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From Son of the Bourgeoisie to Servant of the Revolution

The Roots of Daniel Guérin's Revolutionary Socialism

In short, love is the great, the solemn, I would almost say the *only* purpose of humanity.
*Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*¹

ABSTRACT

This article explores the early years of Daniel Guérin (1904–88), a prominent and original figure on the French left from the mid-1930s onwards, in order to better understand his transformation from a son of the *grande bourgeoisie* into a leading revolutionary socialist and campaigner for decolonisation, racial equality, homosexual liberation and peace. It is based on a close reading of Guérin's own retrospective representation of this period through his several autobiographical or semi-autobiographical works, as well as published and filmed interviews. This public self-representation is complemented and partly challenged by original research on other sources not intended for public consumption, including correspondence and other private papers. The article examines the influence of Guérin's extremely wealthy yet also highly cultured, liberal, *Dreyfusard* family, especially his antimilitarist father's Tolstoyan leanings and social conscience. It also highlights, notably through an analysis of the young Guérin's poetry and novels and his intense friendship with the Catholic novelist François Mauriac, the disillusion provoked by the Great War and the importance of a spiritual crisis which he experienced during the 1920s. Two other personal experiences had a profound impact on Guérin's consciousness: first, his belated exposure to the realities of Parisian working-class life (deepened by a series of homosexual relationships with young proletarians), and secondly his awakening to the realities of French colonialism through his travels in the Middle East and in Indochina. These factors and his subsequent discovery not just of Marx, but also of Tolstoy and Gandhi, are essential, it is argued, to an understanding of the roots of the deeply ethical libertarian socialism for which Guérin would become known in later years.

1 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: *Système des Contradictions Économiques: Philosophie de la Misère*, Paris 1850, pp. 363–364.

Keywords: *Daniel Guérin, anarchism, libertarian Marxism, Tolstoyanism, Gandhism, France*

Introduction²

Daniel Guérin (1904–88) was a prominent revolutionary activist and propagandist for half a century, and arguably one of the most original and most interesting in post-1945 France. For the late Peter Sedgwick, Guérin’s “achievement is scarcely matched in any writer of the Left”.³ An associate of the revolutionary syndicalists around Pierre Monatte in the early 1930s and later a *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) official, he first came to prominence in the Popular Front years on the *pivertiste* left of the *Parti Socialiste – Section Française de l’Internationale Ouvrière* (SFIO): the title of his first-hand account, *Front populaire, révolution manquée* (Popular Front, Failed Revolution) (1963), was, as Julian Jackson has put it, “an argument in itself”.⁴ One of the first on the left to attach central importance to the struggle against colonialism, he became one of the best-known figures in anticolonial campaigns throughout the 1950s and 60s.⁵ He was also one of the first in France to warn of the rising dangers of fascism, publishing *La Peste brune a passé par là...* (The Brown Plague) in 1933 and, encouraged by Simone Weil and others, *Fascisme et grand capital* (Fascism and Big Business) in 1936.⁶ He met Leon Trotsky in 1933 during the latter’s exile in Barbizon, and would work with the Trotskyist resistance during the war years; a respected member of the Fourth International during the 1940s, he was a close, personal friend of Michel Raptis (*alias* Pablo) until his death.

2 I am grateful to Ian Birchall, Norry LaPorte and an anonymous reader for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

3 Peter Sedgwick: Out of Hiding: The Comradships of Daniel Guérin, in: *Salmagundi: A Quarterly Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 58:9 (1982), pp. 197–220, 219.

4 Daniel Guérin: *Front Populaire, Révolution Manquée?: Témoignage Militant*, Paris 1963; Julian Jackson: *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy: 1934–38*, Cambridge 1990, p. xi.

5 Sylvain Boulouque: *Anticolonialisme et Anarchisme chez Daniel Guérin*, in: *Dissidences* 2 (2012), pp. 151–70; David Porter: *Eyes to the South: French Anarchists and Algeria*, Oakland/Edinburgh/Baltimore 2011; Daniel Guérin: *Au Service des Colonisés: 1930–1953*, Paris 1954; Daniel Guérin: *Les Antilles Décolonisées*, Paris 1956; Daniel Guérin: *L’Algérie qui se Cherche*, Paris 1964; Daniel Guérin: *Ci-gît le Colonialisme: Algérie, Inde, Indochine, Madagascar, Maroc, Palestine, Polynésie, Tunisie: Témoignage Militant*, Paris 1973; Daniel Guérin: *Les Assassins de Ben Barka: Dix Ans d’enquête*, Paris 1975.

6 Translations: Daniel Guérin: *The Brown Plague: Travels in Late Weimar and Early Nazi Germany*, Durham/London 1994; Daniel Guérin: *Fascism and Big Business*, New York 1994 [1939].

His controversial, libertarian Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution, *La lutte de classes sous la Première République* (1945) was judged by his friend C. L. R. James to be “one of the most important modern textbooks in [...] the study of Marxism”, “one of the great theoretical landmarks of our movement”, and by Sartre (in *Questions de méthode*) to be “one of the only contributions by contemporary marxists to have enriched historical studies”.⁷ According to his then friend the sociologist Michel Crozier, Guérin identified in the 1950s – “the golden age of the left intelligentsia” – as an “independent Marxist”.⁸ Increasingly critical of what he saw as the Jacobinism inherent in Leninism, he went through what he described as a “classical anarchist” phase in the 1960s and can be credited with having influenced a generation of activists with his “rehabilitation” of anarchism,⁹ before playing a role in the resurgence of interest in *Luxemburgisme* and becoming better known for his attempts to promote a synthesis of Marxism and anarchism.¹⁰ He was also regarded by 1968 as the grandfather of the gay liberation movement in France, as well as being a leading light in antimilitarist campaigns in the 1970s.¹¹ His writings have been repeatedly republished both in French and in translation.¹²

This paper explores Guérin's early years – the period leading up to the point when, at the age of 26, he made a conscious decision to cross over to the other side of the barricade, as it were. The aim is to explore the creation of Daniel Guérin as a public intellectual in two senses: first, his transformation from a son of the *grande bourgeoisie* into a leading

- 7 C. L. R. James: Letter to Daniel Guérin, 24 May 1956, Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine (BDIC), Fonds Guérin, F^oΔ 721/57/2; Ian Birchall: Sartre's Encounter with Daniel Guérin, in: Sartre Studies International 2:1 (1996), pp. 41–56, 48; Jean-Numa Ducange: Sartre et Guérin: Débats et Controverses sur la Révolution Française, in: Emmanuel Barot (ed.): Sartre et le Marxisme, Paris 2011, pp. 107–26, 115; For Eric Hobsbawm, Guérin's book represented “a curious combination of libertarian and Trotskyist ideas – not without a dash of Rosa Luxemburg”. Eric J. Hobsbawm: Echoes of the Marseillaise: Two Centuries Look Back on the French Revolution, London/New York 1990, p. 53.
- 8 Michel Crozier: Ma Belle Époque. Mémoires, 1947–1969, Paris 2002, pp. 79; 86.
- 9 Daniel Guérin: L'Anarchisme: De la Doctrine à la Pratique, Paris 1965; Daniel Guérin: Ni Dieu ni Maître: Anthologie de l'Anarchisme, Lausanne 1965; Anne Guérin: Interview by author. Montrouge, 9 July 2013. Daniel Guerrier: Interview by author. Céret, 1 August 2013.
- 10 Daniel Guérin: Rosa Luxemburg et la Spontanéité Révolutionnaire, Paris 1971; David Berry: The Search for a Libertarian Communism: Daniel Guérin and the ‘Synthesis’ of Marxism and Anarchism, in: Alex Prichard et al.: Libertarian Socialism: Politics in Black and Red, London 2012, pp. 187–209.
- 11 Frédéric Martel: Le Rose et le Noir: Les Homosexuels en France depuis 1968, Paris 1996; David Berry: Workers of the World, Embrace!: Daniel Guérin, the Labour Movement and Homosexuality, in: Left History 9:2 (2004), pp. 11–43.
- 12 For a comprehensive primary and secondary bibliography, see the website of the *Association des Amis de Daniel Guérin* at: <http://www.danielguerin.info> (accessed on 3 June 2014).

revolutionary socialist and campaigner for decolonisation, racial equality, homosexual liberation and antimilitarism¹³; and, second, Guérin's own retrospective representation of his early years through his several autobiographical or semi-autobiographical works, as well as published and filmed interviews.¹⁴ This public self-representation will be complemented and to a certain extent challenged through an examination of other sources not intended for public consumption. In the process, I hope to clarify the nature and roots of his later political positions.

Beside its primary purpose as a "psychotherapeutic self-analysis" written as much for the author's benefit as for the reader's, Guérin's autobiographical account of his youth (covering the period up to 1930) was intended to show "the unorthodox paths by which a son of the bourgeoisie sought to merge with the people and ultimately to put himself at the service of the Revolution".¹⁵ The book would thus also serve, he pointed out, as an "initiation into the life of a bourgeois family from before the deluge."¹⁶ Indeed, Guérin sprang from the Parisian left-bank bourgeoisie, the family's fortune having been made through its ownership of the Hachette publishing and bookselling firm. In the family network created by marriage and distant relations, Guérin wrote, one could detect "all the invisible threads of big business: Banking, Industry, Commerce, Transport, Publishing, *et cetera* – whose weft constitutes 'high society'."¹⁷ Guérin was in fact born into French high society in a period which represented the apogee of bourgeois hegemony: by 1914 thirty per cent of Parisian wealth was controlled by just 0.4 per cent of the population.¹⁸ Indeed, during the Popular Front years it was often claimed by the left

- 13 On Guérin's political engagements from 1930 onwards, see David Berry: *Un Contradicté Permanent: The Ideological and Political Itinerary of Daniel Guérin*, in: Julian Bourg (ed.): *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France*, Lanham 2004, pp. 149–174.
- 14 Guérin even attached a note to the papers he left to the *Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine* – one of their biggest collections – giving advice to any future biographer about which papers to give priority to and which of his many publications they should read: *Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine*: Nanterre, F Pièce Rés. 551, Note du 7 mai 1981; On Guérin's autobiographies, see Bill Marshall: *The Autobiographies of Daniel Guérin and Yves Navarre*, in: *The Modern Language Review* 90:3 (1995), pp. 622–631; and Robert Schwartzwald: *Un même flux vital: Le Lien Homosexualité/Gauche dans les Autobiographies de Daniel Guérin*, in: *Dissidences* 2 (2007), pp. 21–41; For an overview of the methodological issues see Barbara Caine: *Biography and History*, Basingstoke 2010.
- 15 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D'une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, Paris 1972, p. 9.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 18 Roger Magraw: *France 1815–1914: The Bourgeois Century*, London 1983, pp. 364–365.

that the entire French economy was ruled over by “200 families”. This slogan, coined by the centrist Radical Party leader Daladier in 1934, may have been “a legend about the power of the bourgeois dynasties”, but it was one which, as Magraw puts it, had “a basis in reality”, and Trotsky certainly claimed in 1936 that each one of the 200 families was “incomparably more powerful” than the government.¹⁹ A chart which can be found in Guérin's own papers showing the genealogical and economic interrelationships of these notorious 200 families makes very clear the importance of the Hachette clan, including the branch sired by Edmond Guérin (1844–1932), Daniel's grandfather.²⁰

To a large extent, the story of Guérin's adoption of the cause of the oppressed was to be coterminous with his growing determination to reject all ties with his own class. Nevertheless, it becomes clear on reading the autobiographies and from interviews that Guérin's politics and more general outlook on life in fact owed much to the influence of his branch of the family: humanist, liberal and cultured, both his parents had been “passionately pro-Dreyfus” and had incurred the wrath of the more reactionary branches of their respective families as a result.²¹ In Guérin's eyes, the latter were representative of “the inexcusably rigid, stupid, ugly, retrograde bourgeoisie.”²² We shall see later just to what extent Guérin's intimate familiarity with the *grande bourgeoisie* underpinned his passionate rejection of the entire social system over which it ruled.

As for Daniel's immediate family, his father Marcel Guérin had published studies of Degas, Manet and Gauguin among others, and was a friend of Marcel Proust. In his youth, however, Marcel had served at Toynbee Hall in Whitechapel, and this exposure to the situation of the working class in London's East End prompted him to read the *Communist Manifesto*, as well as the *Précis historique, théorique et pratique du socialisme* (Introduction to the History, Theory and Practice of Socialism [1892]) by Benoît Malon.²³ (These authors would later be joined in Marcel Guérin's library by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Peter Kropotkin and especially Leo Tolstoy.) Marcel Guérin published a report on his visit to Toynbee Hall in the newsletter of the *Musée Social*: Daniel's personal papers

19 Ibid., pp. 364–365; Leon Trotsky: Revolutionary Interlude in France, in: Whither France?: 1934–36, at Marxists Internet Archive: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/whitherfrance/cho3d.htm> (accessed 7 August 2012).

20 See Rapport contre Hachette and related documents, BDIC F^Δ 721/24/15.

21 Daniel Guérin: Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D'une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme, pp. 10, 16.

22 Ibid., p. 94.

23 Toynbee Hall was the original university settlement house of the so-called settlement movement. Its purpose was to welcome graduates who volunteered to teach and to do social work in poor urban areas. Benoît Malon was a leading figure in the IWMA and the Paris Commune of 1871. See K. Steven Vincent: Between Marxism and Anarchism: Benoît Malon and French Reformist Socialism, Berkeley 1992.

(in the possession of his daughter Anne) contain a copy bearing the handwritten dedication: “To my dear son Daniel to give him a taste for social questions.”²⁴

The Tolstoyan influence was strong on the mother’s side of the family too: a “consummate polyglot”, Daniel’s great-grandmother had translated two of Tolstoy’s novels into French.²⁵ From her father, Eugène d’Eichthal (1844–1936) – sociologist, economist, poet, music-lover, member of the *Institut de France*, director of the *Ecole Libre des Science Politiques* and rail magnate – Juliette had, in Guérin’s words, inherited a robust intelligence and a solid literary and musical culture, as well as a heightened sense of the moral values of her milieu.²⁶ Eugène d’Eichthal’s father, Gustave (1804–86), had been a disciple of Saint-Simon and an anti-slavery campaigner, publishing his *Lettres sur la race noire et la race blanche* (Letters on the Black Race and the White Race) in 1839: he believed that “the emancipation of the Jews and that of the blacks” were “in solidarity with one another”. (The family was partly of Jewish descent.)²⁷ Daniel’s godfather was Raymond Koechlin (1860–1931), professor of diplomatic history at the *Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques*, art expert and collector, and Secretary General of the Society of the Friends of the Louvre.

Such, then, was the social and cultural milieu into which Daniel Guérin was born on 19 May 1904, the eldest of three children. He would benefit from the conventional education of the bourgeois, Republican elite. In 1913, he was sent to the *Lycée Montaigne*, next to the Luxembourg Gardens in the very bourgeois sixth *arrondissement*, and then to its secondary partner, the prestigious *Lycée Louis-le-Grand*, just round the corner in the fifth. The children would often visit their grandparents’ *château* in Orly (which today houses the town hall) – such secondary residences were, according to Mayer, “prime badges of seignorial status or pretension and provided rarified space for socializing during the summer and shooting seasons.”²⁸ The main family home was a magnificent building in the Boulevard St.-Michel, “an apartment building in the style of the old bourgeoisie, of a kind which is no longer built, constructed by a single family which had grown rich

24 Bulletin Mensuel du Musée Social, Série B, No. 12 (30 August 1897), translated by the author.

25 Daniel Guérin: Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D’une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme, p. 15. On Tolstoyism in France, see F.W.J. Hemmings: *The Russian Novel in France, 1884–1914*, Oxford 1950.

26 Daniel Guérin: Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D’une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme, p. 16; *The Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques* (Free School of Political Science), familiarly known as *Sciences Po*, was created in 1871 with the aim of producing a new governmental and economic elite for the nascent Third Republic.

27 Daniel Guérin: Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D’une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme, p. 104, and Guérin’s dedication to him in: Daniel Guérin: *Les Antilles Décolonisées*, Paris 1956, pp. 19–21.

28 Arno J. Mayer: *The Persistence of the Old Regime. Europe to the Great War*, London 1981, p. 106.

in the publishing industry between 1850 and 1870, on the occasion of the creation of the Boulevard Saint-Germain.”²⁹

“While they were killing each other ...”

It is a *cliché* but nonetheless true to say that the war of 1914–18 represented a national trauma and brought in its wake profound changes in French society. It put an end, first, to that period of bourgeois self-confidence which became known retrospectively and nostalgically – not only, but especially, by the bourgeoisie – as the *Belle Époque*:

The *Belle Époque* – ‘beautiful’ for a privileged minority – was coming to an end; it was the end of a society in which tragedy was, on the whole, unknown; in which nothing fundamental, at least for the time being, was under threat or in question; where one could give oneself over, above all in the camp of the well-heeled, to a carefree life, with a relative confidence in life and the future, allow one’s senses to be dulled in a deceptive but agreeable security; in which the spectre neither of class war nor of foreign war seriously disturbed the sleep of the fortunate of this world.³⁰

The war had two effects on Guérin. Accompanying his mother during her work as a volunteer Red Cross nurse, he witnessed with his own eyes some of the horrific injuries of the soldiers – including the last moments of a German prisoner of war who became for him no longer an “Alboche”, but “just a man, a man who was dying in the convulsions of tetanus”.³¹ Secondly, the death of two of his young cousins at the front contributed to growing feelings of guilt at leading “the life of a prince, far too pleasant, too easy, too protected, too spoiled”.³² Towards the end of the war, the fourteen year old Daniel dedicated a poem to his father, *Pendant qu’ils se tuaient [...]* (While they were killing each other [...]), which evoked a feeling of profound incomprehension in the face of such human suffering.³³

His feelings of revulsion at the nature of war were shared by his “antimilitarist” father: “the absurd slaughter disgusted him to the point of nausea.”³⁴ Invited to participate in some propaganda work designed to boost national morale, Marcel Guérin refused outright, writing afterwards to his friend Jean Lazard: “I confess I suffered an attack of anar-

29 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D’une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 35.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 62. *Alboche* is an older form of *boche*, pejorative slang for a German.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

33 Daniel Guérin: *Le Livre de la Dix-huitième Année*, Paris 1922, pp. 56–58.

34 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D’une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, pp. 68–63.

chism. It's my old Jacobin blood boiling from time to time."³⁵ But these pacifist leanings would resurface periodically, with news of further pointless mass slaughters provoking in him, in his own words, "upsurges of antimilitarism and of anarchism".³⁶ Many years later, reading his father's correspondence from this period would make Daniel realise how much his own attitudes owed to "this simmering anarcho-pacifism."³⁷

Religious Crisis

Guérin was raised in the Catholic church, albeit not particularly devoutly. In his autobiography he refers to his parents' "vague jansenism, an attitude which was more moral than religious",³⁸ and many years later in an interview with the philosopher and journalist Christian Chabanis he would comment that although his mother took him to mass it was largely "a society religion".³⁹ At the age of 14, Guérin definitively lost not only his belief in the Catholic church but his faith in Christianity itself on reading his mother's copy of Tolstoy's diaries:

At first, this book inspired no mistrust on my part, as it was the work of a Christian, of a believer in search of true Christianity, the work what's more of a social apostle of whose teachings my father had, at one time in his life, been a follower. And yet this book spoke a language which I had never before heard. It cast doubt on the absolute truth of the myths and beliefs brought forth by human societies of the most diverse epochs and origins. [...] Tolstoy brought into question my entire upbringing. Evil arises, according to him, from the fact that I attached too little importance to reason. It is the fruit of the false education which I had been given since my childhood. [...] The first thing I had to achieve was my religious emancipation. [...] I gave myself without reserve to Tolstoy.⁴⁰

35 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

39 Interview in: Christian Chabanis et al.: *Dieu existe-t-il? Non*, Paris 1973, pp. 222–223.

40 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D'une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, pp. 80–81; See Alexandre Christoyannopoulos: *Tolstoy's Political Thought*, London 2011; and *Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospel*, Exeter 2010.

The End of Childhood

For Guérin the armistice of 1918 represented the end not only of the war, but also of his childhood. Following Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu (Under Fire)* (1916) and Roland Dorgelès's *Les Croix de bois (Wooden Crosses)* (1919), there was a stream of war novels and eye-witness accounts, but until the 1930s, "the dominant trend of the 1920s, in literature as in politics, was to deny the changes wrought by the war and to seek distraction in material pleasure or exotic adventure".⁴¹ Perhaps this post-war mood of pleasure-seeking – "Having suffered too much, or having fasted for too long, people felt a need for bestial pleasures and in their frenzied intoxications tried to forget the rivers of bloodshed in war"⁴² – combined with the sexual obsessions of adolescence encouraged Guérin's rebellious tendencies, and he became a less than ideal student, deciding that "real life" lay elsewhere: "I believe I was already rebelling against the establishment."⁴³

He began to commit his thoughts to paper and to write poetry, and declared to his parents his wish to become a writer: conventional study and the prospect of university no longer appealed, and he longed instead to leave all that behind him for a life as a bohemian: "I had an extreme need for independence."⁴⁴ He began to frequent salons, and in 1920 was a guest at a reception at the *Académie française* where he came across many of the literary celebrities of the time, including André Gide, Paul Valéry and his particular favourite the Romantic poet and novelist Anna de Noailles.⁴⁵ The same year, he and a group of school friends – all "ardent communists" who criticised him for having "abominably bourgeois" literary tastes – created a monthly literary review they called *La Gerbe du Quartier Latin*, which ran for three years.⁴⁶

Guérin continued to read Tolstoy as well as the classics of French literature. Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection* made a particular impression – "perhaps because of the passionate

41 Mary Jean Green: *Visions of Death and Dissolution*, in: Denis Hollier (ed.): *A New History of French Literature*, Cambridge MA 1989, p. 852.

42 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D'une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 87.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Extremely influential in her time, but rather neglected after her death, Anna de Noailles seems to be enjoying a resurgence of interest. See Catherine Perry: *Persephone Unbound. Dionysian Aesthetics in the Works of Anna De Noailles*, Lewisburg 2003.

46 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D'une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, pp. 108–109; These collaborators included Georges Altman, future journalist and Resistance leader who would go on to co-found the *Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire* with Sartre et al. in 1947. The review, which ran from March 1920 to November 1923, can be found in the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*.

attack on an iniquitous society”, he comments in his autobiography.⁴⁷ One cannot however help but be struck by certain parallels: *Resurrection* recounts the moral and spiritual crisis of a cosseted and self-centred young aristocrat, Nekhlyudov, a crisis caused by his discovery of the suffering of the poor, and his subsequent determination to reject his own class and the artificiality of society in order help the oppressed, no matter the cost to himself ...

Student Politics

In 1921 Guérin began his studies at the prestigious *Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques*. “Intuitively on the left”⁴⁸, his accounts of life in both institutions are full of disparaging remarks about snobbish, royalist teachers and favourable ones about progressive, republican teachers. It was also at Sciences Po that, as he would later put it, Guérin discovered a whole new world through the lecture course on nineteenth-century socialism delivered by Elie Halévy: “Elie Halévy spoke of Karl Marx, amongst others, with trenchant insight and with total objectivity. Of course he was not a socialist, he was an adherent of liberalism. But he was a true liberal, which is certainly not something one could say of all our professors.”⁴⁹

Guérin was also a regular and (initially at least) enthusiastic participant at the famous *Conférence Molé-Tocqueville*. Modelled on life in the Chamber of Deputies, the *Molé* served as a realistic preparation for accession to a political career and was thus attended by members of France’s future political and diplomatic elite.⁵⁰ According to Guérin, the debates there between left and right were just as vehement as in parliament and even more simplistically sectarian. Guérin sat with what he described as the “Marxist extreme left”, but in the end, the *Conférence Molé-Tocqueville* led to his being forever disgusted by parliamentarism.⁵¹

By this stage, then, Guérin identified explicitly with the extreme left in the context of the increasingly polarised debates of the period between extreme right and extreme left:

47 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D’une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 94–95.

48 Christian Chabanis et al.: *Dieu existe-t-il? Non*, p. 223.

49 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D’une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 123. See Elie Halévy: *Histoire du Socialisme Européen*, Paris 1948; new edition 1974 with a foreword by Raymond Aron.

50 See Gilles Le Béguec: *Un Conservatoire Parlementaire: La Conférence Molé-Tocqueville à la Fin de la Troisième République*, in: *Bulletin de la Société d’Histoire Moderne* 16:22, supplement to: *Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 2 (1980), pp. 16–21.

51 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D’une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, pp. 125–126.

“Maurras *versus* Marx”, as the *Autobiographie de Jeunesse* puts it.⁵² Yet he was still unsure of his politics:

Despite this embryonic commitment, my interests remained eclectic. I read, not without admiration, I must say, the *Enquête sur la monarchie* [*Investigations on Monarchy*] by Charles Maurras and, with passion, the *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.⁵³

It was around this time that Elie Halévy persuaded Guérin to choose, for the subject of his final-year dissertation, the social and political ideas of Alphonse de Lamartine (1790–1869), the royalist poet turned Republican politician and reformer.⁵⁴ What he found particularly interesting and admirable in Lamartine was the fact that, for all his failings, “a young legitimist and Catholic writer was able – solely by virtue of generosity of spirit and logical argument – to perceive, before the majority of his contemporaries, the sharpness of the modern class struggle.”⁵⁵ For as early as the 1830s, Guérin argued, Lamartine foresaw the development of modern class conflict and predicted that the working class “will shake society until its odious individualism has been replaced by socialism.”⁵⁶ An article on Lamartine’s social ideas which Guérin subsequently published in the *Revue des Sciences Politiques* in 1924 seems to have been his first publication on social or political issues.⁵⁷

Versailles and the Boche

Guérin’s first overtly political act, if it can be called that, was to listen to the debate in the Chamber of Deputies on the day in 1923 when the Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré spoke in defence of the French occupation of the Ruhr, for Guérin “one of the most sinister blunders of the century”, and when the socialist leader Léon Blum’s speech attacking the occupation – “courageous and prophetic” in Guérin’s eyes – was interrupted by cries

52 Ibid., pp. 126–127. Charles Maurras (1868–1952) was a nationalist, antisemitic royalist, founder of the review and organisation *L’Action Française* and an active supporter of the collaborationist Vichy regime. His *Enquête sur la monarchie* was first published in 1900.

53 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D’une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 126.

54 Daniel Guérin: *L’Evolution Politique de Lamartine, du Légitimisme à la Révolution de 1848*, Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques, 1922–25.

55 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D’une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 129.

56 Ibid.

57 Les Idées Sociales de Lamartine, in: *La Revue des Sciences Politiques* (1924), pp. 396–414.

of “Jew! Jew! Jew!”.⁵⁸ Guérin had already by this time come to the conclusion that the Treaty of Versailles was utterly iniquitous, merely storing up problems for the future. Nor did he share the anti-German feelings common to many of the French. In 1921, Guérin’s father had sent the 17 year-old to Mainz – in an area then occupied by the French military – so that he could perfect his German. What he witnessed of the behaviour of the French occupying forces reinforced Guérin’s negative opinion of the French government’s policy and his sympathy for ordinary Germans: he got on very well with the *Boches* he had been taught to hate but with whom he came to feel he had many affinities.⁵⁹ The occupation of the Ruhr was supposed to have been carried out in order to force Germany to pay reparations, but the interests of the iron and steel industry bosses seemed obvious to Guérin. Just days before the occupation, he claimed, he and his father met the steel and shipping magnate René Fould at the house of a mutual friend: “The repulsive forge-master rubbed his hands: ‘We’ve thought of everything, it’s all planned, everything’s organised.’”⁶⁰

Point of Departure

The autumn of 1925 saw the appearance of an article which Guérin had written during his military service at the officer school at Saint-Cyr. Entitled *Point de Départ*, it was published in the literary magazine, the *Revue Hebdomadaire*, with an introduction by his mentor and confidant François Mauriac (who had advised Guérin on a first draft).⁶¹ It is in some ways characteristic of the kind of generationalist writing – to use Wohl’s term⁶² – which appeared in this period, and the humanist’s malaise to which it gives voice chimes with that of other intellectuals who had lived through the Great War and its aftermath.⁶³ Underlining the extraordinary situation of his own generation, Guérin emphasises the significance of the rupture represented by the Great War. He also attacks not only the complacency of pre-war Europe’s belief in the solidity of its “old idols” – its

58 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D’une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 133. Poincaré was a moderate Republican and had been President of the Republic, 1913–20.

59 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D’une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 120.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 133. On the Fould banking, iron, steel and shipbuilding dynasty, see Frédéric Barbier: *Finance et Politique: La Dynastie des Fould XVIIIe–XXe siècle*, Paris 1991.

61 I have discussed Guérin’s close friendship with the Nobel Prize-winning novelist François Mauriac in some detail in David Berry: *Metamorphosis: The Making of Daniel Guérin, 1904–1930*, in: *Modern & Contemporary France* 22/3 (August 2014), pp. 321–342.

62 Robert Wohl: *The Generation of 1914*, London 1980.

63 Robert Gibson: *The First World War and the Literary Consciousness*, in: John Cruickshank (ed.): *French Literature and its Background*, New York 1968, pp. 56–72.

political institutions, its colonial conquests and its liberal economy – but also the responsibility of earlier generations for the catastrophe of 1914:

In their desire to build, they prepared the catastrophe by which all will perish. The war of 1914–1918 was only a beginning. Capitalism has forged such means of destruction, created so many points of friction between peoples that the blaze will inevitably reignite. The bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century, as Marx had already foreseen in 1848, brought the social problem to its sharpest point. They put everything in motion to widen the gap between two classes.⁶⁴

He drew on the Indian writer and philosopher Tagore to question the value of the merely material advantages of modern capitalism. And yet criticism of Guérin's pessimism by Mauriac, and the advice not to simply curse life but to illuminate it and strive to *change* it had an effect: "This lesson, which at 21 I had been unable to draw by myself, did not fall on deaf ears."⁶⁵

Starting from Zero

That same year, Guérin was packed off to work for the family business, Hachette, in the La Chapelle district of Paris, close to the Gare du Nord railway station, just round the corner from a street frequented by prostitutes:

It was an authentically proletarian quarter where, to my delight, the flat cap reigned and where singers, installed under the overhead *métro* and accompanying themselves on the accordeon, performed in front of large circles of onlookers wearing, to my further delight, the labourer's corduroy trousers [...]. We had lunch in taverns full of workers, who always ordered extra bread, lingering at their table, reading the newspaper after their coffee and fondling the waitresses. I was restarting my life from scratch.⁶⁶

Guérin's work was routine, menial and boring, and his manager took a visible pleasure in dominating him: "It was the first time in my life that I had been put in the ranks, and it did me good."⁶⁷ His new familiarity with such a workplace and such a quarter led him

64 Point de Départ, in: La Revue Hebdomadaire 43 (1925), pp. 457–68 (introduction by Mauriac pp. 457–458).

65 Daniel Guérin: Autobiographie de Jeunesse, p. 160.

66 Ibid., p. 162.

67 Ibid.

to discover and to love the Parisian *populo* from whom he had until now been socially, culturally and geographically segregated.

The metro journey from Saint-Michel on the bourgeois left bank to Barbès and La Chapelle in this working-class part of Paris represented a new departure in sexual as well as social terms for Guérin. It also coincided with the publication of André Gide's groundbreaking study of and apologia for homosexuality, *Corydon*, after reading which Guérin wrote "a wildly emotional letter of gratitude" to the author.⁶⁸ Within a short time of starting work in La Chapelle, Guérin was enjoying the first of a series of gay sexual relationships with young working-class men. Guérin's parents had now let him have two attic rooms in the family home in the Boulevard St.-Michel, but with a separate entrance. Guérin took to bringing his lovers back here. Of one such lover, Marcel, Guérin writes: "In welcoming him into the family home, my purpose was not only sentimental: there was also an appetite for social transgression in the act. I was throwing down a challenge to my class. At least that is how, in retrospect, I attempt to interpret my behaviour at that time."⁶⁹

Mauriac warned him against his "insatiability": "Is this what it means to love, this chase, this perpetual quest? Do not sink too far in pleasure."⁷⁰ Indeed, despite his rejection of the christian attitude to sexual pleasure, Guérin confessed that he soon wearied of the string of brief encounters: "I was not happy with myself. I needed to love."⁷¹

The Road to Damascus

In 1927 Guérin would embark on another life-changing episode when he was offered the job of running the Syrian branch of the Agence Générale de Librairie, a subsidiary of Hachette:

This journey was going to take me much further than the Levant. Although I did not know it at the time, I was leaving behind me not just the bosom of my family, but other havens as well: bourgeois society and Europe. I was setting a course for a

68 André Gide: *Corydon*, Paris 1924. See Richard Howard: *From Exoticism to Homosexuality*, in: Denis Hollier (ed.): *A New History of French Literature. A Panorama of Literature in its Cultural Context: Music, Painting, Politics, and Monuments Public and Private*, Cambridge 1989, pp. 836–842.

69 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D'une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 167.

70 Letter of 2 March 1926, in: François Mauriac: *Nouvelles Lettres d'une Vie: 1906–70*, edited by Caroline Mauriac, Paris 1989, p. 105; and quoted in Jean-Luc Barré: *François Mauriac: Biographie intime: 1885–1940*, Paris 2009, p. 388.

71 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D'une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 171.

succession of unknown lands: the Orient, Islam, Asia, decolonisation and, beyond, socialism.⁷²

He would comment in interview years later that his time in Beirut “taught me, quite simply, the reality of colonialism”, but his re-education began even before he got to the Lebanon.⁷³ During a stopover in Alexandria, he was able to make a brief visit to Cairo, and there he was immediately struck by the “ambivalence” of colonial cities: “Two worlds: on one side, the sumptuous European quarters, the arrogant modern city of Heliopolis, linked to the capital by a *métro*; on the other, the old Arab town with its narrow streets, crowded, hectic, quaint and dirty.”⁷⁴

Similarly, on his arrival in Beirut on 2 October, the first thing he noticed on disembarkation was the prevalence of “uniforms and prostitutes”, a sign of the region’s forcible occupation by the French. And settling in Beirut to take up his new position, Guérin made a positive decision not to live near the port, however attractive the area may have been:

The port faced the sunset and so was still, despite its natural beauty, the West. I quickly left the area, which was to my mind too European and too Mediterranean, in order to go and live far from the coast and the city centre in the Arab part of the town and, if possible, to change identity.⁷⁵

In Beirut, Guérin’s life assumed an almost “normal” character: he worked regularly, though harder than ever before, both for his job and on his own account, and he had a satisfying sexual and emotional life, entirely lacking in dramas – involving notably two seamen from the nearby naval base.

However, the person who most profoundly affected Guérin during his time in Beirut was Louis Massignon, a professor at the *Collège de France* (the most prestigious academic institution in France) and an expert on Islam and Sufism. He was, in Guérin’s eyes, the only person who truly understood the problems of Lebanon or Syria and who foresaw the future of the region. Guérin was profoundly moved by a talk he gave in Beirut in 1928, during which – in front of an audience “of officers with their braid and their deco-

72 Ibid., pp. 178; 183.

73 Interview in television documentary, Daniel Guérin, dir. Jean-José Marsand, questionnaire and interview by Pierre André Boutang (FR3, 4/11 September 1989, série Archives du XXe Siècle; film made in 1985); interview material re-used in Laurent Muhleisen/Patrice Spadoni: Daniel Guérin, 1904–1988: Combats dans le siècle (Productions Imagora, n. d.).

74 Daniel Guérin: Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D’une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme, pp. 183–184.

75 Ibid., p. 186.

rations, of profiteers and of clerics”⁷⁶ – he repudiated the use of force, deception and dishonesty by the colonial power: “The French idea of the disinterested, universal influence of our country in the world is undergoing a crisis. [...] Each one of us has their share of personal responsibility.”⁷⁷

Guérin would soon have the chance to learn more about decolonisation. The following year, he met Ibrahim Bey Hanano, who in 1919 had led a muslim, nationalist revolt against French forces around Aleppo in Syria.⁷⁸ This was not the first time Guérin had come face to face with the leader of a national liberation movement. On the boat from Marseille to Beirut in September 1927 he had met and befriended Emir Khaled, grandson of Abd el-Kader, leader of the earliest resistance to the French colonisation of Algeria. Emir Khaled had launched the *Mouvement pour l'égalité ou la réforme* (Movement for Equality or Reform) in Algeria in 1919 and, despite having been exiled, was made honorary president of the *Etoile nord-africaine* (North African Star). After his death in 1936, he would be widely celebrated as one of the precursors of Algerian nationalism.⁷⁹ Thanks to his encounters with these two figures, Guérin became converted to Arab nationalism.

Indeed, Guérin's representation of his life in the Levant was of a contrast between these two different worlds between which he slipped “without transition”. He had one foot in Beirut, leading the usual, “worthless” life of a privileged member of the French expatriate community; the other foot was in Damascus, “at the heart of Islam”: “I had a weakness for this religion without priests – just as, a little later, I would be attracted to Buddhism, a religion without gods.”⁸⁰

A visit from his father was the occasion for a trip round Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. Guérin's impressions of Jerusalem are interesting, initial disappointment being effaced by “the pure antinomic jewels of two arts and two beliefs: the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Mosque of Omar. Which to prefer? Christianity? Islam?”⁸¹ He was alienated by Tel Aviv, which at the time was still new and was populated, it seemed to Guérin, by “aggressive Jews”, and it was from this period that he became “allergic” to Zionism, “an

76 Daniel Guérin: *Ci-gît le Colonialisme: Algérie, Inde, Indochine, Madagascar, Maroc, Palestine, Polynésie, Tunisie. Témoignage Militant*, Paris 1973, p. 11.

77 Quoted in: Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D'une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 194; see also Guérin, *Ci-gît le Colonialisme: Algérie, Inde, Indochine, Madagascar, Maroc, Palestine, Polynésie, Tunisie. Témoignage Militant*, p. 11.

78 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D'une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 195.

79 Jean-Pierre Biondi/Gilles Morin: *Les anticolonialistes: 1881–1962*, Paris 1992, p. 125.

80 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D'une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, pp. 196; 199.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 200.

unnatural movement which will be able to maintain itself only with bayonets", as he wrote to his mother.⁸²

One of the things which Guérin had been working on so hard in Beirut in his own time was a novel, *La Vie selon la chair*. This was finally published at the beginning of 1929. The title of the book – "Life according to the flesh" – is a biblical reference: "For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live".⁸³ In it, Guérin gave vent to what he called his "carnal tempests".⁸⁴ A psychological novel, it follows the intertwined emotional lives of four characters, and its publication caused something of a brouhaha at home. This is not surprising, given the fairly grim picture the novel paints of four lost souls struggling to find happiness in a decadent, cynical and sexually promiscuous society. Yet the novel is very moral: a recurrent theme is the characters' constant attempts to find meaning and a new direction in life, the need to make choices about what course to follow, the need in fact for self-discipline: the end of the story inconclusively leaves the three main characters on the threshold of new departures, searching for "a value able to replace the flesh."⁸⁵

Guérin was deeply hurt by what seemed to him to be savage and unfair attacks on the novel, and the experience led him to want to break with his family and, he added, "with myself."⁸⁶ Combined with his growing interest in Africa and Asia, this rejection also helped alienate him from France. He now proposed to devote a three month retreat in the Far East to studying the political, economic and social questions which he had not yet been able to examine in any depth. On 23 December he set sail for the Far East aboard the cargo boat, Bangkok – which, ironically, was carrying munitions for the French expeditionary forces in the colonies in Indochina.

On a Slow Boat to Indochina

In his minuscule cabin on the Bangkok, he devoted himself to the intense, solitary study of a small library of books on Marxism, syndicalism, anarchism, colonialism, pacifism and Asian religions which he had taken with him, reading and re-reading them, taking reams of notes, and scribbling approving or critical comments on them:

82 Ibid., p. 201. He would publish on this issue soon after his return to France in 1930: *L'Aventure sioniste est condamnée*, in: *Le Cri du peuple*, 29 October 1930, reproduced in: Daniel Guérin: *Ci-gît le Colonialisme: Algérie, Inde, Indochine, Madagascar, Maroc, Palestine, Polynésie, Tunisie. Témoignage Militant*, pp. 475–476.

83 Romans 8:13, King James Version.

84 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D'une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 210.

85 Daniel Guérin: *La Vie selon la chair*, Paris 1929, p. 279.

86 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D'une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 212.

Why on earth had I taken Marx's *Capital*, Kautsky's *The Social Revolution and Socialist Programme*, La révolution défigurée [The Stalin School of Falsification] by Trotsky, *Les Réflexions sur la violence* [Reflections on Violence] by Georges Sorel, Gandhi's autobiography, and books about Proudhon, Jaurès, Lenin, India and China, on American imperialism, on Soviet Russia, labourism and syndicalism? Today I struggle in vain to recollect the origin of such a sudden and multifarious curiosity. It seems to me I had always been a socialist, ever since the end of my childhood, but in a rather vague way and by fits and starts.⁸⁷

Guérin got on well with the Bangkok's crew (several of them communists) and spurned the company of the ship's officers, whom he found reactionary and loathsome. He would return to his cabin, and in stifling heat try to get to grips with the different schools of thought within socialism. The effort exhausted him:

I was banging my head against a certain number of walls. My approaches towards socialism were littered with stumbling blocks and dilemmas. Socialism from above (Leninism) or from below (revolutionary syndicalism)? Marxist class struggle or Tolstoyan 'love' and Gandhist non-violence? For or against Stalin's Russia? For or against the Communist Party? For or against anarchism? The tension nearly made my head explode.⁸⁸

Readings

An examination of Guérin's notes from this reading provides us with some insights into his thinking at this point in his life, shortly before his experiences in Indochina would trigger a radical change in his life.

To start with, Guérin's retrospective description of this episode as representing his "apprenticeship in marxism" seems misleading, or at least too simple.⁸⁹ Guérin clearly identified as a Marxist, and was in some respects quite orthodox – arguing for instance that economic conditions in Russia had not been ripe and that the Bolsheviks' error had been to pursue a socialist revolution too soon, rather than preparing the Russian

87 *Ibid.*, p. 218. Guérin's reading notes are in the International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, Daniel Guérin Papers, Box 1, Folder 62. Subsequent references to these notes will give just the sleeve number within this folder.

88 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de Jeunesse: D'une Dissidence Sexuelle au Socialisme*, p. 221.

89 Coversheet attached to file, IISH, Box 1, Folder 62; and Daniel Guérin: *A la Recherche d'un Communisme Libertaire*, Paris 1984, p. 9.

proletariat through “a first, simply liberal and democratic revolution.”⁹⁰ But he also had significant reservations about different varieties of marxism which cast a new light on his later political and ideological itinerary.

Firstly, he complained of the willingness of so many to create for themselves a “standardised Marx”, the “awe-inspiring, bearded prophet”, without actually having read him.⁹¹ He commented on *The Social Revolution* by Karl Kautsky, the “pope” of orthodox Marxism – otherwise an “essential book, full of very solid insights” – that its author had too absolute a confidence in “the holy word of Marx” and in Science “with a capital s”.⁹² He held the Bolsheviks in particular responsible for transforming Marxism into “a kind of mystical religion, with Lenin as its high priest”, and he regarded this as a “betrayal” of Marx.⁹³

Second, he was hesitant regarding the idea that socialist revolution would inevitably lead to the disappearance of social conflict and of all classes. What is there to stop another privileged class appearing – “As happened in the USSR with the Nepmen?”⁹⁴

Thirdly, his reflections on debates concerning the role of the state, both as a reformist tool and during a revolutionary transitional stage, were inconclusive. Guérin took from Labriola the idea that the modern state, given the statisation and concentration of the economy and the growth of the public sector, was becoming increasingly autonomous *vis-à-vis* the capitalist class.⁹⁵ However he disagreed with the absolute antistatism of Sorel and the anarchists and accepted the need to conquer state power. But for him, Marxism foresaw “production falling into the hands of the collectivity, and this for inevitable technical reasons.” Conquering state power could thus only be the end-point of a process during which the trade unions would take over the factories and ensure continued production: “The new state will simply be an emanation of a sort of CGT, and will just have to sanction that which will already have been achieved.”⁹⁶ He thus rejected Kautsky’s parliamentarism as a way of familiarising workers with the practical problems of administration: this is “the surest way of ensuring the demoralisation and embourgeoisement of the representatives of the proletariat.” The experience of Ramsey MacDonald’s

90 XIII: Notes on Panaït Istrati: Vers l’Autre Flamme Après Seize Mois dans l’U. R. S. S.: Confession Pour Vaincus, 1929; XIII: Notes on Alfred Fabre-Luce: Russie 1927, Paris 1927; XV: Notes on Léon Trotsky: La Révolution Défigurée, Paris 1929.

91 XXI: Notes on Émile Cazalis: Syndicalisme Ouvrier et Évolution Sociale, Paris 1925.

92 XI: Notes on Karl Kautsky: The Social Revolution, 1902. On Guérin’s appreciation and use of Kautsky’s writings, see Jean Ducange: Comment D. Guérin utilise l’oeuvre de Kautsky sur la Révolution française dans *La Lutte des classes en France sous la première République et pourquoi*, in: *Dissidences* 2 (2007), pp. 89–111.

93 XIII: Notes on Luc Durtain: L’Autre Europe: Moscou et sa Foi, Paris 1928.

94 XI: Notes on Karl Kautsky, The Social Revolution.

95 I: Notes on Georges Sorel, Réflexions sur la Violence, Paris 1908.

96 XI: Notes on Karl Kautsky, The Social Revolution.

Labour governments of 1924 and 1929 and Edouard Herriot's Left Coalition government of 1924 were there to demonstrate that "a socialist government in power is absolutely impotent."⁹⁷ Instead, Guérin insisted, "only syndicalism prepares people for social revolution".⁹⁸ The only realistic strategy was the general strike.⁹⁹ He also agreed wholeheartedly with Sorel's condemnation of "social peace", noting of the employer class: "I know these people better than the workers know them; I've seen them not in the factory, but at the dinner table, in the ballroom and in the smoking-room: there is nothing to hope for from them."¹⁰⁰

Guérin's notes also include criticisms of bolshevism which may seem surprising given his membership of the Fourth International in the 1940s. Firstly, he rejected Lenin's pretension to be fighting on behalf of the working class, and saw the October revolution as "a blanquist *coup*".¹⁰¹ Secondly, he reserved some of his more impassioned criticisms for Trotsky, in particular with regard to what seemed to Guérin to be his casual acceptance of violence: "Terrible. No, I refuse to believe that it will be in an immense pool of blood that we should build the edifice of the new social order."¹⁰² He nevertheless had great personal admiration for Lenin and Trotsky. They were both "men of genius", the latter "a brilliant personality", and the former "profoundly sincere and totally disinterested". Their dictatorship was essentially "a transitional dictatorship"; it was Stalin who was responsible for making it "an actual dictatorship". Stalinism was a form of "militarism" as abominable as Mussolini's fascism, "a docile and mechanised bureaucratism" whose army parades smacked of "bourgeois militarism". Under Stalin, Marxism – "an essentially experimental, flexible, opportunistic system" – had been transformed into "a sort of religion, fossilised in the form of a dogma".

As for the French Communist Party, it was guilty of what was for Guérin the unpardonable crime of having created within the proletariat an "almost irreparable" split beyond anything which existed among socialists before. He lamented French communism's "sterility", "doctrinal poverty" and "stalinist methods of intellectual dictatorship". Indeed for Guérin "political history is explained much more by differences of temperament than by differences of ideas"¹⁰³ and ideology is not the be-all and end-all: it is important to be "an upright man (*un homme droit*)" and he insisted both on personal moral rectitude and on an ethic of comradely solidarity between socialists of all shades of opinion.

97 XIX: Notes on B. Montagnon: *Grandeur et Servitude Socialistes*, Paris 1929.

98 IX: Notes on Emile Hovelacque: *Les Peuples d'Extrême-Orient: La Chine*, Paris 1920.

99 XII: Notes on Karl Kautsky: *Guidelines for a Socialist Action Programme*, 1919.

100 I: Notes on Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la Violence*.

101 XVII: *La Ligne Droite du Socialisme*, in: Daniel Guérin Papers 1929–1953.

102 XV: Notes on Léon Trotsky, *La Révolution Défigurée*, Paris 1929.

103 XVII: *La Ligne droite du Socialisme*, in: Daniel Guérin Papers 1929–1953.

From the 1960s, Guérin's name would be associated with the attempt to "rehabilitate" anarchism and to promote a synthesis of Marxism and anarchism, but at this stage in his life, he clearly equated anarchism with absolute individualism and total licence, the opposite of the collectivism which had his blessing.¹⁰⁴ Proudhon was dismissed as "a polycritic and not a builder", "a deplorable anarchist".¹⁰⁵ Yet Guérin also noted: "It nevertheless seems to me that Marx sought an unjust quarrel with him. [...] Habituated to violent critique, socialists do not spare each other!"¹⁰⁶

Much of Guérin's reading notes either concerned religion or spirituality, or the importance to socialism of idealism and morality. Reading Gandhi immediately after Sorel, for instance, prompted him to comment on the superiority of the former in that Gandhism always held up "a spiritual ideal at the end of its action" (although he did concede that "*direct action* through non-violence has not shown itself to be entirely effective").¹⁰⁷ Guérin also read Tolstoy's letters to Gandhi, as well as his *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1893). "There is in Tolstoy and in Gandhi, his spiritual son," he insisted, "a precious light which can illumine Marxism and extend it in Love (*le prolonger dans l'Amour*)."¹⁰⁸

The idea that a fulfilling human life cannot be achieved through an exclusive emphasis on merely material benefits or physical enjoyment recurs in Guérin's notes with some frequency, and was a belief expressed both with regard to some socialists' understanding of the "good life" and to the developing consumer society under twentieth-century capitalism – as in this outburst provoked by a book on the contemporary USA: "It is the final triumph of matter over spirit, the death of all inner life and of all spirituality. This is where we must listen to the lesson of the Orient, and reply to the businessman

104 See David Berry: *The Search for a Libertarian Communism: Daniel Guérin and the Synthesis of Marxism and Anarchism*, in: Alex Prichard et. al. (eds.): *Libertarian Socialism. Politics in Black and Red*, Basingstoke 2012, pp. 187–209. Apart from reading E. Armand's individualist-anarchist weekly *Len dehors (The Outsider)*, which appeared 1922–39, Guérin had no contact with the anarchist movement in the inter-war years. Letters to the author, 12 and 26 February 1986; Daniel Guérin: *Homosexualité et Révolution*, Paris 1983, p. 18.

105 IV: *En marge de Proudhon*, in: Daniel Guérin Papers 1929–1953.

106 *Ibid.*

107 III: Notes on *Le message révolutionnaire de Gandhi*. When Gandhi visited Paris in 1931, Guérin wrote a sympathetic report for the fortnightly syndicalist magazine *La Révolution prolétarienne*, and the following month published Gandhi's answers to a questionnaire Guérin had submitted to him through Romain Rolland, who hosted Gandhi's visit: *Gandhi à Paris*, December 1931, *Gandhi et la lutte de classes. Un entretien avec Gandhi et Romain Rolland*, January 1932. Cuttings in BDIC F°Δ 688 Rés/4/1.

108 XIII: Notes on Luc Durtain: *L'Autre Europe: Moscou et sa foi*, Paris 1928. See also Marie-France Latronche: *L'influence de Gandhi en France de 1919 à nos jours*, Paris 1999.

with Gandhi.”¹⁰⁹ He was worried about Marxism’s apparently exclusive emphasis on the *material* advantages of socialism:

This is the terrible danger, the only danger of Marxism – Constantly to announce a material paradise is not to raise man up, but to cast him down even lower. We must regard sufficient material wellbeing as nothing more than the simple and necessary precondition of intellectual and spiritual development.¹¹⁰

Interestingly, the folder of Guérin’s reading notes also contains a cutting from the newspaper *Monde* about Henri de Man (1885–1953), a social psychologist and leader of the Belgian Workers’ Party who published *Au-delà du marxisme* (Beyond Marxism) in 1927.¹¹¹ A non-Leninist Marxist, De Man’s main criticism of Marxism was that it was overly deterministic, neglecting morality, psychology and the human will, and that it was too disdainful of the power of religion as a provider of a set of moral values.

Guérin seems to have been drawn both to the total personal commitment implied by the Bolshevik idea of the professional revolutionary and to Tolstoy’s and Gandhi’s ideas on the priority to be attached to moral self-improvement. On reading a biography of Lenin, he noted: “A man who claims to be a socialist no longer has the right to devote a part of his intelligence to sterile intellectual exercises.”¹¹² And in his notes on a study of Trotsky, having first invoked Gandhism, he commented:

109 X: Notes on Octave Homberg: *L’Impérialisme américain*, Paris 1929; Despite his antiracism, Guérin was not immune to the essentialising exoticism characteristic of many European writers. See Kate Marsh: *Gandhi and le gandhisme: Writing Indian Decolonisation and the Appropriation of Gandhi 1919–48*, in: *Modern & Contemporary France* 14:1 (2006), pp. 33–47.

110 XX: Notes on É. Vandervelde: Jaurès, Paris 1929. Cf. Guérin’s comment in a congratulatory letter to Ignazio Silone after reading *The Seed Beneath the Snow*: “I do not know how to find the words to describe to you the profound impression the novel has made on me. [...] What struck me above all is that your book is on the borders of Catholic spiritualism and marxist materialism. I do not believe anybody else combines in himself these two conceptions of the world.” Letter of 23 October 1945, BDIC F°Δ Rés.688/10/1. Guérin later adapted the novel for the stage: *Le Grain sous la neige*, Paris 1961.

111 *Monde* (created by writer, pacifist and communist Henri Barbusse in 1928) is credited by Michael Kelly with being one of a small number of study groups and reviews which helped develop a better grasp of marxist theory in France than “the often woolly conceptions” prevalent up until then, and contributed to “the blossoming of French Marxist philosophy which occurred in the 1930s”. Michael Kelly: *Modern French Marxism*, Oxford et. al. 1982, p. 22.

112 XIV: Notes on Pierre Chasles: *La Vie de Lénine*, Paris 1929.

Before replacing the bourgeoisie, first show yourselves to be superior to them [...] by virtue of your morality: abstain from drunkenness; accept the rigorous discipline of the trade union; push aside exclusively material appetites; love your neighbour – and you will be more worthy of power than the bourgeoisie.¹¹³

Bourgeois socialists, he wrote, can never understand working-class realities unless they are completely “expropriated”, cut off from their roots and forced to live as workers: “This role must be really lived”.¹¹⁴ There are perhaps certain parallels here between Guérin's subsequent decision to do precisely that and the social-Catholic “worker-priests” of the 1940s–50s, as well as the students of the puritanical maoist *Union des Jeunesses Communistes (marxistes-léninistes)* going to work in the factories in the 1960s.¹¹⁵

Finally, Guérin's notes (Folder XVII) include the plan for a book entitled *La Ligne Droite du Socialisme* (literally: *The Straight Line of Socialism*¹¹⁶), with chapters planned on the importance of Marxism, capitalism as a global system, popular anticolonial movements, US imperialism, *Gandhism beyond Marxism*, *The political party subordinated to syndicalism* and finally *Taking power: general strike*. The plan is accompanied by a hand-drawn diagram which emphasises Guérin's rejection of both bolshevism and reformism, as well as his belief that socialism needed nevertheless to be grounded in Marxism, but clearly a different kind of Marxism.¹¹⁷ The book ideas are immediately followed by a plan for an *Association for the Unity of the Working Class and the Renovation of Socialism*.

In his notes on Sorel, Guérin commented that “it is not through ideology that I came to socialism, but through the body and through the heart”, and in his autobiographies and interviews, Guérin was keen to emphasise the visceral nature of his political commitment, derived from his direct personal knowledge of the bourgeoisie and of the colonial system, but also from his sexual experiences:

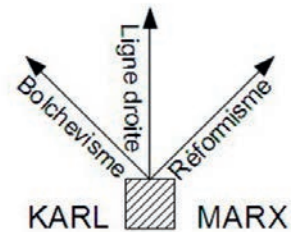


Diagram: a Reproduction of Guérin's plan for *La Ligne Droite du Socialisme*

113 XIII: Notes on Pierre Fervacque (pseud. of Rémy Roure): *La Vie orgueilleuse de Trotski*, Paris, Fasquelle, 1929.

114 XXII/a: Notes on Hyacinthe Dubreuil: *La République industrielle*, Paris 1924.

115 See Christophe Bourseiller: *Les maoïstes: La folle histoire des gardes rouges français*, Paris 2008, pp. 109–126.

116 *Droit* also has ethical connotations.

117 I am grateful to Ben Berry-Allwood for reproducing the diagram here.

Although founded on very wide reading, the metamorphosis which led me to socialism was not objective, on an intellectual level. Rather it was subjective, physical, stemming from the senses and the heart. It was not in books, it was first of all in me, through years of sexual frustration, and it was through contact with young oppressed men that I learned to hate the established order. The carnal quest delivered me from social segregation. Beyond the beautiful torsos hardened by work [...], I had sought camaraderie. It was that which I hoped to find a hundredfold in socialism.¹¹⁸

Vietnam

The Bangkok finally arrived in the port of Saigon towards the end of January 1930. Guérin understood within a matter of days to what extent Europeans in Vietnam clearly had a reputation among the indigenous population as racist brutes. He witnessed the skeletal state of the workers employed to produce opium, “one of the principal sources of income for the French administration”, and “merciless economic as well as racial exploitation” in the coal mines of Hongay (near Hanoi).¹¹⁹ Able to observe the French residents at close quarters, he was horrified by their arrogance, their presumption, their racism and – especially in the case of those who belonged to the French Human Rights League or freemasonry or the Socialist Party – their shocking hypocrisy. The same day Guérin arrived in Hanoi, a popular uprising began with a mutiny by indigenous troops. The Europeans panicked and the repression was savage:

When the rebellion of 1930 broke out, all these little Whites – prison warders, policemen, customs officers, manila players and absinthe drinkers, potbellied coolie whippers – came together in the Café du Commerce and, declaring that ‘socialism is order’, demanded that the rebellious Annamites be repressed without pity. Those young Vietnamese revolutionaries – disinterested to the point of self-sacrifice, prodigiously intelligent and sophisticated, amongst the best graduates of our Grandes Ecoles – they called failures and disappointed careerists hungry for position and profit, and took a sadistic pleasure in watching the flower of Vietnam’s youth declaiming the verses of Victor Hugo as they were led up to the guillotine.¹²⁰

In Hue, a taxi driver who “had guessed [his] sympathies” took Guérin to the office of the newspaper, *La Voix du Peuple*, where he found himself face to face once more with the paper’s director, the old anticolonialist leader Huynh Thuc Khang.¹²¹ This meeting

118 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de jeunesse: d’une dissidence sexuelle au socialisme*, p. 218.

119 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

120 *Ibid.*, p. 225.

121 *Ibid.*, p. 225; *Combats dans le siècle*.

made an impression on Guérin: "I was a stranger, a European, and yet this frail old man welcomed me like a comrade." The Vietnamese revolutionaries asked Guérin to speak out on their behalf to the French workers, and he took this to heart. On his return to France he immediately began publishing articles on the iniquities of colonialism in the revolutionary syndicalist weekly *Le Cri du peuple* and in Barbusse's *Monde*.¹²²

This was undoubtedly a pivotal moment in Guérin's life, and is reminiscent of the moral crisis which led Tolstoy in the 1870s to renounce all his earlier literary works, and of Gandhi's decision to adopt what he called a "religion of service".¹²³ Guérin, vowing to devote his life to "the struggle for the abolition of the social and colonial scandal", similarly renounced all the "superfluous" pastimes of his privileged youth, burning his unpublished writings and consigning to silence his published poems and novels, ashamed of their very existence.¹²⁴

Back in Paris in April 1930, he cut his ties with his family. Having found work as a proofreader (and joined the Proofreaders' Union, renowned as a stronghold of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism¹²⁵), he moved out of the family home and found a room in the working-class quarter of Belleville.¹²⁶ Both geographically and sociologically, this was a Paris which had not been part of his world until now, beyond going to work in La Chapelle in 1925. Guérin liked it there: "It was the happiest period of my life, getting to know this proletarian milieu."¹²⁷ The other inhabitants of the building, mostly young construction workers, were friendly and sociable and became a kind of substitute family.

- 122 Au secours de nos frères d'Indochine in: *Le Cri du peuple*, 21 May 1930 and *Tempête sur l'Indochine* in: *Monde* 7 and 14 June 1930, reproduced in: Daniel Guérin: *Ci-gît le Colonialisme: Algérie, Inde, Indochine, Madagascar, Maroc, Palestine, Polynésie, Tunisie. Témoignage Militant*, pp. 416–418; 419–430. An extract from an article of 8 October 1930 in *Le Cri du peuple* about the repression of the Yen Bay rebellion is reproduced in: Jean-Pierre Biondi: *Les anticolonialistes (1881–1962)*, Paris 1992, p. 166. Launched in December 1929, *Le Cri du peuple* was published by the *Comité pour l'indépendance du syndicalisme* (Committee for the Independence of Syndicalism) associated with Pierre Monatte, virtually the personification of the revolutionary syndicalist tradition by this time.
- 123 Mohandas Gandhi: *An Autobiography. The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, London 2007 (1927–29), p. 155.
- 124 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de jeunesse: d'une dissidence sexuelle au socialisme*, p. 227.
- 125 See Yves Blondeau: *Le Syndicat des correcteurs de Paris et de la région parisienne: 1881–1973*, Paris 1973, pp. 46–47.
- 126 See Patrice Spadoni: Daniel Guérin – 5 rue Lesage, in: Claire Auzias et. al. (ed.): *Un Paris révolutionnaire: Emeutes, subversions, colères*, Paris 2001, pp. 366–368.
- 127 Interview in television documentary: Daniel Guérin, dir. Jean-José Marsand, questionnaire and interview by Pierre André Boutang (FR3, 4 and 11 September 1989, série *Archives du XXe Siècle*; film made in 1985); interview material re-used in Laurent Muhleisen and Patrice Spadoni: *Daniel Guérin, 1904–1988: Combats dans le siècle* (Productions Imagera, n. d.).

His small room was (to use Guérin's words) like a monk's cell in its bareness. As a police surveillance report on him put it:

He occupies a modest and uncomfortable room. [...] The subject is described as a mystic. He strives to live modestly in accordance with the meagre resources he earns from his work as a manual worker and journalist. He nevertheless regularly visits his parents, 22 Boulevard Saint-Michel, who naturally deplore the political attitude of their son.¹²⁸

As Guérin himself commented, "I looked for myself, I more or less found myself", and an essential part of that was abandoning the class from which he sprang:

I irrevocably abandoned one familial clan, which was relatively large since it extended beyond consanguinity, to join another, which was infinitely more vast since it embraced the wretched of the earth. It is more exalting than the first, for it counts within its ranks truth and justice, and more powerful, since it has numbers in its favour.¹²⁹

But it was also less indulgent, and Guerin's first attempts to merge with the proletariat were hard. On first returning to France, he had found work as a labourer on a building site in Brest, and had had to suffer first the taunts of the secretary of the local *Confédération générale du travail unitaire* (CGTU) when he spotted the blisters on Guérin's hands, and then his insults when he somehow found out about Guérin's sexuality.

It would not be the last time that I would be met with distrust, incomprehension and hostility. My new world would be hard. [...] I wanted to fraternise with all men. That was expecting too much. Despite the joys of indentification with the mass, communication would never be either easy or total.¹³⁰

128 Archives Nationales, Centre des archives contemporaines (CAC), Versement coté 19940448, Fichier central de la Direction générale de la Sûreté nationale du Ministère de l'Intérieur, Box 450, file 38145; quoted in Antonio de Francesco: Daniel Guérin et Georges Lefebvre: une rencontre improbable, at *La Révolution française* (Cahiers de l'Institut d'histoire de la Révolution française), <http://lrf.revues.org/162> (accessed 30 May 2012).

129 Daniel Guérin: *Autobiographie de jeunesse: d'une dissidence sexuelle au socialisme*, p. 229.

130 *Ibid.*, p. 229.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would make two main points. First, Guérin himself sometimes summarised his life as a militant in terms of “phases”, and it is certainly easy when surveying his political itinerary to get the impression that he repeatedly abandoned one position and organisation for another: socialism, syndicalism, Trotskyism, anarchism, libertarian communism, *et cetera*. Indeed identity, transformation and transgression are recurrent themes in his writings, and such persistent dissidence was often not understood – beginning, of course, with his abandonment of his class. After 1945, in terms of political or ideological identities, he certainly suffered incomprehension on the part of Marxists, for whom he was too anarchist, and on the part of anarchists, for whom he was too Marxist.¹³¹ Nevertheless, I would argue that the evidence of his reading notes from the Bangkok is that there was in fact always an underlying ideological consistency to Guérin – even if changing circumstances meant that his “organisational options” (as he put it) changed in different periods of his life. The contradiction of his elitist and bourgeois yet cultured, liberal and Republican upbringing was that it provided the humanistic and cosmopolitan substratum for his subsequent, more critical development. This substratum was then enriched by his personal exposure to the realities of working-class life (through his gay relationships) and of colonialism (through his being sent to work in the Levant). The *ligne droite du socialisme* sketched out in those first weeks of 1930 bears a remarkable similarity to the kind of socialism he would advocate for the rest of his life, albeit using different labels and while a member of various organisations (or none): the indispensability of the Marxist method, interpreted non-dogmatically; the centrality of the working class and the autonomy of its (syndicalist) organisations; the rejection of parliamentarism, and the importance of a vision of socialism “from the bottom up”; the preference for collectivist forms of socialism and the rejection of individualist anarchism; the opposition to nationalism, racism, colonialism and imperialism; the horror of violence; the fundamental importance of comradeship, of ethics and even of spirituality. This leads on to my second main point.

Others' commentaries on Guérin's early years, as well as his own, have tended to be framed either in terms of the break with his own class and his quest for “the great family of fraternal camaraderie and shared struggle”, “the camaraderie of community”;¹³² or in terms of the problems he experienced coming to terms with his sexuality – in a talk to the “homophile” association Arcadie, for example, Guérin described *Un jeune*

131 See his comments in, for example: *A la recherche d'un communisme libertaire*, Paris 1984. On political identities, see Muriel Surdez/Michaël Voegtli/Bernard Voutat (eds.): *Identifier – s'identifier: A propos des identités politiques*, Lausanne 2009.

132 Daniel Guérin: *Eux et Lui, suivi de commentaires*, edited by André Masson, Monaco 1962, pp. 7–8.

homme excentrique as “a militant book”, designed to present bisexuals and homosexuals as “normal” and thus contribute to ending discrimination;¹³³ or in terms of his quest to “reunify” his self, his identity, as both revolutionary *and* homosexual. It seems to me that another (complementary) perspective is possible. On such a reading, spirituality acquires an important role – perhaps a more important role than his homosexuality – in determining Guérin’s life decisions. He once commented in an interview that “the driving force of my life has been love”.¹³⁴ And in a 1977 autobiography, he wrote: “Personally, I believe that one and the same vital energy or, to use the Melanesian term, one and the same *mana*, has been the driving force in my political as well as my carnal life.”¹³⁵

One can only speculate about the precise meaning of such remarks. But reading of his determination to start his life afresh in 1930 – and recalling the way in which he earlier described his discovery of the working-class quarters of Paris as “restarting [his] life from zero” – one cannot help but be reminded of the closing lines of one of the many books he read on board the Bangkok, one which seems to have had a profound impact, namely Gandhi’s autobiography:

I must reduce myself to zero. So long as a man does not of his own free will put himself among his fellow creatures, there is no salvation for him. *Ahimsa* is the farthest limit of humility.¹³⁶

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133 Guérin, *Commentaires très libres sur les Mémoires d’un jeune homme excentrique*, Text of a talk given by Daniel Guérin on 17 February 1965. On Arcadie, see Julian Jackson: *Living in Arcadia: Homosexuality, Politics, and Morality in France from the Liberation to AIDS*, Chicago 2010.

134 Géographie passionnelle d’une époque. Entretien avec Daniel Guérin, in: *Débatte* 10 (2000), pp. 5–10.

135 *Le feu du sang*. Autobiographie politique et charnelle, Paris 1977, p. 7; see also Daniel Guérin, *Eux et Lui*, suivi de commentaires, Lille 2000, p. 16. *Mana* is a concept drawn from the cultures of the Pacific islands (Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia) with a number of meanings which depend on context, but tend to be associated with sacred or spiritual authority, power or energy. Tony Swain and Garry Trompf: *The Religions of Oceania*, London and New York 1995.

136 Mohandas Gandhi: *An Autobiography*. The Story of my Experiments with Truth, p. 454. *Ahimsa* means non-harming or non-violence.

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