

Towards an Extraparliamentary Opposition

Translated from the French and introduced by Jacqueline Frost

Daniel Guérin

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Daniel Guérin (1904–1988), was a French libertarian-communist perhaps best known for his controversial 1960s attempt to synthesize Marxism and anarchism. Here, translated into English for the first time, is the text of his speech about anti-racist struggle in both the US and France.

Introduction

Daniel Guérin (1904–1988), the French libertarian-communist, is perhaps best known for his controversial 1960s attempt to synthesize Marxism and anarchism. His life-long militant anti-racism and championing of homosexuality against the ‘anti-sexual terrorism’ of the puritanical bourgeoisie, however, remain less remarked upon. Largely unfamiliar as a Leftist figure outside of France, Guérin’s forty-two-book bibliography is an accompaniment to a mass of materials documenting his involvement in major global movements across most of the twentieth century. In this way, Guérin’s published work and carefully preserved archive are portals into the historical aspirations of proletarian internationalism as such. But the vast majority of Guérin’s writings have not been translated. Among these is Guérin’s brochure, ‘Cuba-Paris,’ which includes a short speech entitled, ‘Vers une opposition extraparlimentaire’ (Towards an Extraparliamentary Opposition), translated below.

Self-published in May of 1968, ‘Cuba-Paris’ contains three short texts on Guérin’s participation in the Havana Cultural Congress of 1968 and two that discuss the state of anti-racism in France. ‘Towards an Extraparliamentary Opposition,’ the fourth of these texts, demands attention in our current political moment. Presented as his introductory remarks to a meeting organized by ‘Friends of S.N.C.C.’ [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] in Paris, this short speech bears witness to a broader conversation between Guérin and former S.N.C.C. executive secretary James Forman. As the transcription of speech, it documents an important occasion in which around two thousand French militants gazed into the ideological and practical world of Black Power. Alongside Guérin, Aimé Césaire also spoke in support of S.N.C.C., though researchers have never located a text corresponding to the Martiniquan’s speech at the Mutualité. Photos of the event also bear witness to Jean-Paul Sartre’s attendance, as anti-racist French intellectuals mobilizes for US Black activists in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination earlier that month. In his rousing account of the burdens of contemporary French proletarian life, and the necessity to struggle against French xenophobia, Guérin warns the Left not to avoid or displace its own problems through a focus on racism in the US. Calling for an understanding of the ‘difference of degree’ between the US and secondary imperialist countries like France, he explores similarities between questions of misery and revolt on both sides of the Atlantic, attempting to dispel any notion that France is lacking in exploitation, oppression, or racism.

The call for such a reckoning within French society is timely, as today prominent leaders continue to deny the existence of racist state violence, claiming that both critical notions of race and structural racism are imitative concepts imported from US academia, and more recently, from the Movement for Black Lives. Police brutality perpetuated on young Black and Arab men in France, however, is factually indisputable. In the wake of the US uprising, the murder of Adama Traoré, killed by police in 2016 using the same technique employed to murder George Floyd, has been brought, along with his family’s four-year long struggle for justice, back into the lime-light. But these similarities have not generated a mass shift in the white French imagination as has been seen in the US in recent weeks. While commentators have suggested that the speech

Guérin later called, 'Towards an Extraparliamentary Opposition,' anticipated the uprisings of May '68, his engagement with US Black revolutionaries and his plea 'to destroy...a system of white power' proper to France seem to have also foreseen our current moment: one in which French anti-racist militants confront the obdurate and hypocritical manifestations of a latter-day imperial color-blindness, which shines down on civil society like a dead star.

Towards an Extraparliamentary Opposition

Daniel Guérin's address at the meeting organized by 'Friends of S.N.C.C. (Black Power)' at the Maison de la Mutualité (Paris), April 29, 1968.

My dear comrades,¹

During a recent press conference, I thought that I should ask James Forman a question that is not a trick question, but the sort of question that we ask of a friend in order to gather from him an answer that we ourselves have already deduced. I asked him if it was correct to say that Black Power was intent on boycotting the presidential and general elections in the United States. His response was categorical: *yes*. And Forman added that, for Black Americans, the struggle no longer passes through the electoral field, which has faded into the background, but is happening in the streets. According to him, Rap Brown had already said in New York last September that 'Black people do not expect anything from the 1968 elections.'

Moreover, other representatives of Black Power showed me, a few months ago, that the multiplication of Black activist groups throughout the United States presents certain advantages that aren't offered by an overly centralized revolutionary movement. Namely, preserving the spontaneity of the struggle, its direct relation to the masses.

In this way, Black Americans have themselves discovered the fundamental rules of revolutionary action as they were elaborated in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century: on the one hand, subordinate electoral and parliamentary action to direct action, such as armed struggle; on the other hand, preserve autonomy and consequently the spontaneity of mass organizations, those which we call communes, soviets, or councils. These elementary principals, alas, have been, more or less, long forgotten within the context of our movements today. We should thank our Black American friends for reminding us of them, and with such powerful conviction!

I am coming to a point that, to me, seems essential. It is our duty—need I say it—to take up the defense of Black Americans, to demonstrate our solidarity, as you are doing here, tonight. It is our duty, of course, as it is our duty to support heroic Vietnam in its struggle. But I think that we should be wary of ourselves. It would be a great error to concentrate our action on Black Americans, on Vietnam, simply in order to give ourselves a good conscience, in order to perform a diversion, in order to create an alibi that would allow us to dispense with the struggle here, against the enemy that is proper to our country.

On this point, I am certain that our Black Americans friends will agree. They know what they have to do; they do not need us to advise them. And our solidarity, even if it is not negligible from their perspective, is in no way the condition of their victory.

¹ Many thanks to Miranda Davidson for her valuable suggestions on the introduction. Many thanks to Sebastian Budgen, whose forthcoming article on Guérin in *Salvage* offered solutions to some of the trickier expressions through his translation of excerpts of this text. Many thanks to Marc Kohlbry and Diane Brown for their feedback and proofreading, especially of the translation.

Furthermore, once we have, as we do tonight, the honor and good fortune to have with us one of their spokespersons of the highest authority, we can dispense with saying about them what they themselves are much better at saying.

On the other hand, we are, it seems to me, in a position to learn a great lesson that you are able to teach us, dear comrades of Black Power, teachings that are applicable in our country and within our own struggles.

First of all, if we wished to be properly accountable to you, our most immediate task would be to commit ourselves entirely to the struggle against racial discrimination, which is as economic as it is human, and which comes down brutally upon people of color in France. I will give two small examples taken from personal experience: when I found myself, a few years ago, functioning as the cultural consultant for the Théâtre des Nations, we had reserved a number of rooms in a hotel on the Left Bank for an African theater troupe. But the owner of the hotel, no doubt, had not understood that it was a Black troupe and, when the artists arrived, he told them that the reserved rooms were no longer available. The organization that I was part of only had power over public matters and didn't react.

The second example: The court case for the Guadeloupian patriots began on February 19 at the Court of Justice. For this occasion, Caribbean students had organized a street demonstration, with instructions to arrive in a dispersed manner until we were near the Court. When, with my friend Michel Leiris, we crossed the Saint Michel Bridge, coming from the square of the same name, a barrier composed of C.R.S. [French National Police] was sorting people into groups: everyone who was white was allowed to cross the barricade; every person of color was held back. The instructions given to the police were simply *racist*, since a number of whites, whom they let go through with such courtesy, had come to demonstrate with the Caribbean students.

Therefore, my dear Black American friends, we must commit ourselves, in France, to the struggle against our bourgeoisie, our capitalism, our neo-imperialism, with an energy that, without reaching your level of intensity, resembles the struggle that you have created in the US. And when I say 'neo-imperialism,' it is not an empty formulation: it wasn't very long ago that repressive French forces shed blood in Martinique, in Djibouti, and in Guadeloupe.

The world is one, the revolution is one. You have taken the lid off over there. It is up to us take a lid off here. How could we better help you in your struggle, dear brothers, than by ceasing to be, here in France, a milquetoast Left, in rabbit's skin² (as we used to say in my childhood), in a state of 'peaceful coexistence,' as we say today, a divided Left, more prodigious in words than in acts and with no international weight. How could we better give you our support, than in wresting from the class enemy, here in this country, the control over our destiny, a destiny that, in the final analysis, is identified with yours, is it not?

One can certainly object that the situations there and here are not the same, that your hell, dear Black American friends, cannot be compared to the ... purgatory in which our oppressors hold us. No comparison, certainly between the economic exploitation within a white country that subjugates those of other colors and condemns— in the name of epidemiology—the entirety of a population to be confined to ghettos, after their names, languages, religions, ancestral cultures, and personalities have been pillaged, making them strangers to themselves and pariahs in their own country, and that constantly exposes them to violence and to death.

² "En peau de lapin," refers to the low quality of rabbit fur compared to mink, and thus suggests a phony or counterfeit version of something.

But despite the difference of *degree*, the society in which we live, and to whose subjections we are a bit too accustomed, is no less terrible or unjust. Yes, dear Black American friends, in this country there are also resounding wounds, unbearable excesses, odious crimes. There is an enormous gap between the rich and the poor, between those who possess the means of production and those who work for a wage, between those who govern and those who are governed, between the financially privileged and the ordinary people ruined by taxes, between the just and the corrupt. The France that welcomes you today, dear Forman, is it not the same territory where the Moroccan leftist leader Mehdi Ben Barka was arrested and then vanished, with the participation of official French services?

Having finished that digression, I return to my indictment. Among us, in France, there are old people, silent and invisible, who finish their days miserably in the midst of an insolent array of luxury. Beneath the façade of beautiful Paris there exists—extensively—sordid streets and innumerable slums.

Among us, here, there is an alienated youth, misunderstood and treated with indifference. Among us, here, women await their true emancipation, and buckle under the quadruple burden of motherhood, breadwinning, housework, and illegal abortions. Here, there is the accelerated rhythm of factory work that drains and shortens lifespans. There is the shame of most of our hospitals and our universities, poorly equipped and overwhelmed, the scandal of non-socialized healthcare and rapacious pharmaceutical corporatization, the vileness of our prison system. There is the ludicrous squandering of our resources for the atomic bomb and for greatness.

There is the disgraceful treatment that we reserve for foreigners, their hyper-exploitation, their segregation into ...semi-ghettos, the egotism, the chauvinism, the racism that so many French people exhibit. There is the burden of the high cost of living, work that mechanization and excessive concentration cut into more and more ominously.

Finally, in a nutshell, the worker's condition is far from being abolished in this country, Forman, where we have welcomed you. Despite appearances, the words of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels hold at base a truth, the knowledge that, in the revolution, the workers have nothing to lose but their chains, and a whole world to win.

Certainly, the means of our struggle should not necessarily be exactly the same as those that you have put into practice, dear Black American friends, and I would not at all like to suggest tonight that the training of sharpshooters is, for the moment, the order of the day for us here [*Shouts of: "Yes, yes, it is!"*].

But your will to destroy, to *burn*, as you say—and as you do—a system of white power that can no longer be tolerated, should reestablish within us a desire for our own deliverance. It is time, it is high time that we make heard in this country the great voice that discontented students on the other side of the Rhine call—with our own revolutionary students—an *extraparliamentary opposition*. It is high time that with you, and like you, comrades of S.N.C.C., we obliterate the old world in order to build another—viable and livable.

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