

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



David Berry

Daniel Guérin, Proudhon and Bakunin

2021

Retrieved 10/11/2021 from [anarchistfaq.org](http://anarchistfaq.org)

Also see David Berry's "The Search for a Libertarian Communism: Daniel Guérin and the 'Synthesis' of Marxism and Anarchism" in *Libertarian Socialism Politics In Black And Red* (Oakland: PM Press, 2017). This was reprinted as the introduction to the English translation of Guérin's *For a Libertarian Communism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2017). (Black Flag)

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)

## Daniel Guérin, Proudhon and Bakunin

David Berry

2021

Daniel Guérin (1904–88) is probably best known among readers of *Black Flag* for his 'rehabilitation' of anarchism in the 1960s and for his writings arguing in favour of a synthesis of Marxism and anarchism—libertarian Marxism or libertarian communism—from 1968 onwards. (He was also a lifelong anti-colonialist, and, after coming out in 1962, a leading light of the gay liberation movement.) But he had not always been an anarchist—in fact it is debatable whether he ever was, and he wrote once that he could not accept the 'anarchist' label without some form of qualification.

As a young man, having rebelled against the Parisian *grande bourgeoisie* from which he sprang, he embarked in 1930 on a long voyage to what was then French Indochina, taking with him a small library: "Of all the reading I did on the cargo boat that took me to Indochina and brought me back, including amongst others Marx, Proudhon, Georges Sorel, Hubert Lagardelle, Fernand Pelloutier, Lenin and Trotsky, it was Marx who had the greatest impact on me. Reading Marx opened my eyes, unveiled the mysteries of capitalist surplus value, explained dialectical and historical materialism. Join-

ing the revolutionary movement, I turned my back on the life of a bourgeois. Always a visceral anti-Stalinist, I became at the same time a leftwing socialist with Marceau Pivert and a revolutionary syndicalist with Pierre Monatte. Later, reading the complete works of Bakunin—the six-volume edition produced by Max Nettlau and James Guillaume—was like a second cataract operation: it made me forever allergic to any version of authoritarian socialism, whether Jacobin, Marxist, Leninist or Trotskyist.”<sup>1</sup>

In fact, his transition away from Leninism to some kind of class-struggle anarchism had begun much earlier. He was strongly influenced by the pre-1914 French syndicalist tradition even before he campaigned alongside Monatte—widely seen after the First World War as the embattled incarnation of Amiens Charter-type syndicalism—in the early 1930s, and although he had enormous admiration for Lenin and Trotsky (and corresponded with the latter during the Popular Front), and even appears to have been a member of the Fourth International during the 1940s, he was always critical of their dogmatism and what he increasingly came to see as their ‘Jacobinism’.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, he described his two-volume, revisionist study of the class struggle between the ‘*sans-culottes*’ and the bourgeois leadership of the Jacobins in the French Revolution—*La lutte de classes sous la Première République, 1793–1797* (1945)—as an introduction to a proposed synthesis of Marxism-Leninism and anarchism. He seems to have been influenced not only by Marx’s, Engels’ and Kautsky’s analyses of the history of ‘bourgeois revolutions’, but also by Kropotkin’s landmark study, *The Great French Revolution, 1789–1793*, with its

---

<sup>1</sup> *A la recherche d’un communisme libertaire*, p.9. Guérin was even a CGT organiser during the 1936 general strike. Pivert led the ‘Revolutionary Left’ faction within the Socialist Party, and later the Workers’ and Peasants’ Socialist Party, after their expulsion from the PS.

<sup>2</sup> Trotsky’s writings on Nazism were the main influence on Guérin’s ground-breaking *Fascism and Big Business* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), first published in 1939.

emphasis on the central importance of the spontaneous uprisings of the peasants and urban workers, on the equally spontaneous appearance of autonomous, federally organised ‘communes’, and on the conflict between the *sans-culottes*’ preference for direct democratic structures and the centralising, bourgeois authoritarianism of Robespierre et al.

Guérin began to have contact with the anarchist movement in the 1950s, especially the *Fédération Communiste Libertaire*. The ideological stance of the FCL (“libertarian Marxism”) and its position on the Algerian war (‘critical support’ for the nationalist movement in the context of the struggle against French bourgeois imperialism) proved doubly attractive to the anticolonialist Guérin. (Indeed, it is noteworthy that he would include a section on decolonisation in his 1965 book, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice*, and found material from Proudhon and Bakunin which supported the FCL’s position.<sup>3</sup>)

A collection of articles published in 1959—*Jeunesse du socialisme libertaire* [*Youth of Libertarian Socialism*—saw Guérin’s first real foray into the history of the nineteenth-century labour movement, and in particular the First International. There is little specifically about either Proudhon or Bakunin, but the basis of the book is his developing critique of authoritarian socialism, and includes what is, as far as I know, his first published study of anarchist ideas (with occasional references to or quotations from Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Stirner, Voline and others). This marked the beginning of what Guérin would later refer to as his “classical anarchism” phase, and saw the publication in 1965 of both his *Anarchism* and the accompanying anthology, *No Gods, No Masters*.<sup>4</sup>

Both books were hugely important, because at the time it was extremely difficult to find anarchist books in the shops, and the far

---

<sup>3</sup> *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970); introduction by Noam Chomsky. Originally published in France in 1965.

<sup>4</sup> *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1998), 2 vols.; translated by Paul Sharkey.

left and the trade union movement were utterly dominated by the Stalinists and their systematic misrepresentation of working-class history. As a result, these books influenced an entire generation of young activists and made a major contribution to the resurgence of anarchism.

Later—thanks to his experience of homophobia in the labour movement—Guérin became interested in Stirner: note the reference in ‘From Proudhon to Bakunin’ to “the necessary de-alienation of the individual”. But at the same time he was alienated from anarchism by the ‘spontaneism’ of the 1968 student movement (which he held partly responsible for the failure of the ‘revolution’); he began studying Rosa Luxemburg and argued for a ‘libertarian Marxism’.

His preferred version of anarchism thus remained one which was closest to Marxism, i.e. a socialist or syndicalist anarchism based on revolutionary class struggle. Proudhon he was interested in above all as the “father of self-management”, and in Bakunin as representative of revolutionary, working-class anarchism, close to Marxism yet remarkably prescient about the dangers of statist communism: “Bakunin’s libertarian collectivism”, he had written in 1956, “was an attempt to reconcile Proudhon and Marx. [...] The true synthesis of these two currents, however, remains to be achieved.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> ‘La Révolution déjacobinisée’, in *Jeunesse du socialisme libertaire*, p.62.