

[Immigrant Struggles, Anti-Racism, and May 1968: An Interview with Daniel A. Gordon](#)

(excerpts from the full interview)

[Selim Nadi](#) and [Daniel A. Gordon](#) October 5, 2017



Today, with Donald Trump repealing DACA, the far right mobilizing against immigrants, and Europe closing its borders to refugees, it's obvious that immigration has become one of the most important points of struggle. It would be no exaggeration to say that the success of the left today will in large part be determined by its ability to organize robust movements in defense of immigrant struggles.

But we should keep in mind that we are not the first generation to think seriously about immigration. In fact, questions about migration have been a fundamental aspect of socialist thinking, and organizing, for well over a century. Socialist history is rife with vivid examples of immigrant struggles, which may still hold important lessons for us today.

Historian Daniel Gordon has taken a detailed look at one particularly important moment: the role of immigrants in the tumultuous struggles of 1960s and 1970s France. In his book, [Immigrants & Intellectuals](#), he explores the role that immigration played in postwar French politics, how French radicals tried to build alliances with immigrant workers, and most importantly, how different immigrant communities organized themselves in the 1970s. Here, Selim Nadi interviews Gordon about the radical left, May 68, and immigrant politics.

SN: How do you define third-worldism? How do you explain the fact that before 1968, the French left was so captivated by the “Third World,” but, paradoxically, this attitude led the same left to underestimate the question of immigration in France? In your book, you explain that this was particularly due to structural reasons – can you explain further?

DG: Third-worldism was a very influential idea on the extreme left in many countries, but especially in France, that crystallized during the period of achievement of independence by formerly colonized countries around 1960-1962. It held that the working class in Europe was no longer revolutionary, whereas the masses of the newly independent countries were *the* new revolutionary force in the world. Between 1962 and 1968 therefore, a period of apparent political stability in France, there was a tendency to see the main task for French radicals as being to the south of the Mediterranean, to go and help build Third World socialism. So it was not immediately noticed that the “Third World” could be said to begin at the gates of Paris, for migrant workers were moving in the opposite direction from the third-worldist radicals, northwards to find work in France’s economic boom, settling in sprawling shantytowns of poverty, mud and lethal fire hazards. To understand underdevelopment, it was not actually necessary to go all the way to Algeria or Bolivia: you could just go to Aubervilliers or Bobigny. But Latin Quarter radicals did not immediately see this, because those were not places they generally went to. So the structural reason for this absence of an encounter before 1968 was an unspoken class segregation between an intellectual extreme Left in central Paris, who were pretty cosmopolitan and radically internationalist, but often ignorant of the realities of working class life, and a working class Communist-dominated Left in the *banlieues*, which was where the bulk of immigrant workers actually lived. So for the emergent student Left in the years immediately before 1968, the immigrant worker question was not uppermost in their political priorities because it was not yet a concrete reality for them. Meanwhile in the *banlieues*, most migrant workers had more immediate practical concerns like saving up cash to take home to their families. Political action in France was a risky business for foreign nationals, and even the minority of immigrants who were political activists were at this time primarily interested in effecting change in their home countries.

SN: Did the workers’ strikes of May 1968 in France have an impact on the political organization and “class consciousness” of immigrant workers?

DG: Absolutely. This was the key moment when a kind of class consciousness emerged among many migrant workers as having a common interest with their French colleagues. From the big car factories like Renault and Citroën to building sites across France, many immigrants participated in the general strike, whether as passive strikers or as active ones, some of them taking an active role as pickets. The CGT and the CFDT had sub-organizations specifically for immigrant workers and their publications highlighted the role of immigrants in the strike. If you pour over inquiries from the time conducted by organizations like the JOC into the participation of their immigrant members in the strike, what you find is evidence that cuts against the dominant idea from before 68 that immigrants were strikebreakers. Moreover like among many French

workers, we see among many immigrant workers a developing sense that the strike was about something more than just money – it was about human dignity. We find, albeit for a short intense period, a sense of friendship and unity between immigrant and French workers, breaking the social isolation in which immigrants had lived before 1968.

SN: Did the mobilization of immigrants living in France in 1968 (and in the following years) unfold in organizational structures specific to immigrants or did their politicization take place within the new groups of the French radical left?

DG: Both. Even before '68, there had been a few radical self-organized groups like the Union générale des travailleurs sénégalais en France, and a whole galaxy of organizations by nationality, opposed to their home country's government, flourished in the years after '68. At the same time in the immediate aftermath of May, there was a definite tendency across the various groups of the French radical left to each try to recruit immigrant workers, and to define immigrants as emblematic victims of capitalist oppression. But by about 1972 some immigrants who had lived through this experience were expressing demands for greater autonomy, as they questioned whether they were being used in a paternalistic way by the French extreme left, in ways that could be dangerous for foreigners. However, numerically probably the largest avenue of participation of immigrant workers in political organization in the post-68 period was not on the new extreme left but in more traditional workers' organizations such as those linked to the Communist Party.'

SN: Retrospectively, how would you evaluate the experience of the Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes (MTA)? Did this experience make possible a struggle against the racism of some French workers? How did the MTA relate to organizations of the left?

DG: The MTA was certainly the most important and influential of the immigrant-Left organizations of this period. It was founded by mainly Moroccan and Tunisian activists with previous experience in the French movement of May 1968, the comités Palestine, and movements of solidarity with opposition to repression in their home countries. But their experience of encountering immigrant workers in places like La Goutte d'Or convinced them that, for a North African worker who was afraid of getting killed just coming home from work in the evening, they had much more immediately pressing concerns than distant ones like Palestine. The formation of the MTA was a turning point in terms of immigrants starting to see their long-term future as being in France, questioning the "myth of return" and making demands to affirm their place in French society. The MTA mobilized heavily around issues of racist violence and government attempts to curtail the rights of immigrant workers. They were instrumental in starting the first ever *sans-papiers* hunger strikes in 1972-1973, which successfully achieved the regularization of 35,000 people. Given the recurrence of *sans-papiers* movements in more recent times, that's an example of where the MTA started something which lasted, even though it only existed as an organization from 1972 to 1976. The MTA was roundly denounced by the PCF and CGT for what they saw as "dividing the working class," but it enjoyed reasonably good relations with the CFDT, with other left groups like the PSU, and with Christians. Over the long term, you can also see the MTA's cultural influence: from the magazine *Sans Frontière* in the late 70s and early 80s, to the NGO Génériques that since 1987 has promoted public understanding of the history of immigration in France, through to the Musée nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration, ex-MTA activists have played a crucial role in their origins. One of them, Saïd Bouziri, who I interviewed for my book, now has a square named after him in the 18th arrondissement of Paris.

SN: One of the interesting points in your book is that you are interested not only in immigration from former French colonies, but just as much in immigration from other European countries. What can you say about the politicization of Portuguese, Spanish, or Greek immigrants in the 1970s? Did the fall of dictatorships in these countries have an effect on the political activism of immigrants from Southern Europe?

DG: Yes, for me it was very important to understand the history of immigration in its totality during that period, against the reductive tendency in France today to see “immigrant” as simply synonymous with “Arab” or “Muslim.” In the 1970s most people still understood “immigrants” as essentially “immigrant workers” in an economic sense rather than as a supposedly separate cultural category from the rest of the French population, which meant that Portuguese workers – often living in shantytowns – were as much “immigrant workers” as Algerians were. I also wanted to question the stereotype that French trade unions had at the time of Spanish and Portuguese workers as docile and lacking in class consciousness (a perception reinforced by the high levels of Catholic religious practice among these groups, which cut against the secularist assumptions of the French Left). Contrary to that stereotype, I found plenty of examples where Southern European workers did participate in the events of 1968. However, it was also true that they had good reasons to be discreet about it, because the Portuguese secret police in particular were keeping a close eye on subversion among their compatriots abroad – there were a lot of deserters from conscription into the Portuguese army living in France. So the downfall of the dictators in 1974-1975 was an important moment of liberation for Southern European migrants in France, leading to a flourishing of activity among immigrant associations, but also a reaction against some of the perceived excesses of the revolutionary period: both the revolution and the counterrevolution in Portugal had echoes in France.

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