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SYMPOSIUM

“Let those who have an experience of prison speak”: The Critique & Praxis of the Prisons Information Group (1970-1980)

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As the May '68 revolution reached a boiling point, a remarkable assemblage of philosophers, writers, and incarcerated persons, doctors, nurses, social workers, and sociologists, activists and organizers, and militants in France turned their attention to the problem of the prison. At a time when prisons were mostly hidden from view, practically impenetrable in France to outsiders, at a time long before we recognized mass incarceration in countries like the United States, the Prisons Information Group (the *Groupe d'information sur les prisons* or the “GIP”) coalesced to spotlight the travesty of justice that is the prison—one that continues unabated today or, even worse, is exacerbated in Western liberal democracies. As I write these words, people are being violated, slashed, stabbed, and deprived of food and security at the jail on Rikers Island in New York City, with almost a third of the guard staff not even showing up for work.¹ As of mid-October 2021, thirteen people imprisoned at Rikers have died this year.² Our jails and prisons are broken—an intolerable crisis, as the GIP maintained already in 1970.

¹ George Joseph and Reuven Blau, “Self-Harm is Exploding in New York City Jails, Internal Numbers Show,” *Gothamist*. <https://gothamist.com/news/self-harm-exploding-new-york-city-jails-internal-numbers-show-rikers> (accessed September 7, 2021); Jonah E. Bromwich and Jan Ransom, “An Absolute Emergency at Rikers Island as Violence Increases,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/24/nyregion/rikers-island-emergency-chaos.html> (accessed September 7, 2021).

² Jan Ransom, “Rikers Death Pushes Toll in N.Y.C. Jails to 13 This Year,” *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/15/nyregion/rikers-death-toll.html> (accessed October 15, 2021); Editorial Board, “The Endless Catastrophe of Rikers Island,” *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/15/opinion/rikers-island-de-blasio-close.html> (accessed September 15, 2021).

The story of the GIP has been told in French and documented.³ Now, we have the archive in English, presented in such high-definition and multi-dimension that we may finally be able to recognize this historical experience for what it truly was: a unique, remarkable, leaderless/leaderful, experimental, intersectional, abolitionist movement, and prison revolt that changed the carceral landscape of France in the 1970s.

We think we know the story: Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Marie Domenach, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and others created the conditions of possibility for the men and women in prison to be heard. The GIP aimed “to let those who have an experience of prison speak. Not that they need us to help ‘raise consciousness’: awareness of oppression is crystal clear there; they know the enemy well. But the present system denies them the means to express and organize themselves,” a GIP tract declared on March 15, 1971.⁴ That was, indeed, one way to recount the intervention—one that would trigger the ire of other critical theorists, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Targeting Foucault and Deleuze especially, Spivak responded, sharply: “The ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual’s stock-in-trade.”⁵ Feigning to not speak for those in prison, Foucault, Deleuze and others had nonetheless represented their oppression. But that critique also fell victim to the same charge. Why had postcolonial critiques too placed the French philosophers at the center of their attention? As Biodun Jeyifo notes, so many leading figures of postcolonial theory rehearsed the privilege and gained “global visibility not on the basis of work on Third World writers, but on account of powerful engagements of Western poststructuralist figures, principally Michel Foucault (Said), Jacques Derrida (Spivak) and Jacques Lacan (Bhabha).”⁶

This GIP archive, though, lays all of those internecine conflicts to rest. The archive is so rich and encompassing that it no longer needs to be tethered to Foucault or Deleuze. Other scholars had already spotlighted the many other women, men, and queer people who made up and worked with the GIP and who were, so often, sidelined in the histories. Kalinka Courtois shined a light on Danielle Rancière, Claude Liscia, Hélène Cixous, and Ariane Mnouchkine;⁷ Shai Gortler on Christine Martineau, Daniel Defert, and Catherine von Bülow;⁸ Phillippe Artières on the collaboration of prison chaplains, especially L’abbé Velten during the mutiny at the Toul prison;⁹ Benedikte Zitouni on Jacques Donzelot,

³ Philippe Artières and Laurent Quérou, *Le Groupe d’information sur les prisons: Archives d’une lutte 1970-1972* (2004); Audrey Kiefer, “Michel Foucault: Le GIP, l’histoire et l’action” (2006); Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt, “The Louvain Lectures in Context,” in *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling* by Michel Foucault, ed. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt, trans. Stephen Sawyer (2014), 271-322. See, generally, Bernard E. Harcourt, *Critique & Praxis* (2020), 439-445 and all the references cited thereto.

⁴ Michel Foucault, “On Prisons” [1971], in *Intolerable*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn, trans. Perry Zurn and Erik Beranek (2021), 66.

⁵ Harcourt, *Critique & Praxis*, 17.

⁶ Biodun Jeyifo, “Inside and Outside the Whale: ‘Bandung’, ‘Rwanda’, Postcolonial Literary and Cultural Studies,” 2002 Annual Invitational Lecture, Society for the Humanities, Cornell University (2002).

⁷ Kalinka Courtois, “The ‘Groupe d’information sur les prisons’: French Intellectuals and Activism Post May ‘68,” (2019).

⁸ Shai Gortler, “Carceral Subjectivity and the Exercise of Freedom in Israel-Palestine,” (2020).

⁹ Philippe Artières, “Les mutins, la psychiatre et l’aumônier. Archéologie d’un silence foucauldien,” *Le Portique* 13-14 (2004).

Louis Aragon, Louis Casamayor, Halbwachs, and Marianne Merleau-Ponty.¹⁰ This archive further reinforces Artières, Courtois, Gortler, and others, and powerfully demonstrates that the GIP was an expansive, broad-based, intersectional experiment in social movement work, one that pushed aside the model of the popular tribunal and disavowed the prosecutorial approach, the indictment, the trial. It did not sit in judgment or accusation—as other brilliant critical thinkers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, were prone to do. It investigated instead. Inquired. Published eye-witness reports. Conducted surveys. Accompanied prison revolts. Publicized demands.

Now, against this backdrop, we can better debate today new and different forms of critical praxis. This GIP archive offers a new lens to discuss and engage the “Black People’s Grand Jury” in Ferguson, Missouri.¹¹ It allows us to rethink transformative justice projects—for instance, how to engage in processes of transformation in cases of police killings of people of color.¹² It compels us to rethink how we tell the stories of social movements without eliding the voices of the people so often marginalized in the telling of those histories—and to ask ourselves what work it does to bring them back into the fold.¹³

What then does this new archive reveal? A powerful foil to debate, today, our own abolitionist practices? The place of experiment in resistance? The leaderful force of leaderlessness? The importance of intolerance? Yes, all that, plus the inevitability of failure as well¹⁴—for, as all successful interventions must hope to be, it too, in its attempt to unveil illusions, inevitably created new ones.

It also reveals, especially for those reading a journal like *Foucault Studies*, a terrible absence: Where are our academic philosophers today on the problem of racialized mass incarceration? In the United States, the horrors of the punitive society are worse than they were in France in the early 1970s. As I noted earlier, Rikers Island is descending into chaos and inferno. Nationwide, we reached a full one percent of the American adult population behind bars in 2008.¹⁵ Covid has decimated prison populations around the country at far greater rates than the general population.¹⁶ And yet, our academic philosophers are

¹⁰ Benedikte Zitouni, “Michel Foucault et le groupe d’information sur les prisons. Comment faire exister et circuler le savoir des prisonniers,” *Les Temps Modernes* 4-5:645-646 (2007), 268-307.

¹¹ Brie McLemore, “Procedural Justice, Legal Estrangement, and the Black People’s Grand Jury,” *Virginia Law Review* 105:2 (2019), 371-395.

¹² Omavi Shukur, the Practitioner-in-Residence at the Initiative for a Just Society at Columbia University, for example, is currently working to create meaningful change through police violence litigation using facilitated conversations between police officers and victims’ family members as well as public inquests.

¹³ Che Gossett, the Racial Justice Postdoctoral Fellow at the Initiative for a Just Society at Columbia University, is doing this as they work on a biography of Kiyoshi Kuromiya, an activist and writer situated at the intersection of several major social justice movements, including the Civil Rights Movement, the Gay Liberation Front, ACT UP Philadelphia, and the Critical Path Project. Through archival work, Gossett is trying to highlight the role of the previously marginalized queer Japanese-American activist, Kiyoshi Kuromiya.

¹⁴ Perry Zurn, “The GIP and the Question of Failure,” *Carceral Notebooks* 12 (2017), 36-46.

¹⁵ Adam Liptak, “1 in 100 U.S. Adults Behind Bars, New Study Says,” *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/28/us/28cnd-prison.html> (accessed October 17, 2021).

¹⁶ In April of 2021, the *New York Times* reported that, on average, more than 1400 new COVID cases among incarcerated individuals and seven deaths had been reported in jails and prisons each day. One year after the pandemic began, it was known that one in three incarcerated people had been infected with COVID. At

nowhere to be found, missing in action. And the few critical theorists who do not expressly espouse prison abolition but nevertheless write about the prison can be counted on our fingertips. This archive—this GIP archive of intolerance—this is the real material for philosophical debate.

The archive, now in English, is a treasure trove for critical thinkers today—and for all abolitionists who are seeking new ways and methods of experimentation to overcome the carceral state and the punitive society we live in.

We are indebted to Perry Zurn, Kevin Thompson, and Erik Beranek for their editing and translation. The excerpts from the four “intolerable inquiries,” originally published by Gallimard but never discussed in the English language, the report of Edith Rose on shackling and restraints in the prison, the interview with H el ene Cixous, the writings by Jean Genet and Daniel Defert, the myriad anonymous GIP tracts—any one of those is worth the price of admission.

Let us now turn to this rich archive to confront our critical praxis. It is time to study, again, and act, anew.

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