

REVIEW

Philippe Artières, Laurent Quéro & Michelle Zancarini-Fournel (eds.), *Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons. Archives d'une lutte 1970-1972* (Paris: Éditions de l'IMEC, 2003). ISBN: 2908295571

Alain Jaubert, *Michel Foucault, une journée particulière* (Lyon: Ædelsa Éditions, 2004). Photographs by Élie Kagan. ISBN: 2915033056

These two recent French publications document the work of the Group for Information on Prisons (GIP), which Foucault co-founded and, with his partner Daniel Defert, was most heavily involved in running. The work of the GIP has thus far mostly been discussed in hagiographical mode, most extensively in Foucault's biographies, and in a handful of articles and unpublished French dissertations. These new publications will hopefully encourage and facilitate much-needed critical scrutiny.

The significance of the GIP to Foucault's œuvre is evident from his introduction to *Discipline and Punish*, where he alludes to the wave of prison protests which had erupted in the preceding years: 'That punishment in general and the prison in particular belong to a political technology of the body is a lesson that I have learnt not so much from history as from the present.' (p.30) Foucault had followed those events all the more closely as he himself had been instrumental in stirring them up.

Public attention was initially drawn to prisons by the scores of Leftist militants who were incarcerated under drastically repressive post-1968 laws enacted by the government in order to regain control in the face of continuing social unrest. The protest actions and hunger strikes carried out by political prisoners in 1970-1971 inspired Foucault and Defert to extend their support to common law prisoners and helped them to expose the shockingly brutal treatment to which they were subjected. Jean-Marie Domenach, then editor of the Catholic monthly *Esprit*, and historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who had famously denounced the torture carried out by French forces in the Algerian war, lent their names and their support to Foucault's initiative and co-signed the statement announcing the creation of the GIP on 8 February 1971.

The GIP's avowed aim was to enable prisoners themselves to speak out on prison issues – not so much to call for reform, as to start a debate amongst

prisoners, and between prisoners and the rest of the population. This simple dialogue, however, was practically hampered by prison regulations forbidding communication with unauthorised persons (i.e., everyone but close family members), while the daily press was not allowed inside and radio broadcasts were routinely censored. The GIP mobilised a small group of sociologists to help draw up a questionnaire, which Foucault himself distributed to inmates' relatives while they queued outside Parisian prisons awaiting their turn to visit and smuggle in the questionnaire. The answers were then published in pamphlet form with an incendiary Foucauldian preface – the first of four such publications reporting on the GIP's work, which also involved street demonstrations, rallies, press conferences, and setting up and liaising with various local groups across the country and abroad.

The GIP's strategy was recognisably infused by the thinker's ideas. The investigation was not an end in itself, for the sake of gathering information, but rather a means to an end: a way to set up a vast communication network, between and around prisoners, so as to allow for discussion and coordinated action to take place. The GIP's campaign was successful on a number of fronts, winning the right for prisoners to read the daily press, for instance, and leading to a series of actions initiated by prisoners, from a wave of rooftop protests to the creation of the *Comité d'action des prisonniers*, pursuing the fight for prisoners' rights through the 1970s.

Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons. Archives d'une lutte 1970-1972 consists of a selection of documents from the GIP archives, introduced only by the editors' brief preface, and a few pages of contextualising commentary framing each of the six sections. The documents, which include press releases, tracts, questionnaires, interviews, photos and cartoons, articles and excerpts from the GIP pamphlets, are organised chronologically, ranging from the Maoist protesters' first declarations to the GIP's final interventions before its auto-dissolution at the end of 1972. The book thus usefully compiles a fair breadth of documentation, including a section on contemporary prison uprisings in other countries, and texts by Jean Genet, Sartre, Deleuze, Claude Mauriac and Robert Badinter, alongside the GIP's statements that by and large bear the unmistakable stamp of Foucault's style and reflection.

The editorial strategy of letting the archives speak for themselves might have worked better had the selection included press reports of the events, for example. As it stands, however, the editorial commentary is so scarce and vague, and the links between the various documents often so unclear, that the reader is left wondering what exactly did happen: how was this declaration received? What was the trigger for this uprising? What concrete impact did the GIP have? Artières et al. shy away from framing the documents within an intelligible narrative, and the closest they get to systematic contextualisation of the documents is to include as an appendix an

extensive chronology of events relating to prison issues between April 1970 and January 1973, listing the GIP's actions in near-telegraphic style, alongside details of contemporary press coverage.

While it will thus frustrate readers looking for something approaching a comprehensive or critical account of the GIP's work, Artières et al.'s collection may nonetheless be a useful research tool for those interested in analysing Foucault's political activism. The selection of texts by Leftist groups helps situate Foucault's thoughts about power within contemporary revolutionary discourses, and the work of the GIP often exemplifies Foucauldian pronouncements on the constitution of strategic counter-knowledges. If *Discipline and Punish* built on the findings of the GIP, the archives also show that some of Foucault's key hypotheses were already formed, and the GIP's movement can be said to have operated as a testing ground for ideas on the functioning of discourse, the power/knowledge nexus, and resistance.

Despite the occasional editorial inaccuracy and inconsistency, this volume provides a valuable basis for further research, and offers a good bibliography. Further details on the content of the archives held at IMEC would have been welcomed, especially as researchers might like to know that many of the GIP documents are incompletely catalogued: the majority of those authored by prisoners fall under privacy laws making them unavailable for consultation, but the catalogue does not systematically indicate to which holdings this applies.

Michel Foucault, une journée particulière offers an interesting contrast to, and helpfully complements, Artières et al.'s volume. The book presents approximately fifty of the action shots of Foucault taken by photographer Élie Kagan. Kagan famously photographed many of the high points of the 1960s and 1970s political struggles in France, including the massacre of scores of Algerian protesters by the police on 17 October 1961. Most of the photos published here were taken on 17 January 1972, when Foucault and about forty other protesters including Sartre, Deleuze, Mauriac and other well-known contemporary figures alongside prisoners' families broke into the courtyard of the Ministry of Justice for an impromptu GIP press conference.

The photos are accompanied by a dozen pages of narrative by journalist Alain Jaubert, who took part in the protest. Jaubert's vivid account of the day's events, interspersed with impressionistic asides filling in some of the background of the work of the GIP and the political atmosphere of the 70s, offers precisely what Artières et al.'s book misses: a detailed picture – albeit brief and partial – of exactly how, in practice, the GIP went about publicising prisoners' demands. It also gives a striking depiction of Foucault, Sartre and Deleuze putting up a struggle to stop Jaubert's arrest by the special security forces – testifying to Foucault's physical courage in carrying out his own calls for direct resistance.

The book includes a preface and a small contribution by Artières, briefly commenting on the significance of this date within a sketchily summarised history of the GIP. A full, if somewhat shaky, English translation is also provided, totalling only twenty-two pages of original text to accompany the photos. Interestingly, the text of the press conference, a statement issued by a group of Melun inmates, is not included; it can, however, be found in Artières et al.

These two publications strikingly illustrate the historiographical struggle over the work of the GIP, and both display a suitably Foucauldian reluctance to impose an authoritative historical narrative upon it. Sadly, both works break with the GIP's endeavours, either by omitting, or by largely downplaying, prisoners' points of view. It is to be hoped that they will help spark off further research into this largely neglected and potentially controversial area of Foucault's work.

Cecile Brich, University of Leeds