



SYMPOSIUM

The Problem of Concealment: Reformism, Information Struggles, and the Position of Intellectuals

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Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group (1970-1980) is a body of texts that urges and insists that its readers think *practically*. It is a compilation that makes accessible and comprehensible the historical participants' real experiences: experiences of differing and converging political desires, of organized group actions and violent state repression, of thoughtfully-timed group movement analysis and critique—in short, experiences of internal and external 'contradictions' typical in social movement struggle. As writings that focus almost exclusively on questions of strategy and efficacy, they draw attention to the reality that honestly grappling with tensions within movements is not a choice but a matter of political necessity. We *do* inevitably deal with the conflicts that arise in any space—just less or more successfully. Through the irreplaceable intellectual labor of painstakingly compiling, translating, editing, and historicizing these materials over the course of a decade, Thompson, Zurn, and Beranek thus manage to effectively draft the reader too into strategic political thinking.

Inspired by the Maoism of both the French mass organization *Gauche Prolétarienne* and the U.S.-based Black Panther Party, the *Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons* (GIP) worked to elucidate the lived relationship between educated professionals and those they are paid to surveil and criminalize, to foster sympathies between the organized French working class and the unemployed at society's margins, and, crucially, to connect the struggles and worldviews of self-identified political prisoners with those of common-law prisoners. Regarding this first relationship, throughout the compilation we see the GIP grappling with the politically ambivalent role of judges, psychiatrists, social workers, and prison guards, people whose willingness to turn against and subvert their own roles in the penal system would effectively allow the GIP to in turn support the struggles of prisoners. Discussing social workers in the prison, one GIP internal document proclaimed: "They are not all scoundrels bankrolled by those in power. Hence the need to intensify

the ideological struggle with them.”¹ A balance was pursued between denunciation and efforts to leverage the real discontentment of those workers who most directly reproduce the system, a particular tactic within a larger strategy. As this compilation makes evident, without its informants and collaborators, the GIP would not have been able to accomplish much at all.

“Information is a struggle,” co-founder Daniel Defert affirmed, and in order to reorient the flow of information and connect these groups, the GIP emphasized the experiences of those most dehumanized, conducting inquiries among the prisoners, publicizing their statements, instigating protests, distributing pamphlets, producing street theater and film, and publishing exposés penned by collaborator-members inside.² Throughout the ‘70s, the activist intellectuals who spoke for the group consistently maintained that the formation’s motivating aim was never to “reform” the prison but instead to make the thoughts, words, and experiences of the ‘most oppressed’ clearly heard by mainstream society—“for the prisoners themselves and their families to be able to speak, to speak for themselves.”³ Placed within the context of the insurrectionary politics from which the GIP derived, the implication was thus that combatting the societal segregations cultivated during the historical development of capitalism would in turn invigorate new perspectives, politicized subject positions, and militant action. And, indeed, insider exposés like the “Report by Doctor Rose, Psychiatrist at Toul Prison” — which described prisoners forcibly restrained to beds in their own excrement for days on end — produced popular outrage.⁴ For France’s prisoners, who had been engaging in demonstrations, revolts, and occupations for years with little acknowledgment, the new societal awareness allowed them to seize the time and revolt, with some protesting to obtain changes to their conditions of imprisonment, some demanding to be freed, and some taking matters into their own hands through the tactic of the prison-break.⁵ In the bigger picture, the GIP’s efforts led to a cultural legitimization of the prisoners’ political organizations and of their suffering more broadly, as well as the creation of new organizations, including other “information groups” throughout France focused on the marginalized and institutionalized. Once these aims had been accomplished, the GIP dissolved itself in early 1973.

By the late 1970s, however, the GIP was disparaged in retrospect for having been both reformist *and* inadequately so. More precisely, the political import of the group was characterized by critics as reformist in light of their actions’ limited reformist effects within popular culture and state policy. Writing at the end of the decade, Paul Thibaud, who

¹ Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons, “The Second Front (The Neighborhoods),” [2003], in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group (1970-1980)*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn (2021), 326.

² Daniel Defert, “When Information is a Struggle” [1971], in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group (1970-1980)*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn (2021), 70-74.

³ Gilles Deleuze, “Foucault and Prisons” [1986], in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group (1970-1980)*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn (2021), 387.

⁴ Édith Rose, “Report by Doctor Rose, Psychiatrist at Toul Prison” [1971], in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group (1970-1980)*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn (2021), 243-251.

⁵ Jean-Marie Domenach, “To Have Done with Prisons” [1972], in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group (1970-1980)*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn (2021), 328-345.

replaced Jean-Marie Domenach (a founding member of the GIP) as editor of the journal *Esprit*, criticized “the GIP ‘reformists’ who, technically, succeeded no better than others in finding a way out of the present impasses.”⁶ Strictly speaking, both the GIP’s descriptions of their own non-reformist practical intentions *and* the critics’ characterizations of the GIP’s real-world effects as reformist were, as best as I can see, accurate.

Under modern liberal society, political protest typically functions as a highly visible form of public expression that is ultimately designed to convince the state or other parties with formal institutional power to act on behalf of those protesting. This appears as reform when parties in positions of formal authority end up enacting as policy some version of the protestors’ campaign that in fact better serves the interest of those authorities or their allies. In response to questions of ‘reformism’ circling the GIP as early as 1972, member Gilles Deleuze retorted that when reforms are sought out by the oppressed parties themselves, as with prisoners who sought reforms, this instead produces in effect a “revolutionary action that questions the totality of power and the hierarchy that maintains it” in a fundamental way.⁷ Deleuze’s point, however, fails to address Thibaud’s later criticism adequately; the reality is that ‘revolutionary questions’ are regularly answered with reformist or even reactionary answers. That is, the modern liberal frame of political analysis itself effectively disallows the possibility of interpreting certain “questions” as radical at all, instead subsuming virtually all such expressions into mere fodder for possible reform—into liberal protests that invite ‘solutions’ from the state.

To be clear, the question at hand is not about what kinds of actions are ‘reformist’ or not according to modern liberal politics but about the quite different unspoken political perspective from which the GIP was operating. According to the Maoist understanding of politics that informed much GIP action, all of culture is interpreted as a terrain of struggle within which ‘winning hearts and minds’ is part of a larger military-political strategy. According to this perspective, then, the GIP was not trying to convince authorities to enact reforms but rather trying to compel the masses to radicalize towards a ‘revolutionary’ goal. The Maoist (dialectical) view assumes that a set of tactics can produce effects that may partially converge with the interests of authorities and elites while also producing other long-term effects that improve the real conditions of possibility for truly transformative (‘revolutionary’) struggle, opportunities which *then* must be actively converted into reality by relevant parties. In the case of the prison, this ‘revolutionary’ reality could only

⁶ Jean-Marie Domenach, Michel Foucault, and Paul Thibaud, “Still Prisons” [1980], in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group (1970-1980)*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn (2021), 380.

⁷ Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, “Intellectuals and Power” [1972], in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group (1970-1980)*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn (2021), 282: “This is why the notion of reform is so stupid and hypocritical. Either reforms are designed by people who claim to be representative, who make a profession of speaking for others, and they lead to a division of power, to a distribution of this new power that is consequently increased by a double repression; or they arise from the complaints and demands of those concerned. This latter instance is no longer a reform but revolutionary action that questions (expressing the full force of its partiality) the totality of power and the hierarchy that maintains it.”

be the physical destruction of the actual prison and the cultural elimination of popular support for penalty.

Thibaud was launching this critique at the GIP precisely because he was aware of the radical critique and total rejection of prisons expressed and theorized by several of the intellectuals within the group. Thibaud was thus praising the theory but criticizing the incomplete practice, posing the question to Michel Foucault in particular:

Why did the great critiques of post-'68 (those of Illich or your own) wash over us in all their force and truth, without provoking an equivalent wave of creativity? To me, this fact obliges us to ask ourselves together certain questions about the way in which culture and politics function in our country.⁸

Thibaud later insisted:

In France, a productive equilibrium has not been found, with respect to prisons as in other domains, between principled critique and reformist activism. That is due to the concealment of the question of law and right, as I said in this text where Michel Foucault sees only a quarrel.⁹

Indeed, much like Karl Marx appears to have 'hidden' at the very end of the penultimate chapter of *Capital* his illegal incitement and militant prediction that "the expropriators are expropriated," so Michel Foucault in 1975 seemingly 'concealed' at the end of the penultimate chapter of *Discipline and Punish* his claim that "it may so come to be ...that crime constitutes a political instrument ...for the liberation of our society."¹⁰

Now, purely in regards to the matter of "the question of law and right," such as with the question of whether or not the 'law' can be 'rightfully' broken, the GIP compilation is informative. In "The Second Front (The Neighborhoods)," a GIP internal document on how to "advance the idea of a popular justice at the level of neighborhoods," the activists turn to the local for sources of counter-law that could effectively produce a fundamental critique of the state's monopolistic hold on law.¹¹ In addition, Daniel Defert's opening reflection in the compilation includes a discussion of the role of anarchists within the prisons in the 1970s, including their role in establishing GIP-offshoots.¹² And, in a couple of prefaces written between 1972 and 1973 also included, Michel Foucault explores both the transgressive and the assimilatory dimensions of popular law-breaking.¹³

⁸ Domenach, Foucault, and Thibaud, "Still Prisons," 380.

⁹ Ibid., 382.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1* (1976), 929. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* [1975] (1979), 289. I borrow the suggestion about Marx from Balibar: Étienne Balibar, "Revisiting the 'expropriation of expropriators' in Marx's 'Capital'," in *Marx's Capital After 150 Years: Critique and Alternative to Capitalism*, ed. Marcello Musto (2019), 41-42.

¹¹ Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons (GIP), "The Second Front (The Neighborhoods)," 326.

¹² Daniel Defert, "The Emergence of a New Front: The Prisons" [2003], in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group (1970-1980)*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn (2021), 41.

¹³ Michel Foucault, "Preface to Serge Livrozet's *De la prison à la Révolte*" [1973], in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group (1970-1980)*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn (2021). Michel Foucault, "Preface to Bruce Jackson's *In the Life: Versions of the Criminal Experience*" [1975], in

Even these articulations, however, are often expressed in an indirect way and their implications within the larger GIP strategy rarely fleshed out. That is, when a ‘revolutionary’ strategy is concealed behind the image of a ‘reformist’ protest, it becomes nearly impossible to diagnose and openly discuss its failures after the fact. Operating from the assumption that the abolition of the penal system will never be brought about by lawful, reformist means, Thibaud thus points out the dilemma of the intellectual who finds themselves in effect silencing themselves. If the aim of the GIP was to increase flows of information between segregated parts of society, then the ‘problem of concealment’ may be analyzed also as a problem of information flow, both segregating intellectuals from the broader society *and* inhibiting open exchanges amongst intellectuals through their internalization of disciplinary mechanisms. And so it does seem to be the case, among intellectuals today operating as professional academics, that the “concealment of the question of law and right” points to a larger cluster of related phenomena—among interlocutors: the deep pervasiveness of euphemism and other forms of fearful speech in the social community of scholars, the avoidance of authentic engagement with the most pressing or difficult questions, and the pretense of having knowledge bases that we do not; in writing: preemptive concession to censorship, excess verbosity and obscurantism, and the strategic hoarding of insights for later publication and commodification; and, in the classroom or in public: the avoidance of difficult questions for fear of reprisal, elitism towards information flows coming from below, and the gaslighting of others who may be more insightful or even more knowledgeable.

Perhaps most pressing and relevant given our focus on the GIP is that not discussing things openly, nor even in community among intellectuals, comes to limit an intellectual’s horizon of thought altogether. As Foucault importantly explained, disciplinary power is exercised by those produced by it, and the work of surveillance is primarily done by people unto themselves and among themselves.¹⁴ Accordingly, even when evidence or analysis leads to a set of conclusions, we may find ourselves avoiding them. On the subject matter of the prison in particular, the practice of deferring or avoiding difficult conclusions is only possible as an option because of the position of lived comfort—especially when grasped at the global scale—from which even the most precarious academics speak, in contrast to the daily felt desperation of prisoners and the criminalized more broadly. And still, even if one decides that a scholar’s responsibility is only to the academy, the ‘problem of concealment’ also has often left subsequent generations of scholars in the dark

Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group (1970-1980), ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn (2021). See also: Michel Foucault, “No, This is Not an Official Inquiry...” [1971], in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group (1970-1980)*, ed. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn (2021).

¹⁴ On the other hand, as Foucault also noted, the process of disciplining has a two-pronged effect: “Military discipline is no longer a mere means of preventing looting, desertion or failure to obey orders among the troops; it has become a basic technique to enable the army to exist, not as an assembled crowd, but as a unity that derives from this very unity an increase in its forces; discipline increases the skill of each individual, coordinates these skills, accelerates movements, increases fire power, broadens the fronts of attack without reducing their vigour, *increases the capacity for resistance*, etc.” Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 210. Emphasis added.

about the political urgency and contentious origins behind the creation of whole fields of study within which they work, as with critical theory (whose radical grounds became obscured in response to American anti-communism), cultural studies (derived from British Marxism and bolstered by the flight to academia by Maoism-influenced leftists after the social movement failures of the early 1970s), and Black Studies (a 1960s social movement for which the legitimization of the study of African and Black knowledges was just one strategy within a larger revolutionary project).¹⁵

In Jean-Marie Domenach's radical 1972 statement "To Have Done with Prisons," he quotes extensively from the remarks of one 'Judge Casamayor,' a founding but clandestine member of the GIP whose real name was Judge Serge Fuster. Reflecting on the hanging of prisoners after a prison revolt, 'Casamayor' observes the shared faults and sufferings of prisoner and guard alike. Remarking then on the perpetually conflicted role of his colleagues working within institutions of "justice," the judge offers his assessment of the practices exercised upon the self that sustain the professionals which in turn sustain the penal system:

"Everyone knows that the prisoners didn't want to harm this or that guard, but were expressing their will to achieve a change in the system. If blows were dealt, it is well beyond the bodies that were affected by the blows that the intended goal is to be found. People of justice, who are blessed no less than others with a certain faculty of vision, know this, but blind themselves to it willingly."¹⁶

References

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¹⁵ In the field of Black Studies, where the radical aim—the total liberation of African-diasporic people in the U.S. and globally—is more openly acknowledged, a historical development towards the re-marginalization of the views and practices of working-class and poor Black people since the 1970s has tempered this original vision.

¹⁶ Domenach, "To Have Done with Prisons," *Intolerable*, 329.

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