SYMPOSIUM

The Problems 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 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 populist and Maoist politics 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 open up to critique those contradictory relationships between educated professionals and those who 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 disrupt and reconfigure their own roles in the penal system effectively allowed the GIP in turn to 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 who were 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 being disparaged in retrospect for having been both reformist *and* inadequately so. More precisely, 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 replaced Jean-Marie

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[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.

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 anti-reformist aims *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 counter-productive 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 accusations 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 fails however to adequately address Thibaud's later criticism. The reality is that 'revolutionary questions' are often answered with 'reformist' or even 'reactionary' answers. That is, radical questioning may open up radical possibilities, but it does not produce change in itself. Furthermore, the modern liberal frame of political mediation and interpretation effectively disables the likelihood of interpreting certain "questions" as radical at all, instead absorbing virtually all such expressions into mere fodder for possible co-optation.

On the other hand, the very question of revolution-or-reform typically reflects an excessive and blinding focus on what the state does, whereas the unspoken political perspective from which the GIP was operating was quite different. According to the *dialectical* understanding of politics that informed much GIP action, all of culture is to be interpreted as a terrain of struggle within which 'winning hearts and minds' is part of a larger political strategy. According to that 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 that treated the state as merely a means to an end. Their view assumed 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

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[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."

which *then* must be actively converted into reality by relevant parties. In the case of the prison, this 'revolutionary' reality would presumably be the physical destruction of the actual prison and the elimination of cultural support for it.

Thibaud was launching this critique at the GIP precisely because he was aware of the 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 call that "the expropriators are expropriated," so did Michel Foucault in 1975 seemingly 'conceal' 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]

On that matter of "the question of law and right," the GIP compilation provides some insights. 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 captured dimensions of popular law-breaking.[13]

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[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

These ideas, however, were often expressed in an indirect way so that their implications within the larger GIP strategy remained ambiguous. As a result, the GIP's strategic decision to conceal their 'revolutionary' strategy behind the image of a 'reformist' protest made it more difficult to diagnose and openly discuss their failures after the fact, as practically necessary as such concealment was. Simply put, they took the necessary steps to avoid the terrible repressive power of the state. And yet, the GIP operated also from the assumption that the abolition of the penal system would never be brought about by lawful means. Thibaud thus points out the dilemma of those intellectuals who found themselves in effect silencing themselves. If the aim of the GIP was to increase flows of information between segregated parts of society, then the many 'problems of concealment' may be analyzed also as problems of information flow, both segregating intellectuals from the broader society and sometimes inhibiting clear exchanges amongst intellectuals given their vigorous efforts at protecting themselves and each other.

And it does seem to be that the GIP's "concealment of the question of law and right" relates broadly to a larger cluster of related obstacles for intellectuals: the circulation of euphemisms, forms of censored speech in the social community of scholars, and hindrances to productive engagement with the most pressing or difficult questions. One of the most intellectually stifling dynamics is the resultant multiplication of limits on the scholar's horizon of thought altogether. As Foucault importantly explained, the force of even the most powerful aspects of disciplinary society rely upon and are magnified by the dispositions of the surveilled subject.[14] And perhaps most problematic of all, the problems of concealment have often left later generations of scholars in the dark about the origins, hard-fought historical gains, and political urgency behind whole fields of study. On the matter of the prison in particular, the practice of deferring the most difficult questions and problems may indeed, in the long run, foster conditions that worsen and broaden the problems of the prison for all, but especially so for the most oppressed sectors of our society.

Writing with considerable foresight in 1991 about "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," Cornel West proposed that "since we live our lives daily and penultimately within this system, those of us highly critical of the bourgeois model must try to transform it, in part from within the White bourgeois academy. For Black intellectuals—in alliance with non-Black progressive intellectuals—this means creating and augmenting infrastructures for Black intellectual activity."[15] Elaborating on these infrastructures, West then adds that such "alternative practices result from the heroic efforts of collective intellectual work and

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[14] On the other hand, as Foucault also noted, the process of disciplining may have a contrary effect: "Military 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.

[15] bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (1991), 140.

communal resistance which shape and are shaped by present structural constraints, workings of power, and modes of cultural fusion."[16] As with all prior generations of scholars, the intellectual ends up in the position of trying to strike the right balance between the necessarily isolated character of her labor against the strengths and difficulties of collectivist and cumulative forms of meaningful human knowledge and possible social change.

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 offered an honest analysis of the many layers of function and failure operating within the justice system, placing blame on guard and prisoner alike. The majority of his remarks focused, however, on the perpetually conflicted role of his colleagues working within institutions of law, at a remove from but within sight of the penitentiary system:

> "Justice is an excellent alibi: a fine-tuned machine in which oral discussion is free and public[, it] cannot but lend confidence to public opinion. It will judge the judgement, it will find it to be good or bad, and the trick will already have been played, for no one will see that the trial that unfolds before them is not the real trial."[17]

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[16] Ibid., 145.

[17] Domenach, "To Have Done with Prisons," *Intolerable*, 330.

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