



## SYMPOSIUM

### Reform, Abolition, Problematization

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I would like to take the occasion of the publication of the English translation of the GIP archive to briefly gather some reflections and lessons on three axes of resistance for which the GIP has served, for me and I hope now for others, as an important point of intersection: reform, abolition, and problematization. My hope is that this distinctive archive will become a catalyst to spur further consideration of these and so many other axes for present struggles and beyond.

It is clear throughout the GIP materials that, even in the group's brief existence, the codified trope of responding to criticism with the countercharge of failing to offer plans for reform reverberates. To be against the prison, to be against incarceration, against the carceral, against the punitive society is never enough. Those who condemn, those who protest, those who expose, those who seek to give the floor to the marginal – they all must take on the burden of crafting the reform, of projecting the vision, for the very institutions and practices that they critique.

For the GIP, this charge came to its head most clearly in the exchange that Foucault and Jean-Marie Domenach, representing the GIP, had with Paul Thibaud, the editor of *Esprit*, in January of 1980. The issue of the journal from November of 1979, "Toujours les prisons", had included an extensive roundtable discussion of the GIP featuring a former member of the judiciary, François Colcombet, a former prison physician, Antoine Lazarus, and a former activist, Louis Appert (the pseudonym that Foucault adopted for this discussion), all of whom had been involved, in varying ways, with the GIP's campaigns. In his introduction to the volume, Thibaud charged that the GIP, like so many other activist groups, had ultimately been ineffective in bringing about social reform because they had failed to lay out a program for improvements in the penal system. Foucault's reply is succinct and biting:

One of our principles was in some way to make it so that prisoners and, around them, an entire fringe of the population, could express themselves. The GIP texts were not the

elaborations of a noxious intellectual, but the result of this attempt. That is why the GIP never considered itself charged with proposing reforms.<sup>1</sup>

Domenach concurred:

From the beginning, Michel Foucault, and I, along with all the initiators of the GIP, agreed not to propose a reform plan and not to substitute our discourse for that of the prisoners.<sup>2</sup>

To abandon representation, to abandon mimesis, to resist the 'indignity of speaking for others' is thus to abandon reformism.

But another of the GIP's tactics also led it towards this same resolute silence. The most famous of the so-called "intolerance-investigations" that the GIP conducted remains, perhaps, its first, "Intolerable 1. Investigation into Twenty Prisons," where the group reported on and reproduced surveys of prisoners regarding the conditions of their incarceration. Here, the prisoners take the floor (*prendre la parole*) and its back cover proclaims: "The goal of the G.I.P. is not reformist, we do not dream of an ideal prison: we hope that prisoners will be able to say what is *intolerable* in the system of penal repression."<sup>3</sup> We see this same commitment again in the publication of the demands from the prisoner uprisings, but perhaps in its most personal form in "Intolerable 4. Prison Suicides," which reproduces a series of letters that a prisoner, H. M., sent to his family, his friends, and others. While in prison, H. M. had been sentenced to solitary confinement for homosexuality, and he eventually took his own life there. His letters thus served as documents for a "lived analysis of the personified mechanisms that ceaselessly push them [young people] into reform schools, hospitals, barracks, and prisons."<sup>4</sup>

Yet, it is "Intolerable 2. The GIP Investigates a Model Prison: Fleury-Mérogis" that initiates a different kind of challenge to the demands for reform. This booklet drew from prisoners' descriptions of the ways of life and built environment of what at the time was proclaimed to be an ideal prison, a prison of the future, to show that even the most humane and efficient form of incarceration, the most reformed means of punishment, remained nothing other than an extension of the punitive logic of society more broadly. The fundamental issue for the GIP was thus not the failure of prisons to live up to the demands of being more gentle, acceptable, and efficient; in a word, to being reformed institutions. Rather, what was at stake was always calling into question the social and political functions of punishment and illegalities.

Was the GIP ultimately fighting for the abolition of the prison system? To this we must say yes and no. Yes, if what we mean is that to become intolerant of prisons and to abolish criminal records was, for the GIP, inextricably part and parcel of the project of abolishing

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn, ed., *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group, 1970-1980*, trans. Perry Zurn and Erik Beranek (2021), 379.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 191.

the entire carceral system of which these were and are but instruments. Yes, if what we mean is, as Jean-Marie Domenach himself proclaimed already in 1972:

All the reforms are worthwhile, but they don't get at what is essential. It is really a question of breaking down prison walls, of destroying the carceral universe, which doesn't mean, as they feign to believe, entering into a universe without sanctions overnight.<sup>5</sup>

And finally, yes if what we mean is how the GIP laid the foundation and handed its work off to the CAP (Comité d'Action des Prisonniers), the group led entirely by former prisoners, which explicitly dedicated itself to abolishing not only the penal system but the death penalty, and ultimately all forms of social inequality and oppression.

But we must say no if what is meant is that the GIP sought, myopically, to destroy the prison, to tear down its walls, where such work unintentionally also serves to further entrench the interconnected logics of marginalization and the microphysics of power, where the destruction of the institution never gets at the root practices from which it emerged.

And further, we must also say no where the struggle for abolition becomes detached from the ground level of incarcerated lives and the always difficult and challenging work of forging public support. The danger here, as Foucault noted in 1976 clearly referencing his experience in the GIP and the CAP, always remains this separation and the growth it permits of certain ideologies about criminality:

The struggle around the prisons, the penal system, and the police-judicial apparatus, because it has developed alone among social workers and former prisoners, has tended increasingly to separate itself from everything that would have enabled it to grow. It has allowed itself to be penetrated by a completely naïve and archaic ideology that makes the delinquent at once into the innocent victim and the pure rebel, the lamb of great social sacrifice and the young wolf of future revolutions . . . The result has been a deep split between this monotonous and lyrical little chant, which is only heard in very small groups, and the masses who have good reason not to take it as 'money down,' but who also—thanks to the studiously cultivated fear of criminality—accept the maintenance or, even, the reinforcement, of the judicial and police apparatus.<sup>6</sup>

This is surely at least part of what Foucault meant when, as Deleuze and others so often tell us, he said that the GIP, for him, had been a failure. But what we also can see here is that the GIP's resolute commitment to the specificity of the struggles in which it took part always stood as both its challenge and its opportunity to call into question the entanglements of knowledge and power, of representation (truth) and control (government), that defined these distinct domains and the broader social architecture of which they were but one part.

Finally, in an interview from April of 1984, Foucault proclaimed that the GIP had been "an enterprise of 'problematization,' an effort to render the evidences, practices, rules,

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 342.

<sup>6</sup>Michel Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault" [1976], in *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988* (2001), 157-158; English translation as "Truth and Power," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, Volume 3, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2000), 130 [translation modified].

institutions, and habits that had remained sedimented for decades and decades problematic and doubtful.”<sup>7</sup> Problematization is invoked here in its critical as opposed to its methodological sense.

In its methodological sense, problematization designates the object of historical investigation. Accordingly, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault set himself the task of tracking the emergence of the modern problematization of punishment, that is, the distinctive way in which punishment became cast as a self-evident matter of thought in terms of the denial of liberty and the requirement to work under the disciplinary terms of the normative gaze. Problematization, in this sense, refers to the discursive and nondiscursive practices whereby something is constituted as a field—with a definite set of objects, rules of action, and forms of self-relation—from which the subsequent reflection of the period takes its bearings.

The task of critique is importantly different than historical inquiry. It is to step back and reflect upon whatever entrenched practice or position, due to a complex of social, economic, and political processes, emerges as uncertain or unfamiliar and to seek not a resolution to these difficulties but a new way of posing what is at stake in the matter at hand. For critique to be able to do this, thought must be relieved of all that it has taken for granted about this issue so that it can pose a fundamentally new problematization, otherwise it threatens merely to throw out but one more solution to an already established problematic. Foucault spoke of this work of untethering or emancipating thought from its prior commitments to a preceding form of problematization as also being a kind of problematizing—a critical problematizing. Here, to problematize means not to pose a new set of objects, relations, and rules, as in the methodological sense, but to disinter thought from its entrenchment in calcified forms of thinking and practice:

The work of thought is not to denounce the evil that secretly dwells in everything that exists, but to sense the danger that threatens in all that is habitual, and to render problematic all that is solid.<sup>8</sup>

To problematize in this critical sense, then, is precisely to aid reflection in awakening thought from its dogmatic slumber. And, certainly, archaeological and genealogical investigation of the history of problematizations of punishment is one way to contribute to the work of critique, but critique requires other forms of intervention as well.

To be sure, none of the GIP’s activities were historical, let alone archaeological or genealogical. Nonetheless, they were profoundly critical in that they rendered the sedimented procedures and commitments upon which the penal system stood problematic, and they did this in a number of ways: not just by creating spaces within which prisoners could speak of their own experiences and be heard, and not just by producing

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, “Interview de Michel Foucault” [1984], in *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988* (2001), 1507; English translation as “Interview with Actes,” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, Volume 3, 394 [translation modified].

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, “À propos de la généalogie de l’éthique: aperçu du travail en cours” [1984], in *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988* (2001), 1431 [this is the French edition of the interview with Dreyfus and Rabinow for which Foucault made several important revisions; the passage cited is one of these].

documentaries, street theatre, dramas, investigations, leafleting, and public protests, but by also enabling those with authority and expertise within these systems of power to testify and denounce the specific operations of power that they themselves inhabited. As Foucault put it, speaking of the testimony of Doctor Édith Rose, the staff psychiatrist at the prison at Toul:

As someone within a system of power, instead of critiquing how it operates, she denounced what happened there, what had just happened, on a certain day, in a certain place, under certain circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

For the GIP to engage in genuinely critical problematization required that it have in its arsenal the courageous truth-telling of those whose status, site, and position entitled them to intervene in local struggles, that is, it required, among other forms of resistance, the work of what Foucault came to call specific intellectuals. And it is precisely the specific intellectual whose epistemic authority is able to link local struggles over administrative practices within a specific facility, such as the uprising at Toul, to the more general battle contesting the historically shifting rules of veridiction and jurisdiction that govern the carceral system itself. In their simple truth-telling, specific intellectuals move beyond calls for reform to actually provoking the public's intolerance for this way of punishing, this problematization of punishment, and, in this way, contribute to the problematization of this seemingly self-evident practice.

To render problematic and doubtful all the long entrenched evidences, practices, rules, institutions, and habits that have sustained the problematization of punishment and the carceral archipelago more broadly demands an expansive and creatively shifting and changing array of tactics of resistance and struggle. This, I would say, is the lesson that stands at the very core of the GIP and stands for us now as its legacy. My hope is that the challenge that this lesson poses will remain vital for us today as we continue the struggles against the intolerable.

## References

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<sup>9</sup> *Intolerable*, 253.

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