

## FOUCAULT AND THE LEGACY OF THE PRISONS INFORMATION GROUP: INTRODUCTION

This symposium seeks to explore the unique nature and history of *Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (the Prisons Information Group, the GIP) and to consider its legacy for current struggles around imprisonment and the various carceral techniques that have historically been associated with this distinctive form of punishment.

Let me begin by briefly recalling some of the basics of the GIP's birth and structure and then attempt to set out the question of its contemporary legacy.

The GIP was a unique militant organization founded in Paris in late 1970 by Michel Foucault and his partner, sociologist Daniel Defert, in the wake of widespread post-1968 government repression of radical activist groups, especially student groups associated with French Maoism (e.g., *La Gauche Prolétarienne*, The Proletarian Left).

The GIP's mission was simple but nonetheless unique: to collect and publicize information about the living conditions within the French prison system, conditions that would otherwise have remained hidden from public view; in short, its mission was to make the invisible visible. By exposing the intolerable conditions in which prisoners lived, the GIP believed it could cultivate an intolerance among the public that

would ultimately render the very practice of incarceration itself problematic as an unquestioned form of punishment, that is, as an unquestioned social good or necessity.

Yet, from its inception, the GIP was a distinctive type of militant organization. The group demanded no ideological unity and provided no political guidance. Instead, it strove to “break down the barriers required by power” by bringing together participants from various social strata: prisoners, lawyers, judges, family members, academics, et cetera. There was no central organizing committee or symbolic figure, no charter, no statutes, no members, just activists. The GIP was nothing less but nothing more than a meeting place or, as they often put it, a “relay station (*un relais*).”

The group’s work, albeit brief, was amazingly varied. It engaged in street theater, public demonstrations, meetings, and press conferences, and it produced a play (*Le procès de la mutinerie de Nancy*, July 1972) and a documentary of interviews with former inmates (*Les prisons aussi*, 1973). But perhaps its most enduring legacy consisted of two campaigns: (1) the creation and publication of a series of distinctive information pamphlets, the Intolerable Series, and (2) the organization of advocacy groups and the publication of grievances in support of the prison revolts that erupted throughout France in the winter of 1971–72.

The GIP was thus a struggle of diffusion and rupture, dissemination and critique. But, with such a short life, what could its legacy possibly be? What might an organization whose existence spanned really but a few short years over forty years

ago offer us for addressing the questions of incarceration and punishment that we confront now?

That, of course, is one of the central questions that we want to consider in this symposium. To begin that process, I suggest, we actually need look no further than an article in *Le Monde* from April 20, 2015. Its headline read, “Half of the Deaths in Prisons are Suicides.”

The article reports about a 2014 study jointly undertaken by the French Institute for Demographic Studies and the Ministry of Justice that shows that the suicide rate for prisoners in the French penitentiary system during the period, 2005–10, was *seven times higher* than that of the general population.<sup>1</sup> And this rate had risen continuously over the period studied, whereas the rate in the general population had remained fairly constant.

All these are facts that are perhaps well known now, but nonetheless, I think, deeply troubling—even deeply intolerable, we might say—despite the fact, or maybe even because of the fact, that prison suicide in France has become a recognized “social issue” and over the last twenty-five years the French penitentiary system has adopted regulations and procedures to detect and mitigate the risk of suicide among its inmate population. Which is to say that prison suicide has become itself an object of investigation (an object of knowledge) and a manageable (governable and governing) trend (a technique of conducting conduct).

The study identifies several factors that place inmates at higher risk for suicide<sup>2</sup> and it builds on previous work in the field, citing in particular a 1976 French study by Chesnais as

the first to bring the heightened vulnerability to suicide of French inmates to light.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in what came to be its final act, the GIP raised precisely this issue—the question of prison suicides—and they did so in a way that I believe suggests that we still have much to learn from them about what it genuinely means to render problematic the practice of incarceration and the various techniques of control, surveillance, normalization, and resocialization that have historically become entangled with it.

The fourth pamphlet in the GIP's Intolerable series was entitled *Suicides de prisons* (1972). The report was actually composed in the fall of 1972, but it was not published until February of 1973 (some three years *before* Chesnais's social scientific investigation of this disturbing trend).

Now, as with all the pamphlets in the series, this volume was published anonymously. But we now know the editorial work was done primarily by Daniel Defert, the sociologist and cofounder of the GIP, and philosopher Gilles Deleuze. The volume contained a list of the suicides that had occurred in the French prison system in 1972, a set of selected case histories of these incidents, five letters from inmates and their families regarding these suicides, and an interview with the general medical inspector for the French penitentiary administration.

At the center of the report, however, stood a series of letters by an inmate referred to only as "H. M." (who we now know to have been Gérard Grandmontagne<sup>4</sup>), a thirty-two-year-old petty criminal, first convicted and jailed at the age of seventeen. In and out of some fifteen different prisons over the

course of his life, H. M. hanged himself while in solitary confinement having been sent there for being openly homosexual.

After listing the thirty-two suicides that had occurred in the French prison system during 1972 (those of which the GIP was at least aware at the time<sup>5</sup>), documenting dates, locations, and where available, names, Deleuze and Defert offer what is clearly the pamphlet's core brief: These suicides did not just occur *in* (en) prison; the penitentiary regime and administration as well as the criminal justice system had a direct hand in them. These are suicides *of* prison (*suicides de prison*).<sup>6</sup>

In their Introduction to H. M.'s letters, Deleuze and Defert contend that inmates in France during this period lived on what was often a quite narrow border between the temptation to commit suicide and the birth of a certain form of political consciousness. This consciousness was not concerned with vague indictments of society, nor of fate, nor even about making new resolutions for how to live. Rather, this unique political awareness sought nothing less than, as Deleuze and Defert put it, "to make lived analysis (*l'analyse vécue*) of the personified mechanisms that ceaselessly push them into the correctional home, into the hospital, into the barrack, into prison."<sup>7</sup>

In such a context, a prisoner's correspondence is no longer, Deleuze and Defert contend, just a record of their communications with their family and friends about their needs, their lives, their obsessions, though it is certainly that. Rather, such correspondence is "exemplary because, through the qualities of soul and thought, it says exactly *what a prisoner thinks*. And this is not what we usually believe."<sup>8</sup>

But—and this is the GIP’s point in publishing this material—what does this correspondence show that no amount of statistical data, as valuable as that is, can?

Deleuze and Defert argue that what political reflection in this context focuses on is nothing other than “all sorts of desires to flee, such as to live (*envies de fuir, comme de vivre*).”<sup>9</sup> But these are not desires to escape confinement wholly and completely. Rather, what prisoners think about is what Deleuze (together with Félix Guattari) would come to call—in a phrase they took perhaps from Foucault—“lines of flight” or “deteritorializations”: all the dimensions of a set of relations that tend fluidly to slip away from rigid structure and thereby continually disturb any effort to impose stasis and order. In this sense, the multiple struggles to flee are actually (as Foucault came to say) *coextensive with* or they actually *precede* (as Deleuze held) imprisonment itself and they mutate in accordance with the constraints that a life in incarceration present.

But what does it mean to take up the standpoint of lived analysis and think prison suicides as lines of flight in this sense?

The report acknowledges that suicides (incidents of “self-harm”) have long been part of the prison system. Yet, their number and, more importantly, their significance had changed. The inmates certainly took their own lives for what were clearly deeply personal reasons, but many were also struggling against the prison system itself, a struggle where prisoners had, as Deleuze and Defert note, “only their bodies with which to fight and resist.”<sup>10</sup> In this sense, suicides began to escalate when all other means of resistance became ineffectual and as

such they are an expression “of the detainees’ collective intolerance and their appeal to public opinion.”<sup>11</sup> The suicides were therefore not merely tragic acts of desperation, but rather the first in the “forms of combat developed for tomorrow.”<sup>12</sup>

The GIP’s work (and perhaps carceral political reflection, more generally) thus teaches us that we must situate prison suicides in the context of the myriad struggles that seek to problematize the practice of imprisonment, and it reminds us that to do this we must see them not just as statistical patterns, not just as varying rates, and not just as personal and familial tragedies but also as moments of resistance with and against the very functions of control, surveillance, normalization, and resocialization that today extend far beyond the confines of the prison complex diffused as they are across the entirety of the social body.

That challenge—to see the personal, social, and political struggles (to see resistance) in the statistics—I submit is part of the enduring legacy, better, the enduring challenge posed by the GIP.

## NOTES

- 1 Géraldine Duthé, Angélique Hazard, and Annie Kensey, “Suicide des personnes écrouées en France: Évolution et facteurs de risqué,” *Population* 69, no. 4 (2014): 519–49.
- 2 Risk factors include (1) pretrial detention, (2) placement in a disciplinary cell (including solitary confinement), (3) loss of contact with family and friends, (4) the gravity of the offense, and (5) recent hospital admission / stays (where the rate is even higher still as compared to the rest of the prison population).

- 3 See Duthé, Hazard, and Kensey, “Suicide des personnes écrouées en France,” 519.
- 4 H. M. is identified as Gérard Grandmontagne and photographs of two of his actual letters that were included in the H. M. collection in *Suicides de prison* (1972) are provided as evidence along with an unpublished type-written report on his case prepared by the GIP at the time of the work on the pamphlet in the archive collection devoted to the group, Philippe Artières, Laurent Quéro, and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, eds., *Le Groupe d’information sur les prisons: Archives d’une lutte 1970–1972* (Paris: Éditions de l’IMEC, 2003), 277, 288–89, 292–93, and 304–6. Daniel Defert reaffirms this identification, though the pseudonym is mistakenly referred as “H. H.,” in his recent set of interviews regarding his life and political activism, *Une vie politique* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), 65.
- 5 The report notes that in January 1973, as the pamphlet was going to press, *Le Monde* published a list of thirty-seven suicides from 1972.
- 6 *Groupe d’information sur les prisons: Intolérable*, ed. Philippe Artières (Paris: Verticale, 2013), 275. Hereafter cited as *Intolérable*. Note that this edition of the pamphlet fails to carry over the emphasis on ‘en’ from the original version, cf. *Intolérable 4: Suicides de prison* (1972) (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 9.
- 7 *Intolérable*, 312.
- 8 *Intolérable*, 313.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 *Intolérable*, 272.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.