

PRISONERS INSIDE / INTELLECTUALS
OUTSIDE:
THE GIP AND THE FRENCH PRISON
REVOLTS, 1971–1972

My presentation might not be as academic as the others because I am not a professor. I am used to showing my film in bumsquats and alternative networks rather than universities, but I am nevertheless extremely honored to be here. In my film, I interview the prisoners who were said to trigger the Nancy prison revolt in 1971. I also interview Daniel Defert, former member of *Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (the Prisons Information Group, the GIP) and Michel Foucault's partner, as well as Serge Livrozet, a former prisoner who got in touch with Foucault when he was in prison and then wrote the now classic book called *De la prison à la révolte*. Here I will examine the close links and relationships between the prisoners, revolting inside the prison, and the GIP intellectuals outside, during the period of 1971–72. As Daniel Defert puts it in my film, at this time there was a level of communication between the inside and the outside that the GIP could never have dreamed of. There was a mutual interest and a beneficial relationship between both parties. The GIP wanted to inform the public about prison conditions and how intolerable they were, so the prison riots gave credibility to their work. On the other hand, the prisoners discovered an incredible relay within the members of the GIP when the riots happened. The GIP would

follow each riot closely and write about it in papers, so it gave a lot of credibility to the riots and the prisoners themselves.

From the very beginning of the GIP, it was clear that GIP members were hoping riots would happen. This is what Daniel Defert states in my film. He says that they were hoping for riots but the GIP could not push the prisoners to riot because they had no way to protect them from the extremely violent repression inside the prison that would invariably follow. So the GIP could only hope for this revolt, which finally happened. And we could say it was clear from the beginning because one way the GIP conducted its investigation was through questionnaires that were illegally snuck inside prison. These questionnaires asked prisoners about the food, the working conditions, the sleeping conditions, et cetera, and the last question was always, "Have you heard of riots?" First, "Have you heard of hunger strikes?" and then "Have you heard of riots?" So there was this way of pushing the prisoners toward that. And of course, in September 1971, there was the Attica riot. The GIP would analyze it and juxtapose it to the situation in France and wonder if such a thing could happen in France. There were also riots in Italy around the same time, riots in Rome and other prisons across Italy. And the GIP wrote about these riots.

The French prison riots launched about forty separate movements between 1971 and 1972. Along this wave of riots, the GIP worked closely to support the prisoners' *revendications* by publishing their demands, conducting investigations, giving press conferences, as well as participating in public demonstrations and protests. When the first riot broke out in Toul, in December 1971, Foucault went there two days afterward, held a press conference, and wrote about the event in the name of

the GIP. That gave the riot a certain credibility from the start that the prisoners could not have given it themselves. Foucault also, along with Simone Signoret, paid to publish an open letter in *Le Monde*, perhaps the largest daily newspaper in France. The letter was addressed to President Pompidou and written by Dr. Edith Rose, a Toul psychiatrist. In it, Dr. Rose wrote about the situation and how unbearable and harsh the conditions were at Toul prison. A couple of days after the Toul riot, there was a big television debate where Jean-Marie Domenach, a founding GIP member, asked the prison representative about what happened in Toul. Maybe a month after the main riot broke out in Nancy (my home town and where I still live), the GIP was accused by the mainstream press of instigating the revolt. You could read in the newspaper about how the leftist movement was behind the prisoners, pushing them toward the riot. Two days after the riot in Nancy, Foucault, along with Defert, Sartre, and other GIP members, did a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Justice. They asked for an account of what was going on in Nancy after the riot, what was going to happen to the prisoners, what information would be made public. So there was a really close relay. Again, a few weeks after the riot, Foucault returned to Nancy where there was a protest in front of the prison that was really violently repressed and dispersed by the police.

Also, one thing we have not talked about is that there were spontaneous local antennas of the GIP, meaning that there was the large GIP organization in Paris, but then there was GIP-Lyon, GIP-Toulouse, GIP-Nancy, et cetera. The members of GIP-Nancy were really behind the prison walls. Some prisoners

I interviewed remember them throwing tobacco over the walls and helping in any way they could.

Nancy's prison revolt led to the first trial. It went to court and the six ringleaders were held responsible for the material damage to the prison. It was torn apart and there were no more tiles on the roof. The prison was totally destroyed. The so-called mastermind behind the riot, Jackie Hoffman (then a prisoner and now a good friend of mine) told me it was actually a member of GIP-Nancy who, shouting to him from the bridge across from the prison, told him to call the lawyer, Henri Leclerc. Leclerc was basically the French William Kunstler of the period. He was really behind the whole leftist movement. The GIP-Nancy told Jackie to write to Leclerc both because of his reputation and because he was also defending for free back then. So that's how Henri Leclerc came to defend the six ringleaders of Nancy's prison riot. It was Leclerc who made this the first trial of prison. It was not just the trial of Nancy; it was the trial of all the riots in prisons. At the time, Gilles Deleuze, the famous philosopher and GIP member was in the court at Nancy, but the jury refused to let him speak in the name of the GIP, explaining he didn't witness the riot itself.

So all throughout that period, there really was a close relation between the prisoners inside, coming from a lower, uneducated social class (all of the prisoners interviewed in my film left school at age fourteen), and prestigious intellectuals outside. This makes it a rather unique case in the history of social struggle. We have bourgeois and proletarian joining forces around the same cause. The prisoners were not necessarily aware of this, though. You have to keep in mind that back then no press could get into prison. There were no radios, no TV,

no nothing. So the six ringleaders discovered all this support when they got to court in Nancy. They saw they had national support, with some of the country's most important intellectuals behind them. They did not really know whom Foucault was and they certainly had not read his books. So it was sort of a strange relation between really different social classes. Most of the prisoners had heard of the GIP, but they did not necessarily know all about the work it was doing outside. Nevertheless, there was a relation of mutual interest and both parties gave credit and legitimacy to each other's action. The GIP needed the riot to show the public that the situation in prisons was intolerable and the prisoners needed the GIP to give their movement credibility.

This will all be even clearer when you see my film, *Sur les toits*.