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FOUCAULT'S *PUNITIVE SOCIETY* AND THE PRISONS INFORMATION GROUP (GIP): INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this round table on *The Punitive Society*.[1] This meeting is a sequel to the workshop on the legacy of Michel Foucault and *Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (the Prisons Information Group, the GIP), which took place about one year ago, May 2015, at DePaul University. In the meantime, many things have happened, including the publication of the English translation of Foucault's lecture course, *The Punitive Society*, a few months ago; the yearlong seminar, "Foucault 13/13," here at Columbia University—including a seminar on *The Punitive Society*, with Axel Honneth, Didier Fassin, and Nadia Urbinati; and the very recent publication of the volume *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition*, edited by Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts, with fourteen essays and three "intolerable" statements, which we will need to read in depth.[2]

The Punitive Society marks the time and place where Foucault studied the model of the war of all against all, the emergence of the social enemy, the genealogy of the penitentiary, the theory of illegalisms, and the birth of imprisonment. We know quite well the external circumstances in which this seminar was taught. At that moment in time, people were still living the consequences of May '68 and the recrudescence of repression, especially promoted under the presidency of Georges

Pompidou. It is, as well, the moment of dissolution of the GIP, which had been activated by what the group called the *enquête-intolérance* or intolerance-investigation.

In early 1972, during his visit to the United States, Foucault had visited Attica prison, an event that left an indelible mark on his intellectual activity and his work. In an interview with John K. Simon for *Social Justice*, Foucault confessed that he had never had the opportunity to visit a prison in France, but that he had information about the pitiful state of French prisons. What impressed him about Attica was something else entirely: the machinery, the dwarfing effect, medieval towers, the entrance à la Disneyland—but also the riots, the political prisoners, and the Black Panthers. At the time, Foucault was already working on his "book on punishment," a book that would later become *Discipline and Punish.*

Because they are so rich, and the circumstances so extremely complex, these thirteen lectures in *The Punitive Society*, taught between January 3 and March 28, 1973, at the Collège de France, sport their own load of incoherent, perplexing elements that are part of a complex process of thought: a thought in the making, a thought constantly critical of itself and of the historical context within which Foucault always responded with action.

In fact, the lectures begin by qualifying the noun at the top of his lectures, *punishment*. "I want to justify the title of the lectures and talk about this notion of *punishment*. If I have taken precisely this dull, naïve, weak, puerile notion, it is because I wanted to return to things at the level of their historical development, beginning with the analysis of what could

be called the 'subtle tactics of the sanction.' I will start," he announces, "by picking out some of these. It seems to me that we can pick out four major forms of punitive tactics, which I will define by verbs rather than nouns."³ Defining them by verbs means something theoretically crucial, as he will be focusing on *actions*, on processes, rather than on nouns or *substantifs*, which seem fixed and essential. He wants to understand processes, actions, and performances, which can be changed and whose directionality can be redefined. That's how he identifies these four key punitive actions: to exclude, to organize a redemption by means of compensation, to mark, and to confine. These four tactics cannot be isolated from each other. As they are verbs or actions, they are constantly interacting. The lectures will explain the complexities of those interactions. There is something that seems important in these lectures: punishment, *supplice* in its different forms, and other tactics, are part of a "literacy."⁴ Foucault frequently considers that those "subtle tactics of the sanction"⁵ are part of an alphabet, or a grammar. They are part of a linguistic system that has been automated and is barely visible; a system that is hidden, sleeping sometimes, in language itself. Foucault claims that to de-automate the perception, we need to study the *hors-texte* and to delve into the discourses—what he began calling "discursive events" back in 1970.

Focusing on the radically Heraclitean trope of the war of all against all, and on the theory of illegalisms, Foucault will change the direction of analyses current in some of his contemporaries, and those paradigms will become crucial to draw a critique of Marxist and Althusserian paradigms.

On March 28, 1973, by the end of his lectures, Foucault not only recapitulated his work, he also pushed his research forward:

> Where was I wanting to go? I wanted to analyze a certain system of power: disciplinary power. It seemed to me, in fact, that we live in a society of disciplinary power, that is to say a society equipped with apparatuses whose form is sequestration, whose purpose is the formation of a labor force, and whose instrument is the acquisition of disciplines or habits. It seems to me that since the eighteenth century, there has been a constant multiplication, refinement, and specification of apparatuses for manufacturing disciplines, for imposing coercions and for instilling habits. This year I wanted to do the very first history of the power of habits, the archeology of those apparatuses of power that serve as the base for the acquisition of habits as social norms.[6]

This is not only a project of nouns, of substantifs, this is a project of verbs. Of actions.

Now, to talk about all that and much more, we are going to give the floor to our colleagues, and then we will go on with an open discussion.

NOTES

1   Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1972–1973,* ed. Bernard E. Harcourt, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

2   Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts, eds. *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

3   Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, 6.

4   See Michel Foucault, *La Société punitive: Cours au Collège de France 1972-1973,* ed. Bernard Harcourt (Paris: Seuil, 2013), 10, where Foucault calls the tactics of punishment an "alphabet," in the sense of "alphabetisme" or "literacy."

5   Ibid.

6   Ibid., 237.