

THE GIP AS A CYNICAL PRACTICE

In my earlier intervention at DePaul University and in the course context of *The Punitive Society*, I tried to suggest an intimate link between Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge and mode of discourse analysis (circa 1970) and his political engagement in *Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (the Prisons Information Group, the GIP). I proposed, as others have, that the conceptual architecture of the GIP related directly to the structure of his analyses of discourse, but also, that his political praxis pushed his theoretical reflections toward both the idea of a "political economy of the body" and also the need to supplement the archaeological approach with a more genealogical analysis of power. In sum, Foucault's theoretical work in the early 1970s informed his political engagement and, reciprocally, his political praxis reshaped his theoretical writings.

To see, on the one hand, how the theoretical framing influenced his political engagement, one might focus on the following elements of the GIP:

First, by contrast to alternative forms of engagement, such as, notoriously, the popular tribunal (discussed in the debate with the Maoists¹) or a formal commission of inquiry and report, the GIP was organized so as to allow the incarcerated persons to be heard—rather than be spoken for. This principal theme involved a number of subelements, including:

- a. *The (relative) anonymity of the organizers.* Rather than have a named and appointed spokesperson, along the model of a Jean-Paul Sartre as prosecutor and judge of a popular tribunal, the effort was to diffuse authority and avoid designated speakers. Still today, few of the central figures are known—Danièle Rancière, Christine Martineau, Jacques Donzelot, Jean-Claude Passeron would all be initial participants, working on the original survey, but their names would remain somewhat anonymous.² Domenach, Foucault, and Vidal-Naquet would sign the original manifesto, but practically all of the other communiqués were unnamed, signed by the GIP.
- b. *Leaderlessness of the organization.* Insofar as the objective was to make it possible to hear those incarcerated and their families, rather than to speak on their behalf, there was a concerted effort not to identify or allow leadership positions within the GIP.
- c. *Not to say what to do, but to give voice, to allow the voices of the prisoners to be heard.* As the GIP manifesto declared, “It is not for us to suggest reform. We merely wish to know [*connaître*] the reality. And to make it known almost immediately, almost overnight, because time is short.”³ You hear this throughout the tracts of the GIP, like this one from March 15, 1971:

It is about letting speak those who have an experience of prison. It is not that they need help in “becoming conscious”: the consciousness of oppression is absolutely clear, and they are well aware of who the enemy is. But the current system denies them the means of formulating things, of organizing themselves.⁴

Second, the breakdown of the distinction between political prisoner and common law prisoner, at the heart of the GIP intervention—in opposition to some of the early Maoists’ attempts to obtain political prisoner status for their militants⁵—theoretically derives from the interstices of the 1972 lectures, *Théories et institutions pénales*. It is a clear implication of the challenge to the political nature of criminal justice, and articulated as such in those lectures. One can see this translated directly into the GIP, from the initial manifesto onward, where it is clear that the object of the political intervention is the prison *tout court*, not the detention of militants only or political prisoners.⁶

Finally, and at least nominally, the political intervention “ended” with the creation of an autonomous—actually the first—organization of and for prisoners, the CAP (*Comité d’action des prisonniers*). The idea that the GIP was all about hearing the incarcerated was capped by the elegance of this withdrawal, once a genuine prisoner’s group had been formed.

In this sense, the model and praxis of the GIP emerges seamlessly from the theoretical work on discourse analysis, from the *History of Madness* to the *Archaeology of Knowledge* and “The Order of Discourse”. As Foucault himself confided

to Daniel Defert, his involvement in the GIP was, in his words, “dans le droit fil de l’*Histoire de la folie*” (“in a straight line emanating from *The History of Madness*”).⁷ On the other hand, the political praxis then shaped the theoretical work in a number of important ways.

First, the focus on the body of the prisoner, on the materiality of the conditions of confinement, on the way in which the prison continues to operate principally on the body, shaped his orientation. The “political economy of the body” is, I think, a product of this work. And, of course, Foucault intimates as much in his own words in *Discipline and Punish*.⁸

Second, the shift from the analysis of a repressive model of power in *Théories et institutions pénales* in 1972 to the productive elements of penality in *The Punitive Society* and *Discipline and Punish*: I have commented earlier; there is clear evidence of this right after the visit at Attica in April 1972.

Third, the first-hand experience of the prison and witnessing of the routinized, homogenous uniformity of isolated confinement, intolerable prison conditions, and the day-in-and-day-out repetitiveness and recurrence of prison life manifested to Foucault the difference from the ideals of the prison reformers of the eighteenth century, thereby revealing to him that an archaeological approach alone was not sufficient, and that a genealogical method was necessary. Archaeology would have entailed the derivation of the prison from the theories of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reformers. What Foucault discovered was that this was impossible, and that instead he had to seek its birth in a genealogy of morals.

Finally, the militant engagement manifested to Foucault both the seriousness of the struggle and the relevance of the model or matrix of civil war—as I noted at DePaul.

It may be possible to summarize all this by saying that the lectures *The Punitive Society*, the book *Discipline and Punish*, and the militancy of the GIP together formed a philosophical act, what Deleuze referred to as “a theoretical revolution,”⁹ that was aimed to deconstruct the distinction between political and common law prisoners, actualize a civil war matrix, and build alliances in society between critical theorists, political militants, and criminal justice practitioners. As he famously said of the book he was writing, *Discipline and Punish*, “The little volume I would like to write about the disciplinary systems, I would want it to be useful for an educator, a guard, a magistrate, a conscientious objector. I don’t write for a public, I write for users, not for readers.”¹⁰

Now, while I continue to think that this is all right, there are certain dimensions that I think are missing by an overly focused contextual history of the GIP. Because, after all, I think that there were other important elements to the GIP engagement that involved dimensions of (1) frank speech, (2) a mode of life, and (3) an aesthetics of existence. These are themes and concepts that flourish in Foucault’s later lectures, and yet I hear them in the way in which the members of the GIP were proceeding. I think they relate closely to Foucault’s discussion of the Cynics and of the Cynics’ mode of life and their critique of their surroundings, all of which are developed in great depth in *The Courage of Truth*.

Now, my claim will be modest. I will not argue that the GIP experiences shaped the late lectures, nor the other way around, that the GIP practices were influenced by the Cynic mode of life. Rather, I will seek only to draw the reflections of each on each other.

Critical philosophy as a way of living, as a mode of life: this is, as Foucault explores in *The Courage of Truth*, the characteristic life of the Cynics—of Cynic practice, of those philosophers in the tradition of Antisthenes and Diogenes of Sinope who, from the fifth century BCE to the fifth century CE, espoused a simple mode of life that challenged most of the conventions of society.

There are certain key concepts associated with the Cynics, at least on Foucault's reading: An aesthetics of existence, frank talk, and life as a work of art.¹¹ Cynic practice is all about a particular mode of life. And on Foucault's reading, this question of mode of life is inextricably linked to a certain form of truth-telling, a particular ethical form of *parrhesia*. Truth-telling is, as we know, by no means limited to the Cynics, but the Cynics are in part defined by their truth-telling. "The Cynic is constantly characterized as the man of parrhesia, the man of truth-telling," Foucault tells us.¹² If anything, it is the kind of *parrhesiastic* truth-telling that is characterized by "insolence": this is a term that Foucault begins to deploy in relation to the frank speech of the Cynics. Only here, he will write about "free-spokenness, but also insolence."¹³

"Intolerable insolence": the Cynics pushed their frank speech and acts to the extreme, to the point where their frankness becomes insolent. Foucault lectures,

in Cynic practice, the requirement of an extremely distinctive form of life—with very characteristic, well defined rules, conditions, or modes—is strongly connected to the principle of truth-telling, of truth-telling without shame or fear, of unrestricted and courageous truth-telling, of truth-telling which pushes its courage and boldness to the point that it becomes intolerable insolence.¹⁴

I find it interesting here to see the notion of “intolerable” reappear, but this time on the side of the Cynic, the practitioner of resistance. He is the one who is now intolerable—not the wardens and police.

These first two aspects, then—mode of life and frank speech—come together in Cynic practice. They are linked. They are related. So, for Foucault, Cynic practice is “a form of philosophy in which mode of life and truth-telling are directly and immediately linked to each other.”¹⁵

Indignation and scandal are two other important concepts: “the form of existence as living scandal of the truth,” Foucault writes. Elsewhere he develops the “theme of life as scandal of the truth.”¹⁶ He uses the term “*scandale*” in French, and it is interesting to note here that the notion of scandal is associated with political militancy, with revolutionary movements: “Cynicism, the idea of a mode of life as the irruptive, violent, scandalous manifestation of the truth is and was part of revolutionary practice and of the forms taken by revolutionary movements throughout the nineteenth century.”¹⁷

Foucault refers to three styles of militancy—of what he calls revolutionary life—the third of which strikes a real reso-

nance with his earlier political engagements in the 1970s: “the third important way of being militant,” Foucault explains,

is militancy as bearing witness by one’s life in the form of a style of existence. This style of existence specific to revolutionary militantism, and ensuring that one’s life bears witness, breaks, and has to break with the conventions, habits, and values of society. And it must manifest directly, by its visible form, its constant practice, and its immediate existence, the concrete possibility and the evident value of an other life, which is the true life. Here again, right at the center of the experience, of the life of revolutionary militantism, you find the theme, so fundamental and at the same time so enigmatic and interesting, of the true life, of that problem of the true life which was already raised by Socrates and which I do not think has ceased to run through all Western [thought].¹⁸

Foucault argues that this form of militant life resurfaces in the contemporary, though he suggests, speaking of Communism, that it has now become an “unacceptable truth” that has to be “banished.”¹⁹ (I will confess that I cannot help but read into his discussion a certain embrace of the model.)

What is most interesting, then, is that the model of the Cynic militant life—a model of struggle, of conflict, of battle, or in his words, “the life of battle and struggle against and for self, against and for others”²⁰—is precisely the matrix that we had seen in the early 1970s. It gives life to a radical kind of militancy. One that is a mode of life. It is a “philosophical militancy” that Foucault describes as:

the idea of a militancy in the open, as it were, that is to say, a militancy addressed to absolutely everyone, which precisely does not require an education (a *paideia*), but which resorts to harsh and drastic means, not so much in order to train people and teach them, as to shake them up and convert them, abruptly. It is a militancy in the open in the sense that it claims to attack not just this or that vice or fault or opinion that this or that individual may have, but also the conventions, laws, and institutions which rest on the vices, faults, weaknesses, and opinions shared by humankind in general. It is therefore a militancy which aspires to change the world, much more than a militancy which would seek merely to provide its followers with the means for achieving a happy life. If we are to talk of Cynic militancy, it is important not to forget the system to which it belongs, that it exists alongside many other forms of philosophical proselytism in Antiquity. But we should also recognize a particular form in this militancy: an overt, universal, aggressive militancy; militancy in the world and against the world. This, I think, is the singularity of Cynic sovereignty.²¹

This conceptualization of the Cynical militant life bears an uncanny resemblance to the political practices that Foucault himself engaged in as a member of the GIP. Here are several elements that resonate:

1. The first aspect is perhaps hidden, but it is, in my opinion, of the utmost importance. It concerns the last few and

totally innocuous words of the GIP manifesto: the postal address.

“All those who want to inform us, be informed or participate in the work can write to the GIP at 285, rue de Vaugirard, Paris-XVe.”²²

That was Foucault’s home, his apartment in the fifteenth arrondissement of Paris.

One can imagine that the GIP could have used countless other addresses—including, for instance, the offices of the journal *L’Esprit* where the tract would be published.

But Foucault chose his home. He was investing his life. He was making no separation, drawing no distinction, making no boundary between his political engagement and his mode of existence.

2. There is a sense, second, that the prison touches us all. That we are all, in our personal lives, affected. That it concerns our lives, not just those of the incarcerated. So, for instance, there is an inclusion or inclusiveness from the start. The pronoun is “we”; yes, that floating, haunting we that so often causes trouble.

You can hear this from the first sentence of the GIP tract:

None of us is sure to escape prison. Today less than ever. Police control [*quadrillage*] over day-to-day life is tightening: in city streets and roads; over foreigners and young people. . . . We are kept under “close observation” [*Nous sommes sous le signe de la ‘garde à vue’*].²³

There is also this resistance to the conventional, in an effort to redefine reality and the life that surrounds us. It is *our* lives, in their entirety, that are affected. In the journal *Combat* on May 5, 1971, Foucault writes:

The street is becoming the restricted domain of the police; it's arbitrariness becomes the law: Move along and don't stop; walk and don't talk; what you've written, you're not going to give it to anybody; no gathering (*rassemblement*). Prison begins well before its doors. As soon as you leave your place.²⁴

3. All of the words, the discourse, the language Foucault would use to describe the Cynics would be expressed in his words at the time: *intolérable, indigne, scandale . . .*

Here, from a text he wrote in February 1971 addressed to the detained and their families:²⁵

The situation in the prisons is intolerable [*intolérable*]. They render the prisoner's life a life unworthy [*indigne*] of a human being. The rights they have are not respected. We want to bring this scandal [*scandale*] to light. [Again, addressed: 285 rue de Vaugirard]²⁶

4. The parrhesia of others: especially compelling, Foucault talks of the parrhesia, the speaking in the personal voice, the "I" of the psychiatrist at the prison Toul, who, against the prison code, spoke of what she had seen. "That voice that says 'I,'" a formidable voice because she claimed to speak truth.²⁷

And their own parrhesia as well. In response to the Schmelck Report on the Toul uprisings, the GIP writes that

their findings and aggregations of responsibility “are morally and juridically unacceptable.”²⁸ Throughout, the language is of moral inadmissibility and the need to hold accountable.

5. Not to tolerate the accepted, the conventional, the habitual. Yes, that is part of the “intolerable” that goes with *power-knowledge*, but it is also a part, I think, of the Cynical mode of life. And it is well articulated in that GIP tract from March 15, 1971, that is the namesake for the volume by Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts:

Our inquiry is not done in order to accumulate knowledges, but in order *to increase our intolerance and to make it an active intolerance*. Let’s become intolerant of prisons, of the justice of the hospital system, of psychiatric practice, of military service, etc.²⁹

6. Foucault’s own language in the early 1970s is often that of “intolerable insolence.” In a radio interview with Radio-Canada in April 1971, Foucault refers to the conditions in prison in France as “incredibly medieval and archaic.”³⁰ He would add, sounding like a Cynic or anarchist or nihilist:

Yes, they are archaic, medieval; furthermore, I don’t know if good prisons can exist; in principle, I think that all repression is bad, I also think that every state is repressive; from which I conclude that every State is bad [laughter].

— [...] are you an anarchist?

Maybe not entirely, I simply wonder if the forms of the state that we’ve known until now, if the forms of the state that have developed during history, let’s say

since Ancient Greece, are the only forms of social organization to which one can refer. We probably need to think about another type of social organization....³¹

Or later, in January 1972, in the communiqué of the GIP in response to the Schmelck Report regarding the prison uprisings in Toul, Bussac, and Nîmes, authored most likely by Foucault himself and published in the bulletin of the APL (*Agence de presse libération*, no. 12, January 9, 1972), the language is blunt: “the detained were left eight days or more in their own shit.”³²

Now, I have focused on the contributions of Foucault, but I also detect this voice of “intolerable insolence” in the words and writings of the other militants. For instance, the Maoist militants of the *Gauche Prolétarienne* (which was rendered an illegal organization and thus signed their tracts “The Maoists”) would refer to the minister of justice, René Pleven, as “that man whose face resembles a rat” [*cet homme à tête de rat*].³³ They would write, during the second hunger strike just before the GIP was formed:

This man must pay, he needs to be punished ... We’ve made an outlaw of “*le grand maton de France*” [slang for “screw,” referring to Pleven], and we will know how to apply the law.

In the past, an enormous prison, called La Bastille, crushed Paris. The people destroyed it and put on top of its spikes the heads of those who guarded it.

Read *La Cause du Peuple* – The Maos ³⁴

Or, Jean Genet, the author of the third *enquête-intolérance* on the death of George Jackson at San Quentin, would refer to his shooting as “a political assassination.”³⁵ Those were fighting words.

In the end, one could almost say that the entire GIP enterprise resembled the teaching of Diogenes in the household of Xenocrates: to eliminate the dependence of the dependent (in the household, the children), to render them self-sufficient, independent, to “practice autarky”—in Foucault’s words, it involved “an apprenticeship in endurance, of battle, an apprenticeship in the form of an armature for existence.” That is what “characterizes Cynic teaching.”³⁶

I think one can hear this best in the words of the GIP itself, so let me conclude with a passage from a communiqué of the GIP, written most probably by Foucault, in January 1972, at the time that he would have been delivering his lectures on *Penal Theories and Institutions*, where the GIP states (in response to rumors that they had disavowed the prisoners’ revolt at Nancy):

The GIP doesn’t have anything to disavow about the forms of collective action that the prisoners adopt in order to support or express their demands. The GIP believes that the prisoners are old enough. The GIP is not an intellectual court that judges over the well-foundedness of these actions, neither is it, as the minister would like to suggest, a subversive group which inspires them from outside. Since its foundation, the GIP proposed for itself neither to speak for the prisoners nor in their name, but to ensure instead that the

prisoners and their families can finally speak themselves.³⁷

In helping the prisoners to be heard, and in paving the way for them to create their own Prisoners' Action Committee, the CAP, the effort was one that had at its center a mode of life geared toward independence, simplicity, and autarky. There was a distinct resonance with the Cynics, who Foucault would study years later.

NOTES

- 1 Michel Foucault, "Sur la justice populaire. Débat avec les Maos" (1972), *Dits et Ecrits I* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), no. 108, 1208–37.
- 2 See *Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons: Archives d'une lutte 1970–1972*, eds. Philippe Artières, Laurent Quéro, and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel (Paris: Éditions de l'IMEC, 2003), 30 and 47. Hereafter cited as *Archives d'une lutte*.
- 3 GIP, "(Manifeste du GIP)" (February 8, 1971), *Dits et Écrits I*, no. 86, 1042–43 (translation by Stuart Elden: <https://progressivegeographies.com/2013/08/02/manifesto-of-the-groupe-dinformation-sur-les-prisons-a-full-translation/>).
- 4 GIP, "Le GIP vient de lancer sa première enquête" (1971), *Archives d'une lutte*, 52: "Il s'agit de laisser la parole à ceux qui ont une expérience de la prison. Non pas qu'ils aient besoin qu'on les aide à 'prendre conscience': la conscience de l'oppression est là parfaitement claire, sachant bien qui est l'ennemi. Mais le système actuel lui refuse les moyens de se formuler, de s'organiser."
- 5 See, for example, "Déclaration des emprisonnés politiques en grève de la faim" (1970), *Archives d'une lutte*, 31.

- 6 See Philippe Artières, Laurent Quérou, and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, “Genèse du GIP,” *Archives d’une lutte*, 28.
- 7 Daniel Defert, *Une vie politique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2014), 56.
- 8 Michel Foucault, *Surveiller and Punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 35: “Que les punitions en général et que la prison relèvent d’une technologie politique du corps, c’est peut-être moins l’histoire qui me l’a enseigné que le présent. Au cours de ces dernières années, des révoltes de prison se sont produites un peu partout dans le monde.”
- 9 Gilles Deleuze, “Écrivain non: un nouveau cartographe,” *Critique* 343 (December 1975):1212.
- 10 Michel Foucault, “Prisons et asiles dans le mécanisme du pouvoir” (1974), *Dits et Ecrits* I, no. 136, 1389–93: “Le petit volume que je voudrais écrire sur les systèmes disciplinaires, j’aimerais qu’il puisse servir à un éducateur, à un gardien, à un magistrat, à un objecteur de conscience. Je n’écris pas pour un public, j’écris pour des utilisateurs, non pas pour des lecteurs.”
- 11 Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984* (New York: Picador, 2008), 162–63.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 166.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 166.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 165.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 166.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 180.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 183.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 184.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 186.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 283.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 284–85.
- 22 GIP, “(Manifeste du GIP),” 175.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 174.

- 24 Michel Foucault, “La prison partout” (1971), *Dits et Ecrits* I, n. 90, 1061–62: “La rue est en train de devenir le domaine réservé de la police; son arbitraire y fait la loi : circule et ne t’arrête pas ; marche et ne parle pas ; ce que tu as écrit, tu ne le donneras à personne ; pas de rassemblement. La prison débute bien avant ses portes. Dès que tu sors de chez toi.”
- 25 Michel Foucault, “La situation dans les prisons est intolérable” (1971), *Archives d’une lutte*, 50.
- 26 Ibid., 51: “La situation dans les prisons est intolérable. On fait aux détenus une vie indigne d’un être humain. Les droits qu’ils ont ne sont pas respectés. Nous voulons porter ce scandale en plein jour.” Shai Gortler at the University of Minnesota has done remarkable work excavating earlier drafts of this tract, and showing how the GIP’s rewritings of this passage reflect the theoretical dimensions of their praxis.
- 27 Michel Foucault, “Le discours de Toul” (1972), *Archives d’une lutte*, 168.
- 28 GIP, “Questions à propos du rapport Schmelck” (1972), *Archives d’une lutte*, 175.
- 29 GIP, “Le GIP vient de lancer sa première enquête” (1971), *Archives d’une lutte*, 52: “Notre enquête n’est pas faite pour accumuler des connaissances, mais pour accroître notre intolérance et en faire une intolérance active. Devenons intolérants à propos des prisons, de la justice du système hospitalier, de la pratique psychiatrique, du service militaire, etc.”
- 30 Michel Foucault, “Non, ce n’est pas une enquête officielle . . .” (1971), *Archives d’une lutte*, 65.
- 31 Ibid., 68: “Oui, elles sont archaïques, médiévales ; je ne sais pas d’ailleurs s’il peut y avoir de bonnes prisons ; je tiens en principe que toute répression est mauvaise, je tiens également en principe que tout État est répressif, de là je conclus que tout État est mauvais [rires].

— [...] est-ce que vous êtes un anarchiste ?

Peut-être pas absolument, simplement je me demande si les formes d’État que l’on a connues jusqu’à présent, si les formes d’État qui se sont développées dans l’histoire, disons, depuis la Grèce, sont les seules formes

d'organisation social auxquelles on puisse se référer. Il faudrait probablement penser à un autre type d'organisation sociale . . . ”

32 GIP, “Questions à propos du rapport Schmelck” (1972), *Archives d'une lutte*, 175.

33 Les Maos, “Pour le deuxième fois en quelques mois . . .” (1970), *Archives d'une lutte*, 41.

34 Ibid., 41: “Il faut que cet homme paye, qu'il soit châtié. . . . Nous avons mis hors-la-loi le grand maton de France [slang for “screw,” referring to Pleven], et nous saurons appliquer la loi.

. . . Autrefois une énorme prison écrasait Paris qu'on appelait la Bastille. Le peuple la détruisit et il mit aux pointes de ses piques les têtes de ceux qui le gardaient.

Lisez *La Cause du Peuple*—Les Maos”

35 *Intolérable 3*, “La mort de George Jackson n'est pas un accident de prison . . .” (1971), *Archives d'une lutte*, 105.

36 Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 205.

37 GIP, “Je voudrais au nom du GIP dissiper un malentendu” (1972), *Archives d'une lutte*, 193: “Le GIP n'a rien à désavouer des formes d'action collectives que les prisonniers sont amenés à décider pour soutenir ou exprimer leurs revendications. Le GIP estime que les prisonniers sont assez grands. Le GIP n'est pas un tribunal intellectuel qui jugerait du bien-fondé de ces actions, pas plus qu'il n'est, comme le voudrait le ministère, un groupe subversif qui les inspirerait de dehors. Dès sa fondation, le GIP s'est proposé, non pas de parler pour les prisonniers ou en leur nom, mais de faire en sorte que les prisonniers et leurs familles puissent enfin parler eux-mêmes.”