

THE GIP AND THE QUESTION OF FAILURE¹

Perhaps the most banal question one can ask of an activist effort is this: did it work? Did you accomplish something? Did you get something done? I want to ask this very banal question of *Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (the Prisons Information Group, the GIP). I do so, however, with the conviction that the philosophical analysis requisite to answering such a question will uncover something significant about the nature of failure.

It is my aim in these brief remarks to develop criteria of failure that are implicit within the GIP's discourse itself. How did the GIP attribute failure? And what were the theories of failure circulating among its leading members? For this particular investigation, I have chosen to consult the thought of Michel Foucault, the only member to publish a book on the prison's history and failure. How, then, did Foucault attribute failure in this period? By analyzing these discursive practices together, I first identify five sorts of failure: *discursive*, *structural*, *systemic*, *deconstructive*, and *productive* failure. Second, I test the GIP against the criterion for each, marking where it does and does not fail. I therefore offer an internal assessment of the GIP. Finally, I reflect on the status of failure in relation to current prison activism.

I. A SHORT HISTORY OF THE DEBATE

There is already a nascent debate over whether or not the GIP worked. From its inception, the GIP understood itself to be doing important work. It defined that work as neither the sociological work of observing and recording prison conditions nor the reformist work of revamping prisons.² Rather, the GIP aimed to do the “effective work” of creating a public network for disenfranchised voices.³ For Foucault, this was a strong antidote to “university yacking and book scribbling.”⁴ Unlike the academic factory, the GIP undertook “a concrete political action” “charged with meaning.”⁵ Such work was real work.

Foucault’s immediate assessment after the GIP disbanded was that it had failed, that “things returned to exactly the way they were.”⁶ But by 1980, Foucault had a defense against this very same accusation.⁷ Whatever evidence might be marshaled for the GIP’s failure—its short life, for instance—“all that was the result of our cause,”⁸ i.e., *donner la parole* to the detainees. Cecile Brich, however, presses the point. If in fact the GIP’s work was “to give the floor,” then the GIP did in fact fail. Why? The GIP did not simply step aside and create a vacuum within which prisoners could suddenly speak. Rather, through its format and self-understanding, members of the GIP—especially its leading intellectuals—constructed the floor and determined the voices of prisoners. As Brich states, “The prisoners’ discourse was not simply ‘set free,’” but was also “subtly constrained by the GIP’s agenda.”⁹ Its work, as advertised, did not work.

From this brief summary of the debate, we are left with the following questions. If you renounce, as the GIP did, any effort to reform, do you also relinquish any claim to having worked?

What is work if it does not accomplish something? If it does not change something concrete, in this case for prisoners? Furthermore, insofar as the GIP's express mission was to change the subject who speaks, the subject who identifies intolerable prison conditions and demands change, the question of the GIP's efficacy is inextricably tied to who does the work. In the following section, I interweave the GIP and Foucault's assessments that the prison is a failed institution. I then argue the GIP failed according to some, although not all of the criteria it itself utilized, insisting that failure can never be assessed unilaterally.

II. THE PRISON AS FAILED INSTITUTION

GIP documents, as well as Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*,¹⁰ indicate not only that the prison did not work but also that one of its primary loci of failure was its abuse of prisoners' labor.

The GIP documents repeatedly indicate its assessment that the prison as a whole is a bankrupt institution. Far from ensuring the recalibration of criminal lives for reinsertion into the social fabric, the prison has proven to be a complex network of violence and de-socialization. In a 1973 interview, Foucault states:

When prisons were first put in place, it was as instruments of reform. That failed. It was imagined that confinement, the break from society, solitude, reflection, obligatory work, continual supervision, moral and religious exhortations would lead the condemned to self-reformation. Since then, it has been one hundred and fifty years of failure.¹¹

The prison's failure, however, does not stop with its inability to fulfill its original aim of improving or reeducating those who pass through its doors. This failure is compounded by the fact that the prison's repressive tactics prompted what has become a long history of resistance, whether prison revolts, reform movements, or abolitionist efforts. The GIP is part of this history. The prison, then, not only fails outright but also fails by instigating resistance to itself. Voices do break out. Walls are breached.

The prison's failures, however, are not limited to its performance on the inside. They extend outside by participating in and even generating systems of social inequality. We can see this first of all in the use of criminal records. As the GIP attests, criminal records extend the injustice, discrimination, and targeting from within the prison to the outside.¹² This produces a migrant workforce that is easily taken advantage of by businesses and institutions. With a criminal record, the GIP reports, "there is no release; there are only reprieves."¹³ Second, however, we can see this in the function of prison labor itself. In the prison, work is no mere contribution to the reeducation of prisoners. Work, Foucault states, is "the constitution of a power relation, an empty economic form, a schema of individual submission and of adjustment to a production apparatus."¹⁴ Together with techniques of isolation and normalization, work creates the delinquent,¹⁵ and thereby heightened policing, targeted criminalization, and revolving incarceration.

Given this cursory review of the GIP and Foucault's critique of both prison as an institution and the particular role of

work therein, we can conclude they assessed failure in at least the following five ways.

1. *Discursive Failure.* To discursively fail is to not do what you say you do. Insofar as the prison claims to reform, or to train, or to manage its prisoners, but does not, it fails in this way.

2. *Structural Failure.* To structurally fail is to not do what you try to do. Whether the prison tries, irrespective of rhetoric, to reform or to repress, its inability to do either is a failure in this sense.

3. *Deconstructive Failure.* To deconstructively fail is to create consequences that inhibit or cancel out what you do. Perhaps not despite but because of the prison's consistent attempts to repress or to "merely" punish, revolts and resistance movements abound.

4. *Systemic Failure.* To systemically fail is to participate in a system that inhibits or cancels out what you do. In this case, the prison participates in the broader systems of capitalism, penal justice, and racial projects that prohibit the restorative function of work both in and outside of it.

5. *Productive Failure.* To productively fail is to successfully accomplish one thing *by failing* to accomplish another thing. The prison produces delinquency by failing to reform prisoners.

With this taxonomy of failure on the table, let me return to the GIP and ask if it failed in any or all of these senses. This will allow me to develop an internal evaluation of the group itself.

III. DID THE GIP FAIL?

Did it succeed in its mission, despite arguable indications to the contrary? Here, I will take each form of failure in turn. First, did the GIP fail discursively? No. It *did* fulfill its stated aim of giving prisoners the floor by collecting, publishing, and publicizing prisoners' assessments, demands, and stories. It did so, moreover, against the reigning paradigm, established by Benjamin Appert in the early nineteenth century, of reporting the wild and raucous lives of "great criminals."¹⁶ The GIP diverged from this model. It did not "report," but rather let the detainees share their thoughts and tell the often-mundane facts of their lives.

Second, did the GIP fail structurally? Did it fail to accomplish what it set out to do? If the GIP's most common profession was to give prisoners the floor, its more specific intention—on my reading—was to identify the intolerable. The GIP did not fail to identify the intolerable. Instead, it succeeded in self-publishing and widely disseminating four large pamphlets in a series they called *Intolerable*. The first pamphlet testifies to the deplorable conditions, sheer violence, filth, and misery in the prisons. Subsequent pamphlets then refract that depiction through race, sexuality, and prison suicides.

Third, did the GIP fail deconstructively? That is, did the GIP create consequences that canceled it out? Yes, it did indeed fail in this way. By giving prisoners the floor, the GIP not only facilitated the establishment of the *Comité d'action des prisonniers* (the Prisoners Action Committee, the CAP), an entirely prisoner-led group, but ultimately dissolved itself in favor of it. Right out of the gate, the CAP demanded immediate prison reforms and ultimate prison abolition, two points on which the GIP remained tentative.

Fourth, did the GIP fail systemically? That is, did the GIP participate in a system that inhibited or cancelled out its work? Yes. The GIP participated in the academy. Its roots in intellectual culture extend from the student revolts of May '68, through the leadership of Foucault, Defert, Deleuze, and Sartre, to its current afterlife in the biographies and scholarly studies of precisely these figures.¹⁷ The GIP's legacy has especially been overtaken by the name of Michel Foucault. More than anything, prisoners' voices have gone missing, whether those from the 1970s or today. As such, the GIP's floor is sullied, reduced to the mahogany floorboards of today's ivory halls. This is indeed a failure—according to the GIP's own assessment rubric but also, I think, the standards of social justice.

Lastly, did the GIP fail productively? That is, do its failures accomplish any work? If so, what is this work? Yes, the GIP does fail in this fifth and final sense. Just as the prison's repeated failures produce the delinquent, the GIP's repeated failures also produce something. Here I will take the GIP's two failures already identified: 1) its deconstructive failure and 2) its systemic failure. First, what does the GIP's deconstructive failure produce? By instigating and facilitating the construction of the CAP, which ultimately replaced the GIP, the GIP produced a paradoxically lasting model of a momentary, provisional, dynamic movement that passed out of existence almost as quickly as it appeared. In this sense, it leaves today's activists with a model of alliance or ally-ship.

Second, what does the GIP's systemic failure do? What does its participation in the academy produce? First and foremost, it replicates academic whiteness and maleness within the

nonacademic, nonwhite, and nonmale elements of the GIP's legacy. There has been, up to this point, a forgetting of the role of women, the AIDS context, and the impact of sexuality. Scholarship has failed to richly replicate, for instance, the GIP's relationship to the women's liberation movement, which collaborated vibrantly with the group at La Roquette, or its work beside the *Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire* (FHAR).¹⁸ More than this, however, the GIP has become unmoored from its deep roots in the early 1970s' race wars. As Philippe Artières indicates, "the major event in this history is not World War II, but more so the Algerian war."¹⁹ Brady Heiner has argued extensively that Foucault himself erased his own and the GIP's indebtedness to the Black Panther Party.²⁰ This work of reduction must continually be resisted.

IV. CONCLUSION

I have identified five modalities of failure by which the GIP assessed the prison: *discursive*, *structural*, *systemic*, *deconstructive*, and *productive*. I then assessed the GIP according to its own criteria. This was not a mere historical-theoretical exercise. It was an act of work understood as agitation, deploying the sense of "*travailler*" as "to trouble." I first multiplied and thereby nuanced our senses of failure. Second, I decoupled failure from any moralizing schemas by defining its multiple modes simply as the relationship of an act to itself, discourse, systems, and effects. By developing what is, ultimately, a constellation of failure, I tried to extend the discussion of the prison's failure beyond its current confines. To my mind, the mere attribution of "failure" inhibits our ability to address the multimodal reality of the prison itself. Rather than simply assert that the prison has failed or repeat the Foucauldian analysis that its failure is its work, I have provided multiple ways to precise

that assessment and work differently. This should equip us to explore how reform and abolitionist movements might by turns resist or harness the work of failure.

NOTES

- 1 This essay is a significantly shortened version of “Work and Failure: Assessing the Prisons Information Group,” in *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition*, eds. Perry Zurn and Andrew Dilts (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 75-91.
- 2 Daniel Defert, “Quand l’information est une lutte” (1971), in *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) [Hereafter *Archives d’une lutte*], 69–73; Michel Foucault, “(Sur les prisons)” (1971), *Dits et Ecrits I* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), no. 87, 1043–44, and Michel Foucault, “Je perçois l’intolérable” (1971), *Dits et Ecrits I*, no. 94, 1071–73.
- 3 Michel Foucault, “Le grand enfermement” (1972), *Dits et Ecrits I*, no. 105, 1169.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995* (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2007), 258–77.
- 7 Michel Foucault, “Toujours les prisons” (1980), *Dits et Ecrits II* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), no. 282, 917.
- 8 Foucault, “Toujours les prisons,” 915.
- 9 Cecile Brich, “The Groupe d’information sur les prisons: The Voice of prisoners? Or Foucault’s,” *Foucault Studies* 5 (2008):27.

- 10 Reflecting on the effects of the GIP, Foucault asserts that the limited strengths of *Discipline and Punish* owe themselves to the work of the GIP: “this book owes much to the GIP and . . . if it contains two or three good ideas, it gleaned them from there.” See “Toujours les prisons,” 916.
- 11 Michel Foucault, “Prisons et révoltes dans les prisons” (1973), *Dits et Ecrits I*, no. 125, 1297.
- 12 Foucault, “Le grand enfermement,” 1171.
- 13 Michel Foucault, “Préface” (1971), *Dits et Ecrits I*, no. 91, 1065.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 243.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 255.
- 16 Michel Foucault, “Luttes autour des prisons” (1979), *Dits et Ecrits II*, no. 273, 811.
- 17 Defert will ultimately assert that the effort of intellectuals involved in the GIP to subvert their own position of knowledge and power was “a failure [*un échec*].” The only one to have succeeded, he suggests, was Dr. Edith Rose. See Daniel Defert, “L’émergence d’un nouveau front: les prisons,” *Archives d’une lutte*, 318.
- 18 Defert, “L’émergence d’un nouveau front: les prisons,” 323 and 326. For more on the question of women in French prisons at the time, see Anne Guérin, “Et les femmes?” in *Prisonniers en révolte: Quotidien carcéral, mutineries et politique pénitentiaire en France, 1970–1980* (Marseille: Agone, 2013), 301–29. See also the book by FHAR leader Guy Hocquenghem, entitled *Homosexual Desire* (1972; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).
- 19 Philippe Artières, “Un instrument en héritage,” in *Intolérable* (Paris: Verticale, 2013), 340. For more information, see Raphaëlle Branche and Sylvie Thénault, eds., *La France en guerre, 1954–1962: Expériences métropolitaines de la guerre d’indépendance algérienne* (Paris: Autrement, 2008).
- 20 Brady Heiner, “Foucault and the Black Panthers,” *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 11.3 (2007): 313–56.