

## THE CREATURELY POLITICS OF PRISONER RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to struggle against a system that is capable of crushing you? A system whose resources far outmatch your own: armed with weapons, with state power, and with multiple discourses of justice, security, and efficiency? What does it mean to struggle against a system that is beyond accountability, in part because it claims the right to hold individuals accountable for their own actions and choices? What does it mean—and what role does meaning play in this struggle?

These are questions for anyone who finds themselves in a society that is structured by domination. But they are especially pressing questions for people who are incarcerated. These are the people from whom “society must be defended!”<sup>2</sup> They are the “dangerous individuals” who must be contained, controlled, and incapacitated so that the rest of us may be safe and prosperous.<sup>3</sup> What does it mean to organize collective political resistance from this position, and what can we who are not—or not yet<sup>4</sup>—incarcerated learn from prisoner-led movements about our own position in a carceral society, our capacity to resist this position, and the possibilities for solidarity across and beyond the prison walls?

I will take up these questions very briefly in relation to the prison activism of *Le Groupe d’information sur les prisons* (the

Prisons Information Group, the GIP), which helped to organize and support prisoner resistance in France from 1970–73, and the California prison hunger strikes (2011–13), which were organized by prisoners in the Pelican Bay SHU Short Corridor Collective and supported by a Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity network whose mission was to “amplify . . . the voices of CA prisoners on hunger strike.”<sup>5</sup> While these movements emerged in different political and historical contexts, with different motivations and dynamics, a study of their points of intersection helps to disclose the way resistance emerges in a carceral state where prisoners are disqualified in advance from political agency, and yet nevertheless manage to act politically. The organization of effective resistance behind bars is, by most accounts, impossible—and yet it happens, and the way it happens is instructive for anyone who finds themselves in impossible situations.

For Michel Foucault, the hallmark of contemporary political movements (ca. 1973) is that they are oriented toward “the most quotidian things”: food, work, sexuality, reproduction.<sup>6</sup> This is also true of contemporary prisoner resistance movements. Consider, for example, the importance of seemingly humble or even banal demands made by French detainees in the 1970s for “the right to a transistor [radio] in each cell,” or “the right to buy paperback books”<sup>7</sup> alongside demands for “equitable” and “honorable justice.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the Pelican Bay SHU Short Corridor Collective has demanded both an end to the torture of indefinite isolation and also an expansion of privileges such as “more TV channels,” longer and more frequent visiting times, craft supplies such as “art paper, colored pens, small pieces of colored pencils, watercolors, chalk, etc.,”

permission to wear “sweat suits and watch caps,” and the installation of “pull-up/dip bars on SHU yards.”<sup>9</sup> As Antoine Lazarus, a former prison doctor and participant in the GIP, observed in a 1979 interview: “What is surprising . . . is that they ask for basic comfort: nourishment, bedclothes. . . . Detainees display, sometimes at the risk of their own lives, an enormous need to change things, to be heard, and simultaneously they demand all the little things.”<sup>10</sup>

What is the significance of these “little things”? The fluidity of demands for equal justice and for better living conditions may seem, from an outside perspective, to mix lofty and noble desires with mere needs or creature comforts, thereby diminishing its more radical claim with reformist compensations that would perpetuate the prison system rather than challenging its foundations. But such an interpretation would miss the point, underestimating both the genocidal logic of the prison system and the meaning of radical critique.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely by attacking and undermining the creaturely existence of detainees that “equitable” or “honorable” justice is denied to them. A meaningful experience of equality cannot be separated from the thickness of one’s mattress or the size of one’s meal portion. Likewise, a meaningful experience of freedom is grounded in one’s access to art supplies, exercise equipment, and radio or television programs. Prisoner resistance movements demonstrate that politics is not a higher-order activity reserved for those who are willing and able to rise above the demand for chocolate and transistor radios. Rather, it is a set of embodied practices such as connecting with others, forming communities of inquiry and struggle, and concatenating our powers and desires for better food and for equal justice. Political move-

ments that diminish or deny the vital importance of warmth, nourishment, and pencil crayons cannot claim to be radical, even if they embrace a pure, ideal form of prison abolition. Far from undermining radical decarceration projects, the creaturely politics of prisoner-led resistance movements affirms the meaning of political subjectivity, not as an abstract status that is granted on the decimated ground of animality but rather as an elaboration and amplification of (inter)corporeal life.<sup>12</sup>

A study of the GIP's response to demands made by French prisoners in the early 1970s helps to demonstrate—even in its ambivalence—the interconnection of demands for justice and for warmth, nourishment, and enjoyment, as well as the vital importance of pleasure for a radical politics of prison resistance. In defense of “the little things,” Foucault says: “these are not merely details or rather every detail is essential when one struggles to obtain, against a boundless arbitrariness, a minimum of juridical status; when one struggles to have the right to demand. It is important to have the right to wash, but it is essential when one obtains it in this way.”<sup>13</sup> To struggle collectively for the right to demand (one's rights) is to embody in one's struggle the possibility that one is struggling to bring about. The struggle is already a performance of capacity-building, movement-building, community-building; it is the accomplishment of meaning in the making, a political poem created through the materiality of collective struggle.

Ultimately, what is at stake in the radical politics of “little things” is a movement beyond good and evil, and beyond the categories of guilt and innocence upon which penal systems are founded. In a 1971 interview entitled, “Revolutionary Action: ‘Until Now,’” Foucault links “the fear of criminals” to the

affective reinforcement of “the ideology of good and evil, of the things that are permitted and prohibited.”<sup>14</sup> He explains:

The ultimate goal of its interventions was not to extend the visiting rights of prisoners to thirty minutes or to procure flush toilets for the cells, but to question the social and moral distinction between the innocent and the guilty. And if this goal was to be more than a philosophical statement or a humanist desire, it had to be pursued at the level of gestures, practical actions, and in relation to specific situations. Confronted by this penal system, the humanist would say: “The guilty are guilty and the innocent are innocent. Nevertheless, the convict is a man like any other and society must respect what is human in him: consequently, flush toilets!” Our action, on the contrary, isn’t concerned with the soul or the man behind the convict, but it seeks to obliterate the deep division that lies between innocence and guilt.<sup>15</sup>

To move beyond innocence and guilt, and in effect beyond good and evil, is to shift the terrain of both prison systems and prison reform movements: the terrain of sin and expiation, transgression and penitence, delinquency and rehabilitation, moral fault and moralizing reform.<sup>16</sup> It is to shift one’s critical attention from the individual subject who remains the target of rehabilitative models of prison reform to the systems that constitute and perpetuate the prison as a social, political, economic, and even pedagogical institution.

But Foucault speaks too quickly when he contrasts the movement beyond good and evil with the demand for flush

toilets. As he suggests elsewhere, it is precisely in demanding creature comforts as a condition for any meaningful experience of equality, freedom, or justice that contemporary prisoner resistance movements move beyond liberal humanism, and even beyond more abstract forms of radical politics. In a 1979 roundtable discussion (in which he spoke under the pseudonym, Louis Appert), Foucault recalls that “among detainees there was absolutely no shame in emphasizing and putting to work the problem of being hot or cold, the problem of chocolate or grub, even if it killed someone. This represented, it seems to me, a deculpabilization.”<sup>17</sup>

Foucault contrasts the deculpabilization of radical prisoner-led resistance movements with the writing of prisoners in the nineteenth century, who took up the moral discourse of the penitentiary system: “The whole literature was steeped in: surely, what I did is dreadful, I must atone for it, I am here to pay my debt to society. . . . I wonder if it changed around ’68. Now people say: ‘Yes, I killed someone, but this is no reason for me to be cold.’”<sup>18</sup> While such demands may seem petty or even offensive in contrast with the lofty political ideals of freedom and equality, it is of the utmost importance to grasp the continuity of demands for better food and better legal representation, for heated cells and equal justice, for more contact visits and an end to prison slavery.

This point is connected to the vital importance of understanding civil life as an elaborated form of embodied, creaturely life rather than as an abstract status that is granted through the suspension of “mere” animality. At stake here is both the meaning and the materiality of political life, understood as the embodied, fleshly, animal life of a creature who eats and sleeps

and enjoys her chocolate, and that also speaks, demands, affirms, and organizes collective resistance. This creaturely life of radical decarceration moves beyond good and evil but—precisely as such—it affirms the ethical and political potential of intercorporeal solidarity.

It is clear that outside intellectuals have much to learn from prisoner resistance movements. But what do we have to contribute? In his statement on the 1972 Nancy Prison Revolt, Foucault affirms that it is up to outside supporters of prisoner-led resistance movements “to follow these demands and lend them our support.”<sup>19</sup> In the case of Nancy, this meant literally picking up messages thrown from the rooftop by detainees, relaying these messages to others, and not forgetting to enjoy the nougats tossed into the crowd by detainees, “so the crowd could bear with them and be able to eat!”<sup>20</sup> This suggests that, in order to participate effectively in radical political struggles for decarceration, activists must not only work hard but also open ourselves to the creaturely enjoyment of struggle and solidarity, in resistance to both the moralizing discourse of liberal prison reform and the (equally moralizing) discourse of purist approaches to prison abolition, which discount the importance of “little things.” Activist enjoyment may take many forms, from the simple pleasure of sharing space or exchanging letters to Robin Kelley’s affirmation that “After the revolution we STILL need Bootsy! That’s right, we want Bootsy! We need the funk!”<sup>21</sup>

In addition to amplifying the voices of people inside, our challenge as outside intellectuals is to issue a call of our own to nonincarcerated people to name, analyze, and reject our own position as alibis for the civil death of others, as the “good” or

“innocent” ones for whose sake “society must be defended.” Our task is to open and sustain discursive spaces for the emergence of new, decarceral forms of political subjectivity behind and across of the razor wire. This means organizing in our own communities to dismantle the conditions of our own privilege, to use whatever power we have to open spaces for others to be heard, and eventually to disappear from the scene, not because we have become a neutral switchpoint in the seamless transmission of inside voices but because the subject position that enabled us to serve a specific purpose in the struggle has become obsolete. This means using whatever resources are at our disposal to abolish white supremacy, economic exploitation, heteropatriarchy, and oppressive norms of physical and intellectual capacity. In short, it means destroying the conditions under which one became an outside intellectual, as opposed to some other kind of intellectual, without ceasing to think and to act critically. Ultimately, what is required of outside intellectuals is not to speak for others but to bring our own creaturely demands and desires to the politics of prison abolition, by articulating what is intolerable in our own position among those whose voices and lives are privileged at the expense of others, so that we may act as effective accomplices in the creaturely politics of prison abolition.<sup>22</sup>

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This essay is a significantly shortened version of Lisa Guenther, “Beyond Guilt and Innocence: The Creaturely Politics of Prisoner Resistance Movements,” 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), 225-40.

- 2 Michel Foucault, *“Society Must Be Defended”*: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).
- 3 Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003).
- 4 See the GIP manifesto: “None of us is sure to escape prison. Today less than ever.” Michel Foucault, “(Manifeste du GIP)” (1971), *Dits et Ecrits I* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), no. 86, 1042.
- 5 Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity (PHSS) describes itself as “a coalition based in the Bay Area made up of grassroots organizations & community members committed to amplifying the voices of and supporting the prisoners at Pelican Bay & other CA prisons while on hunger strike.” “About,” Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity, accessed on August 5, 2013, <http://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com/about/>.
- 6 Michel Foucault, “Prisons et révoltes dans les prisons” (1973), *Dits et Ecrits I*, no. 125, 1296.
- 7 Quoted in Cecile Brich, “The Groupe d’information sur les prisons: The Voice of Prisoners? Or Foucault’s?” *Foucault Studies* 5 (January 2008): 41.
- 8 Michel Foucault, “Il y a un an à peu près . . .” (1972), *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), 197. Hereafter cited as *Archives d’une lutte*. See also the demands of prisoners at Nancy in January 1972, who called for “equitable justice” and “honorable justice” as well as for better food, uncensored access to newspapers, cleaner and heated dormitories, and an end to beatings by guards.
- 9 For a full list of the prisoners’ five core demands, as well as more specific demands from different institutions across the California state prison system, see “Prisoners’ Demands,” Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity, April 3, 2011, <http://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com/the-prisoners-demands-2/>.
- 10 Michel Foucault, “Lutttes autour des prisons” (1979), *Dits et Ecrits II* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), no. 273, 814.

- 11 Dylan Rodríguez, “Insurrection Against Racial Genocide: Prison Rebellions and the Logic of Evisceration.” Paper presented at the Rethinking Mass Incarceration in the South Conference, University of Mississippi, April 14, 2014.
- 12 For a more sustained treatment of the complex relation between animality, politics, and punishment, see Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 125–60; Colin Dayan, *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Lori Gruen, *The Ethics of Captivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 13 Foucault, “Pour échapper à leur prison...” (1972), *Archives d’une lutte*, 153.
- 14 Michel Foucault, “Revolutionary Action: ‘Until Now,’” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 226.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 227.
- 16 For an analysis of the will to punish and the “alibi” provided by moral concepts such as good and evil, which are deployed to justify both punishment and pardon, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989).
- 17 Foucault, “Luttes autour des prisons,” 815 (emphasis added).
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Foucault, “Il y a un an à peu près . . .,” 198.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 10–11.
- 22 For more on the distinction between accomplices and allies, see Indigenous Action Media, “Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex,” May 4, 2014, <http://www.indigenoussaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex/>.