

# Antipode

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*Sur les Toits: A Symposium on the Prison Protests in Early 1970s France*

*Organised by Marijn Nieuwenhuis (University of Warwick)*

## **Critiquing Carceral Societies through *Sur les Toits***

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Although Western societies have faithfully relied and invested on the prison experiment for over 200 years, in the past four decades, liberal democracies have incarcerated more than ever. The UK's prison population stood at approximately 85,450 inmates in early 2016, and with such record numbers it maintains its position as the largest prison population in Western Europe. The urge to punish in Britain is underscored by the number of prisoners per 100,000 people, which stands at 149.7 for England and Wales and 147.6 for Scotland, compared with 118 for France and 81.4 for Germany (Penal Reform International 2015). Meanwhile, the United States imprisons more than any other nation, with approximately 2.2 million people currently behind bars (The Sentencing Project 2016). While European prisons have managed to partly decrease their populations in the past decade, recently we have seen Hungarian, Greek, Belgian and other nations overflow their prisons with those most socially and economically marginalised, including foreign nationals (Maculan et al. 2013).

Moreover, not only are we punishing more, we are also investing in new prison regimes that are increasingly more austere, secure and technologically invasive. Indeed, we have now witnessed the expansion of the penal state and the re-appropriation of prison-like spaces for the control of a diverse range of populations, including migrants and children.

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Additionally, we have seen the increased privatisation of the delivery of punishment, so that the poor, unemployed, physically and mentally ill, and ethnically and nationally dispossessed, are increasingly put under the control of large corporations like G4S and the GEO Group as objects of profit, even as they fail to provide the services they promise (Mason 2013).

Few films have seriously engaged with the inherently problematic nature of imprisonment and the complex relationship between those inside prison walls and those outside. *Sur les Toits* is a rare exception, in that it simultaneously manages to capture a particular moment in the history of French prisons, while also making a robust statement about the very idea of modern punishment. The film shows that the struggles it portrays provide insights that are as significant today as they were in the 1970s. *Sur les Toits* is therefore an important film for those researching and campaigning against prisons. It presents a historically and intellectually important event in prison riots and highlights key questions pertaining to what prisons are for, how we (as societies and individuals) feel about and treat prisoners, and what we, as critical scholars and activists, should do about prisons now. In this short intervention, I outline some questions that can be raised through a reading of the film. I suggest that the problem of the “invisibility of prison life”, and the “insensitivity we feel towards prisoners”, act as important barriers in opening up public debate on punishment and help maintain the prison’s function as a space of exclusion for those most socially marginalised and oppressed. I also argue that the film raises important questions about class consciousness within and outside prison walls, and consider why prison abolition campaigns might have remained peripheral to broader campaigns for social justice.

## *The Invisibility of Prison Life*

The interviewees in the film expressed on a range of occasions how their separation from public social life, via the physical and political isolation brought forth through incarceration, render prisoners invisible to those outside prison walls. It was expressed that people outside don’t know what goes on inside prisons. This invisibility has not only allowed prison to become a convenient space for structural violence, but it has also silenced the many forms of

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

oppression experienced, and resistance expressed, by those inside. It is this invisibility function that allows prison to become the “dumping ground” it continues to be, and it is this sense of isolation that makes riots an integral aspect of prison life.

Indeed, a prison riot is one of the few means of communicating with the outside world, and in this sense, it can be seen as both an act of revolt against the prison regime, as well as a call for solidarity with the outside world (the riot is to some extent legitimised or formalised through this search for contact). This sense of invisibility and the urge to undo it, made acutely visible in the film, is even more troubling in today’s prison populations. Especially where prison demographics are particularly racialized, such as in France and England, this invisibility raises further questions about the *political function of prisons*. Thus, a central point raised in the film and one to which prison sociologists seek to contribute is the question of *what are prisons for/what is punishment for?* Or perhaps, more concretely, *who is it for?* The issue of invisibility thus underlines the ongoing function of the prison as a space of exclusion and violence for those deemed “outsiders”.

## *The Insensibility Towards Prison Life*

A related, deeper problem linked to the first point is the question of *why is it that societies appear rather indifferent about what prison life is like, and why are attitudes to crime punitive?* We seem to generally associate our sense of “justice” with the infliction of pain. In the past decade, significant research in the field of the sociology of prison life has reacted to this insensibility by inviting prisoner researchers to seek to create “affect” in their analyses of prison life (Liebling 1999). This was an invitation to humanise those inside, and thus alter negative public opinion towards those convicted to imprisonment. However, it remains a question whether the general antipathy expressed towards prisoners and offenders can be addressed just by raising awareness about what goes on inside prisons, or whether we need to think about how to relate to prisoners at a deeper level. Prisons are distant not just physically, and not just from public knowledge, but also from our feelings and sensibilities. More recent research would suggest, and this was also rather apparent in the film, that the embodied

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

aspects of imprisonment are an essential conceptual tool not only through which to revisit the lived experience of punishment for those inside prisons, but also to help us understand how our public attitudes to punishment relate to our own psychosocial identities as punishers (Carvalho and Chamberlen 2016; Chamberlen 2016). Perhaps thinking of the subjects of punishment (both those inside and those outside prison) as embodied may be one means of undoing the insensibility of punishment in contemporary societies.

The case of the riot makes this especially obvious: through hunger strikes, defiance to the rules and regulations present in the physical space of the prison, and the causing of material damage, the prisoners express their resistance in a corporal and thus visible and affective manner. The corporeality of the prison experience is shared among inmates, so that it can potentially be a means of communicating this experience outside prisons. As one of the interviewees suggests in the concluding scenes, the only difference between prisoners and those outside is that their chains are more visible than ours; there is thus an inherent link in our humanity. Though concealed and managed, it can still be pursued to re-establish a bond of empathy and solidarity between those inside and those outside prison walls.

## *Prison Activism and the Case for Abolition*

Finally, *Sur les Toits* showed that the resistance expressed by the prison riots was closely related to issues of class. The film suggests that the riots and the work of the GIP were strengthened by a strong sense of class consciousness—the ex-prisoners interviewed for the film identified themselves as oppressed workers. They talked about their labour rights, discussed their efforts to struggle for fairer pay in prisons, and expressed that there was not only solidarity towards each other as prisoner workers, but they also attracted the solidarity of broader movements in society.

Nowadays, however, the notion of class struggle is much more ambivalent in the prison context. Instead, we see a strong ideology of individualization and “responsibilization”; prisoners and offenders are no longer expressly identified as representing a particular group or class, but rather as individuals responsible for crimes which

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

they allegedly “chose” to commit. This is certainly how the criminal justice system and the media seek to construct them. To some extent, the neoliberal state has strived (rather successfully) to disperse any sense of solidarity on issues of social justice, while also denying its responsibility to address structural problems. The movie ends by portraying the sense of hopelessness felt by some of those who have campaigned for prison abolition. This hopelessness is something that has the potential to either feed a disillusion towards the possibility of change, or to spark new forms of resistance. How to strive for the latter is an open question that prison abolitionists today cannot help but face.

As the public and the media in liberal democracies seem permanently interested in forms of entertainment that seek to paint a rather sensationalised picture of life inside prison walls, there is little general concern over the wellbeing of inmates or interest in the consequences of punishment, both for those who experience it and for those communities and individuals who inflict it. There is also barely any real engagement with the ineffectiveness of punishment and with the possibility of thinking of a world without punishment. Against this trend, *Sur les Tois* takes the viewer in a journey that considers why we might want to revisit the problem of punishment, and raises important questions about the potential for solidarity in the pursuit of social justice.

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# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

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