

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Sur les Toits: A Symposium on the Prison Protests in Early 1970s France
Organised by Marijn Nieuwenhuis (University of Warwick)

On *Sur les Toits* (Nicolas Drolc, 2014)

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The film opens with footage of the demolition in 2010 of Charles III prison in Nancy, intercut with black and white still photographs of prisoners on the roof taken during the revolt there in January 1972.



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The hydraulic arms of mechanical diggers slice through the edifice of the prison, exposing as never before its innards in cross-section, as though in a post-mortem dissection. I was reminded of other photographs capturing [the evisceration of the Renault factory on the Île Seguin](#). Both sites call for ambivalence in remembrance. The land where the prison stood has been earmarked for what detractors call a “[pseudo bourgeois-bohemian eco-district](#)”. The prisoners have been moved to the outskirts, to a new prison in the countryside between Nancy and Maxéville, which opened in 2009.

Newsreel footage from 1972 cited in the film shows just how close spatially speaking the prison was to the life of the city. This contiguity was exploited to great effect during the revolt: we see prisoners on the roof hurling down tiles, some of them with notes attached articulating their demands; we see the banner which takes a straightforward alimentary route to empathy—“We are hungry”—and the crowds of onlookers gathering around the prison, turning a building which had functioned in front of their noses as a correctional facility since 1824 into a spectacle. Jacques Rancière (2001: 22) suggested that “the police order”—in his polemical opposition between policing and radical politics—could be illustrated by an upending of Louis Althusser’s scenario in which an interpellating policeman models the summons of ideology. Instead of “Hey, you there!”, the police order says “Move along! There is nothing to see here!”. Yet the prisoners in revolt on the roof make a spectacle of themselves and the building they crown, showing that in this prison there is something that should be seen by the world at large; politics irrupts into the police order. As well as the pragmatic motivations for this move, by climbing to the roof the prisoners elevated themselves in a visual reversal along the vertical axis of a very pervasive representation of social hierarchy, according to which they were at the bottom, to be crushed—repressed, suppressed—by the brute material weight of the prison’s edifice. From their station as the lowest of the low, they had briefly ascended through force of will and improvised arms to the highest point. Helicopters were called in, although seeing them in this film and hearing what was said about them I am reminded that less than half a century ago they were considered a

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military technology of exception, a strange rarity of the skies, rather than part and parcel of the everyday paraphernalia of civilian policing.



In Britain today you can even sign up for [jaunty tweets](#) ostensibly from the police helicopters that so often overfly us, as though in a relentless reminder that we are the governed.

Moving prisons away from urban centres, as well as freeing up prime land for development, also advances the police order, since contagion through contact is in large part what prison, as technique of coercive governance, was established to limit. As Foucault (2015) argues in lectures from 1972/73, prison as the prototype of Modern punishment has functioned since the 19th century to segregate those who refused to respect the bourgeois insistence on private property as an absolute value from the disciplined working class over whom they could exert a “bad influence” and thereby to divide that class in two. One of the striking features of the film’s interview footage with Foucault’s partner, Daniel Defert, is the way he opens by stressing the clandestine nature of the work done by *le Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons* (the GIP), an influential activist group which flourished around Foucault in 1971/72. It was contrary to the internal regulations of the French prison system to pass information about life inside out of the prison. That prohibition dated back, as Michelle

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Perrot (1984: 27) notes, to the 1830s and specifically to a circular authored by Adrien de Gasparin, Préfet of the Rhône during the crushing of the Second Canut Revolt of 1834 and subsequently Interior Minister. That circular also established routine censorship of prison letters and attempted to secure the “closure” of prison as institution. The *clandestine* activity of the GIP in passing information across the barrier that prison constitutes thus connected directly back to the establishment of prison as universal form of punishment in the 1830s and as the technique of coercive governance by which one class ruled over another by dividing it in two.

Another striking feature of Defert’s reflections is his account of the weekly conversational visits to Foucault by the mother of two inmates at Fleury-Mérogis, the so called “model prison” on the outskirts of Paris, which would become the target of the second issue of the GIP’s brochure, *Intolérable* (Artières 2013: 83-151). This anecdote moves both with and against a tendency in recent scholarship on the GIP (e.g. Zurn and Dilts 2016) to insist that the GIP was a genuinely collaborative enterprise and not just Foucault’s one-man show. The anecdote further highlights the key role played by the families of prisoners in that group, as well as confirming Foucault’s centrality, at least as “nodal point”. Why, when researchers are developing increasingly sophisticated tools for measuring psychological and social suffering, is none of this directed at prison as institution, in the round? In other words, why is it that we don’t inquire systematically into the *total* harm which prison causes, not just into lost earnings by the prisoner, but into the effects over the long term on their mental health and on the damage to families and the impact on children, dependants and communities over the long term? We already know for a fact that prison does not work to rehabilitate offenders. But if we cared to lavish this kind of close attention on prison and account fully for all of its individual and social harms, it would cease entirely to be a viable institution. Here the discussion opens out, as celebrity lawyer Henri Leclerc and long-time activist, now officially in retirement, Serge Livrozet both note in the film, on to the abject failure of prison as institution.

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I want to end on a lighter note by paying tribute to the director's perceptive portraiture of the intimacy of his interviewees' domestic interiors. By treating the three former prisoners and the former prison guard in the same way, as well as by making similar use in each case of archival footage to illustrate the story of their early lives, the film breaks down the barriers between them and places them on a horizon of equivalence as working-class subjects, despite their different roles and functions, in a visual cancellation of prison's effect of segregation, the dividing of the labouring from the dangerous classes, a coercive division complacently reproduced in Marxism's sanctimonious split between proletariat and lumpen. One of the revolt's leaders, the charismatic and unapologetic Jacky Hoffman, is interviewed amid a rich décor of plants and flowers. An ornate and substantial 19th century wooden dresser has plant motifs carved in relief; its shelves bear dried flowers, among other items.



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There is a plant pattern on the cloth covering whatever object is concealed in the corner of the room; plastic flowers sit atop it. There are flowers on the wallpaper and the curlicued tattoos on Hoffman's arms seem to extend the reach of the plant realm down over his flesh. His plantlike affinity with a domestic interior which relates so insistently to a natural exterior recalls those passages in Jacques Derrida's (1974) beguiling book of enlaced columns on Hegel and Genet, *Glas*, in which Derrida re-enlaces the flora that populate Genet's pages and adorn the bodies of his dangerous convicts. Such entwining recalls a time before the imposition of rigid bourgeois order in the 19th century and its imprisoning insistence on the absolute private enjoyment of property; it recalls a time when the poor could still take what they needed, before poverty was punished.

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