

# 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)*

## ***Sur les Toits as Oral History***

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*Sur les Toits* tells an important and neglected story, and it tells it in a compelling way. As someone who has been working on Foucault's political activism of the early 1970s I have found it a very useful documentary and resource. The *Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (GIP), which Foucault co-founded in 1971, had as a primary aim of giving the prisoners a voice, and they did much work to enable this. But despite those efforts the elite voices have tended to dominate accounts of this time. I am grateful to Nicolas Drolc, as interviewer and director, for making these important oral histories available.

One issue I wondered about when watching the documentary was the choice of voices. The interviewees were all fascinating, and it was especially interesting to hear from the prison guard as well as prisoners, and the final segment on Serge Livrozet indicated some of the story beyond the specific time focus of the film. Nonetheless, the interviewees appear to be white, European-origin men, and I thought the range might have been broadened. There was an important post-colonial context to France at this time, following the Algerian war, with immigrant populations and overtly racist police practice. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, one of the GIP's other founders, had played an important role in denouncing French torture in Algeria. In addition, while the focus of this documentary was very much on the French situation, the GIP had some links with the American Black Panther Party, and one of their pamphlets was a

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study of the assassination of George Jackson in a Californian jail. Foucault's time in Tunisia and the student challenge to Habib Bourguiba's rule had been crucial to shaping his political activism, as much or perhaps more than May 1968. This racial and colonial situation might have been discussed in some way in the film.

The other absence was voices from women, with the exception of the documentary footage of Dr Edith Rose. While the prison riots were in male institutions, women played a crucial role in the GIP. Foucault, Daniel Defert and other men get much of the attention, but there were some important contributions to the GIP from H el ene Cixous, Dani ele Ranciere, Catherine von B ulow and Christine Martineau. Equally the GIP made use of prisoners' families to circulate questionnaires and to report on visiting rights, and Serge Livrozet's wife, Annie Livrozet, played a crucial role in the *Comit  d'action prisonniers*—a successor group to the GIP set up not by intellectuals but by prisoners and their families. Sadly she died in 2004, but perhaps her absence could have been compensated in other ways.

The role of the GIP is discussed in several places in the secondary literature on Foucault. His biographers assess the group's work to varying degrees, and in French there are two documentary collections of materials—*Archives d'une lutte 1970-1972* (out of print) and *Intol rable* (see Arti eres 2013). More documents from their work can only be consulted at the [IMEC archive in Normandy](#). An English translation of some of the material is forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press, edited by Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn. Zurn and Andrew Dilts (2016) edited a recent collection of essays discussing the group and its legacies—*Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition*. Marcelo Hoffman's (2015) *Foucault and Power: The Influence of Political Engagement on Theories of Power* has a powerful account of the group. Given what we know of it, the documentary might have said a bit more about the specific political context in which the GIP first emerged. It was set up by the *Gauche Proletarienne* (GP), a Maoist group of which Defert was a member. In part through Defert, Foucault was introduced to Maoist activists, and this shaped some of his reading and lecture material, especially in the 1971/72 course *Th ories et institutions p nales*. Many of the GIP's texts appeared in radical

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journals. Foucault had been asked by Defert to establish a group looking at prisons. Foucault joked that from the GP to the GIP was simply adding the “I”–intellectuals.

The intellectuals were not just academics like Foucault, Defert, Vidal-Naquet or other previously mentioned people. Jean-Marie Domenach was the editor of the *Esprit* newspaper, the writer Jean Genet worked with the group, and they also collaborated with professionals in relevant fields. These were the kind of people Foucault meant by the term “specific intellectual”. Dr Rose has already been mentioned, and the lawyer Henri Leclerc is interviewed in the film, but the group had links to Charles Dayant who wrote the book *J'étais médecin à La Santé* (“I was a Doctor at La Santé prison”). Back in the 1950s Foucault’s training in psychiatry had put him in contact with prisons and other secure institutions, something he largely obscured in his work of the 1970s, claiming that his visit to Attica in New York State was the first time he had been inside a prison. Other people with links to the GIP went on to play important political roles: one of the key accounts of the Buffet and Bontems case, for example, was *L'Exécution*, written by Robert Badinter. Badinter was a lawyer who became Minister of Justice in François Mitterand’s 1981 government, and abolished the death penalty.

Foucault’s role in the GIP is fairly well known, and will become better established with the translation of documentary materials. But he was also involved in the *Groupe Information Santé* (GIS), a parallel group on health. This group worked on a number of campaigns, including industrial accidents and illness, immigrant health issues, and especially the abortion rights struggle. Foucault did not have as much direct involvement in this group, but did take part in interviews on the group’s aims, and wrote some newspaper pieces about their work. Foucault was also prepared to be prosecuted for the distribution of an anonymous pamphlet detailing abortion methods and information—probably in large part to shield the actual authors. Little of this material is easily available in French—texts were informally distributed or unsigned, have never been collected, and can be difficult to trace today. But it is an important part of the story of Foucault’s activism, and of the intellectual and political culture of early 1970s France (for a longer discussion, see Elden 2016a).

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I discuss much of this work in my forthcoming book *Foucault: The Birth of Power*, a companion study to *Foucault's Last Decade* (Elden 2016b). The books treat the periods 1969-74 and 1974-84 in Foucault's career, looking at his activism, lectures, writing and research projects. Many of these projects, throughout this period, were collaborative, from his Collège de France seminar, through work at Berkeley, Louvain and elsewhere, to research conducted with Félix Guattari's CERFI group, and the activist organisations like the GIP and GIS. In one of his retrospective pieces on the GIP, Defert notes that "there is no politics without logistics", stressing that important role and indicating how much of that work Foucault did. Foucault was often the figurehead, the lead author of texts, the speaker at press conferences or with the megaphone at protests. But he also ran things behind the scenes, distributed texts outside prisons, convened meetings in his apartment, and persuaded people to be involved.

Documentaries like *Sur les Toits* shed light on this work, and by giving voice to those directly involved help to fill out the story in significant ways. Given the age of many of those interviewed, this is both important and urgent work, and Nicolas Droic is to be congratulated on his achievement. His forthcoming [documentary on Serge Livrozet](#) will doubtless be another important contribution to this history.

## References

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