

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)

Interview with Nicolas Drolc

Marijn Nieuwenhuis
Department of Politics and International Studies
University of Warwick
Coventry, UK
m.nieuwenhuis@warwick.ac.uk

Marijn Nieuwenhuis (MN): First off, I want to congratulate you on making an excellent film on this important, but little discussed, episode in the history of incarceration. Could you tell us a little on why you wanted to make a film about the early 1970s prison revolts in Nancy and Toul?

Nicolas Drolc (ND): The event that triggered my interest in the prison revolts was a series of photos my father took of the Nancy rebellion in 1972. At the time he had just started his job as photojournalist for a local newspaper. After he retired he brought home a massive photo archive covering 40 years of local history. The Nancy photos immediately grasped my attention. I was amazed by the depiction of the events and decided to use them as a starting point for my documentary project.

I knew the Charles III prison building in Nancy which I used to pass by on my way to middle school. The central location of the building and its size left a big impression on me as a child.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

MN: Why do you think this was an important film to make?

ND: The story of the prison riots was largely unknown. It is true that a few academics and Foucauldian scholars had written about the events, but none of them had actually gone through the effort to actually meet the people that had been involved. The prisoners, the wardens—I think the story needed to be told by those involved. Because some of them were in bad health, I knew this had to be done sooner rather than later. One of them sadly passed away after we finished shooting. I wanted to record and collect their stories before they would be gone and forgotten forever.

Besides that, I have always been concerned with histories of social struggles. I like the work of the American historian Howard Zinn and his concept of a “people’s history”: a history that is made and told by the working classes. *Sur les Toits* is first and foremost a film about class consciousness and class struggle. The prison was an attractive frame of research because it, being a micro-society in itself, operates as a kind of magnifying lens to study the forces at work in the mechanisms of power, repression, exclusion and struggle in society at large.

MN: Your film mentions the murdering of a nurse and a prison guard by two escaping convicts as important events in the unfolding of the later unrest. For the sake of context, how did these events trigger the later prison uprisings?

ND: In 1971, a young prison guard and a young nurse were murdered by an escaping convict of the Clairvaux prison [in north-eastern France]. The murder led public opinion in France to turn against prisoners. They came to be seen and portrayed as potential murderers which led prison guards to enforce stricter regimes of discipline. While rules were toughened and prison guards enjoyed impunity, the beating of prisoners became a more frequent phenomenon.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

It should also be remembered that René Pleven, the then Minister of Justice, suppressed the rights of prisoners to receive large Christmas packages which families had traditionally prepared for incarcerated family members. Arguing that the packages could be used to hide weapons, the rule was implemented under the pretext of security. This was November 1971, a month later the first riot took place in the prison of Toul.

MN: The revolts started in Nancy and Toul but seemed to have spread very quickly across the country to places such as Lyon, Toulouse, Nimes and others. I even have heard about prison protests in Belgium. How did they travel so rapidly and so far afield?

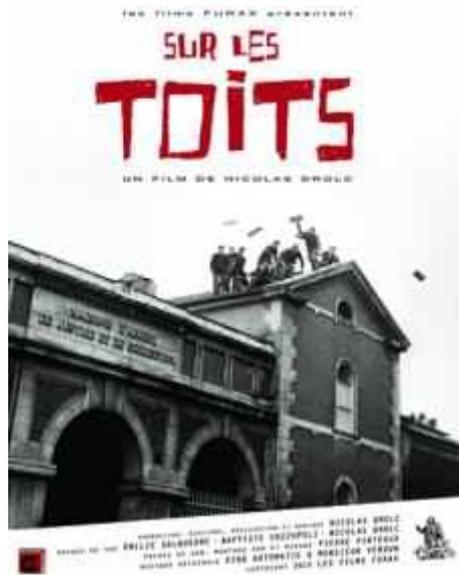
ND: This is the result of the transferring of prisoners. Every time a riot occurred, the carceral administration would reallocate “agitators” [*meneurs*] to another prison. As soon as these prisoners would arrive information was shared. Discussions took place about prison conditions and eventually plans would be made to organise collectively—that is how information travelled. Prisoners had no access to press coverage, but they did not need that to get organised across different locations.

MN: The trailer of the film starts with the ruins of the Charles III prison in Nancy. How are the events remembered in popular imaginations in France today?

ND: Despite a number of books and the film, the story remains still largely unknown. The historical relevance of what happened is not widely acknowledged in France. You will not find it mentioned in school books and I doubt the prisoners will ever receive the recognition they deserve. Henri Leclerc, a prominent French lawyer, says at one point in the film that the abolition of the death penalty in France in 1981 probably would not have been possible without the events—not many people seem to be aware of that.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography



MN: How did the former prisoners respond to your initiative of making a film about their involvement and experiences?

ND: Those who are in the film responded extremely well! The only other time they publicly were able to tell their stories was in court during their trial in Nancy.

They physically paid for their involvement in the riots. They were beaten-up by the guards and received an extra six months on their sentences. So, as you can imagine, telling their own version of the story 40 years later in front of a camera made them feel appreciated. Suddenly they were put in the position of heroes!

I have contacted also other people that had been involved, but many declined to be interviewed. They were in prison for shorter amounts of time and did not want the past to be brought back. You have to understand that the Nancy prisoners I interviewed had spent most of their lives inside—they did not have a problem to talk about the events.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

MN: Was it difficult to trace their whereabouts? And how did you get in contact with those that had been involved?

ND: I decided to closely follow the stories of three prisoners involved in the Nancy riot and that of a prison guard from Toul. The small number was a conscious decision to allow enough time and detail for each individual to tell their story—I thought that if I would have interviewed more people, the film would not have felt so detailed and personal.

The first interviewee I found in a phonebook. We met and discussed the project; he gave me the contact of the second and soon I found the third. Soon an article on my project was published in a local newspaper. A prison guard from Toul read it and asked me to be part of the film.

MN: What surprised you and/or moved you most about their retrospectives?

ND: I think the way the events had marked the lives of those involved. They could exactly recount and describe what took place on the day of the riots. There were no signs of sadness, sentimentality or pity in their descriptions. Their accounts were really concrete, clear and unromanticised. The thing that moved me the most was probably that perseverance in their attitudes. Neither they nor their opinions had changed since the events. I felt as if they still had the same energy and commitment as on that day.

MN: Did you get to interview their family members? What was their role in the revolts?

ND: I have not conducted any interviews with family members, but I know that the families played an instrumental role in the revolts.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

MN: Public Intellectuals in France, among them Foucault, Vidal-Naquet, Defert and Domenach, played an instrumental role in setting up organisations such as the *Groupe d'informations sur les prisons* (GIP). Could you tell a little about the significance of their participation and the function of the GIP?

ND: The GIP was important in communicating the prisoners' demands. Their position as acclaimed intellectuals granted credibility to the voice of the prisoners in the press. They functioned as a kind of amplified megaphone. However, as Daniel Defert states in the film, they did not encourage the prisoners to start rioting, as they could not protect them from punitive repression inside. But when a riot occurred, they would be there for the prisoners, doing what they could to help them—write and publish pieces, organise demonstrations, etc.

MN: I could be wrong but I remember to have seen a photo in your film of Foucault and many of the other GIP associates (Sartre and Deleuze, among others) breaking into the courtyard of the French Ministry of Justice.

ND: This is correct. The event occurred immediately after the Nancy prison riot. The GIP conducted a large “savage demonstration” in the courtyard of the French Ministry of Justice. A few days later Foucault and others came to Nancy and organised another demonstration in support of the prisoners' revolt. These demonstrations were generally violently repressed by the police. The experience is perhaps similar to Sartre's famous appearance at the workers' car plant [of Renault] in Billancourt [in October 1970].

MN: Do you think this culture and tradition of proximity between the socially marginalised and the active public intellectual continues to exist in France today?

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

ND: Unfortunately, I am afraid things have changed. Today we seemingly have a different definition of what a “public intellectual” is—personally I believe that an intellectual should be politically aware and active. However, today it seems that French “intellectuals” are more preoccupied with appearing on television and writing popular books, than acting as a voice for the marginalised—we have not seen many intellectuals standing with the refugees in Calais or with the workers that are currently on the street against the new labour laws. They even seem to care less about standing in solidarity with the prison population...

MN: Your film concludes with an extensive and moving interview with the anarchist and former convict Serge Livrozet. How did Livrozet respond to your film and the renewed interest in the events?

ND: In the early 2000s, Livrozet decided to “retire” from his 40 years of political activism. The reason is that he felt disappointed with the outcome of his attempts to transform the prison population into a revolutionary vanguard.

The renewed attention for the events initially did not inspire Livrozet—over the past 40 years he had already spoken so much about the prison problem that he felt at first somewhat reluctant to participate in the project. He accepted my invitation for an interview but only on the condition that he would be in control of his contribution.

In the interview he explains why he considered his prison activism to have been a political failure. He mentions a range of things: the good-for-nothing compromises of material comforts in today’s prisons; the lack of a questioning on why we imprison people; the fact the socially marginalised continue to be more likely to end up in prison; and the fact that the vast majority is in prison for petty crimes. None of these things have changed at all...

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Worse still is that the prison population has almost doubled since then. Close to 66,000 people are serving time in France today.

I thought these were all interesting well-argued points, and decided, perhaps somewhat radically, that the interview was a good way to conclude the film.

MN: Do you think the experiences of 1971 and 1972 carry a message relevant for carceral politics today?

ND: Yes, absolutely! Many of the issues that were brought up by the GIP and the later *Comité d'action des prisonniers* (CAP) remain of great relevance today. As I said, the reasons why and the identity of those we send to prison have remained largely the same. The poor, the coloured, the marginalised... I consider the film's stories to have a universal meaning. They are not historically stuck in time or set in a particular place—the documentary could very well have been the story of a contemporary experience in a prison in France today, or anywhere else to be honest...

MN: Many of the people that have seen the movie spoke highly about the score. Where does the music come from and how did you come to choose it?

ND: The score is an original soundtrack, composed and recorded exclusively for the film. I invited two close and talented friends of mine to make music which could convey some of the emotions and feelings that the film's visuals and words could not capture. They are known under their stage names as King Automatic and Monsieur Verdun. I agree that they did a pretty good job!

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

MN: Thank you for both the interview and for allowing us to engage with it, Nicolas. It was a great experience and I look forward to watching your next project on Serge Livrozet.