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

Introduction: The Making Visible of Carceral Politics

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This symposium contains a rich collection of contributions based on the screening of the French documentary film *Sur les Toits* (“On the Roofs”). On a Wednesday in May 2016 I invited the film’s independent maker, Nicolas Drolc, and a number of academics from across Warwick’s humanities and social sciences to the screening of the movie. The result was a friendly and productive discussion on an important, but sometimes forgotten, episode in the history of incarceration (see, however, Zurn and Dilts 2016). The essays presented here comprise an interview with the director and a series of original reflections on both the film and its subject of investigation.

[*Sur les Toits*](#) (a title taken from a protest [song](#) of the French punk band Bérurier Noir) is a documentary film on the prison protests that took place in Toul and Nancy between September 1971 and late 1972. The unfolding of the protests is in the film narrated through the use of carefully selected archival material (including footage of an interview with the psychiatrist Edith Rose) and extensive interviews with three former prisoners, a guard, the sociologist Daniel Defert, the activist Serge Livrozet and the lawyer Henri Leclerc. The final product is a moving and honest portrayal of a historical event whose relevance continues to

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speak to contemporary questions of the politics of imprisonment, carceral control and regimes of discipline and punishment.



The Nancy Prison Revolt (source: Gérard Drolc)

The 1970s revolts were the first collectively initiated prison rebellions in France and played a crucial role in helping to problematise the societal function and concept of the prison. The activists were not only successful in seizing control of their prisons but were also, and more importantly, effective in opening-up public debates on the politics of France's incarceration system. The commitment and efforts of public intellectuals such as Michel Foucault, Jean-Paul Sartre, Christine Martineau, Jean-Marie Domenach, and numerous others, including lawyers, historians and political activists, were important in helping to vocalise prisoners' demands to the wider French public. The collaboration between intellectuals and prisoners was also instrumental in the establishment of the informal and anonymous *Groupe d'informations sur les prisons* [Prison Information Group], or GIP, the later ex-prisoners-led *Comité d'action des prisonniers* [Prisoners' Action Committee], or CAP, and the *Association de défense des droits des détenus* [Association for the defence of the rights of the detained], or ADDD.

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Central to both the film and the collected contributions is the subject of visibility which relates as much to the carceral technologies of the modern prison as to the politics of the invisible prisoner and the place of the public intellectual in the protests. **Dominique Moran**'s contribution reminds us of Foucault's historical diagnosis of punishment which moved from "public spectacle ... [to the] internalisation of the carceral regime; [the] regulation of space, segregation of individuals, and unseen but constant surveillance [which] moulded the subject into its own primary disciplinary force." The title of the film reminds Moran (and **Sophie Fuggle**, too) of the coverage of the anniversary of the 1990 Strangeways Prison riots in Manchester in which prisoners similarly "took to the roof in protest against prison conditions." The "spectacular" coming-into-visibility and the verticality of freedom is in the French context experienced as a courageous act of *mutiny* "against the proper authorities" but is in the English case remembered as a *riot* with a supposedly aimless purpose of "violent disturbance." Moran's account teaches us to engage with the context of the roof's visibility while Fuggle warns about the risk of roofs becoming metonyms.

Anastasia Chamberlen focuses less on the idea of the "'closed' world of the prison" and more on the invisibility of imprisoned bodies. She shows how invisibility and insensibility are closely intertwined. "Prisons are distant not just physically, and not just from public knowledge, but also from our feelings and sensibilities." The interviews with the ex-prisoners in the film confirm her idea that "embodied 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."

Both Fuggle and **Oliver Davis** remind us that there are also those bodies whose harm is more remote, less visible and harder to capture. Fuggle writes about the film's scenes of the "repeated slamming of the heavy prison door, the local children playing outside the gates and the absence of any inmates in these scenes, ... [emphasizing] the processes of exclusion and

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invisibility operating at the heart of the urban landscape ... [This] is a film about an image.” A film that tells a story that negotiates “both an absence of images and images of absence.” It not only captures the failing of a prison but visualises a broader story about how the concept of the prison “constitutes a failure for society.” The film’s opening scene of the demolished Charles III prison in Nancy poses the audience the question whether a new beginning is possible or, as the retired activist Serge Livrozet tells the young talented filmmaker, nothing has changed at all. Indeed, as Moran writes, this is a film about the question if prisons are reformable.



Film-maker Nicolas Drolc and retired Serge Livrozet (source: Emilie Salquebre)

Davis similarly questions “why it is 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, dependents and communities over the long term?” The presence of such pains is in subtle

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ways presented throughout the interviews in the film which more than once hints at the importance of families. Davis recounts the interview with Defert, Foucault's partner, in which he talks about "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."

And then, of course, there is also the visibility of the intellectuals. **Stuart Elden** writes about the experience of Foucault's involvement and its importance for his own political activism and the development of his philosophy. Both Elden and Davis warn us that although Foucault's voice was important the GIP was not just a "one-man show". Foucault was one among many other contributors that either took part or helped enable to make the voices of the prisoners heard. Elden stresses that women played a crucial part in the GIP and the success of the protests (among them Danièle Rancière, Christine Martineau, Michelle Perrot, and also the founder of the *Théâtre du Soleil* Ariane Mnouchkine).

Diversifying the voices of the protests is, as Elden writes, also important given the post-colonial context of the time. It was especially the historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet, one of the three original signatories of the manifesto of the GIP, who acted as a particularly staunch critic of French colonial violence. A recent [publication](#) by the journalist François Malye and historian Benjamin Stora show that François Mitterrand was responsible for the execution of 45 Algerian prisoners during his time as Justice Minister during the 1954-1962 Algerian independence war. The abominable and vicious conditions in prisons such as La Santé in Paris led incarcerated members of the Algerian National Liberation Front to organise hunger strikes. In an article on the 1972 Nancy revolts, the editor of the collected work of the GIP, Philippe Artières, notes that such post-colonial experiences were probably crucial for the later protests (see Artières 2001, 2013).

Nicolas Drolc made it clear in our interview that he intended the film to let those voices be heard that society silences and punishes. As said, the politics of visibility is central

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to all the contributions in this symposium. Chamberlen's essay argues that "invisibility has not only allowed [the] prison to become a convenient space for structural violence, but it has also silenced the many forms of oppression experienced and resistance expressed by those inside." Making the unseen visible and giving voice to the unheard was also an important part of the GIP's own ethos. In an article in an early edition of the radical journal *J'accuse* the group [wrote](#) that it neither intended to speak for the prisoners nor aimed to raise awareness for the "consciousness of oppression" which, after all, is already so perfectly visible to all. Instead the GIP aimed to break down the prisoners' *political* isolation. The objective was, according to Drolc, to make a film that not only gives voice to the past but also one that makes past experiences relevant for a politics of the present. Indeed, as Fuggle writes, "the story of today's prison system can only be told via the narrative of its past." The stories collected in *Sur les Toits* tell us as much about the experiences in Toul and Nancy as they do about the conditions of American prisons (a subject touched upon in one the GIP's brochures). Making visible and embodying the stories of those punished (inside and outside the prison) may, as Chamberlen concludes, "be one means of undoing the insensibility of punishment in contemporary societies."

Acknowledgements

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