

Preliminaries to any Struggle against Prisons

Tiqqun

2003

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Preface

In the spring of 2003, an ephemeral and shaky “European Coordination against Prisons” met in Turin. Although there were indeed a few Spaniards, a few Swiss, a handful of British and Greeks in attendance, the general scenography for the hundred-plus actors of the drama that was to unfold belonged among the classics of the activist repertoire extending back to the founding of the First International: a public confrontation between the little family of Parisian autonomists of these years — incurably Marxist, and those behind the pretentious idea of a “European coordination” — and Italian insurrectionary anarchists. All the divergences, all the rejoinders, all the impasses that would fill the stage, up to the final collapse, were basically contained in the initial script. The minimum practical aim of reaching an understanding about the ins and outs of occupying a prison construction site only added to the dramatic tension: it was of the utmost importance, more than ever, to find oneself in disagreement on all points; and all this was done under the meddlesome eyes and ears of the Italian *carabinieri*. An act of *Tiqqun*, in the midst of such an apparatus, could only mean pushing it to its breaking point — without placing oneself on either end of the prevailing oneness, without allowing oneself to be attached to either of the two poles of the machine — through a gesture of *parrhesia*, or at least an attempt at it. One couldn’t be happy with anything less. A verbal foray too loaded with truth to be digested by the apparatus, plus the text that follows below, distributed in French and Italian, produced the expected effect of scandal. There were cries of desertion to the enemy under insurrectionary fire. The family was quite furious. It was urgent to act as if nothing had happened, while discreetly taking the appropriate measures in such a circumstance. In the fifteen years that followed, the breach in the apparatus has continued to deepen, to the visible despair of its guardians, who have not ceased to decry the universal “*appelisme*.” It should be emphasized that the “authors” of the following text, as one can see by reading it, had no interest in prisons as one more activist terrain to be tacked onto the rubric of the frantic activism of the day. It was the considerable mass of illegalities from which and *within* which they lived at the time that made them want to weaken as much as possible the project of imprisonment. And they did this with the circumstantial allies who found themselves there. Can one reproach them for the wretchedness of the times? Clearly, it was not out of duty, or from any moral impulse that they unfurled banners stating “Humanism is the civility of swine,” that they deprived Robert Badinter of the microphone and the unmixed satisfaction of having “abolished the death penalty,” that they occupied, sabotaged, rioted, conspired, or disturbed the well-oiled operation of the carceral complex, all the while adhering to a scandalously partial interest. The proletariat is a “rude pagan race,” as our comrade Tronti had understood very well. Subsequent events have done little to prove them wrong. Moreover, this must have crossed the mind of one of the authors of this text when he found himself locked up in a prison where, a few years earlier, he had tried unsuccessfully to break through a plexiglass sentry box with a sledgehammer during a little “street festival.” It must have added some needed spice to his peculiar detention.

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As long as we keep repeating the same refrain of the little anti-repressive anthem, everything remains as it is and anyone can sing it without being noticed.

—Michel Foucault

1. The struggle against prisons doesn't return the same way that it left. And we do not take it up in complete innocence, as if we don't know why, in the 1970s, it failed.
2. The function of prison in the overall economy of servitude is to materialize the false distinction between criminals and non-criminals, between law-abiding citizens and delinquents. This "purpose" is as much social as it is psychic. It is the imprisonment and torture of the prisoner that produces the citizen's feeling of innocence. Thus, as long as the criminal aspect of *all existence* under Empire is not acknowledged, the need to punish and to see punished will persist, and every *argument* against prison will continue to miss the mark.
3. The distinction between guilty and innocent is false. Reversing it only reinforces its lie. In our struggle against prisons, whenever we cast prisoners as the good guys, as the *victims*, we reproduce the very logic whose penalty is prison. A single dash of morality is enough to spoil any anti-carceral struggle.
4. The phrase "prison is the solitary confinement of society" is true only with the corollary that there is no "society." It is not "society" that produces prisons. On the contrary, it is prison that produces society. It is by asserting, by constructing its own fictitious outside, that Empire creates the fiction of an inside, an inclusion, a belonging. The fact that the *techniques* through which the daily life of Empire's metropolises and its prisons are managed are substantially the same — this must remain the exclusive knowledge of its managers. "A prison is a little city. You sleep there, you eat there, you work, you study, you play sports, you go to church. Except that life there is always constrained. Out on the street, there are stores, movie theaters, etc. And so I asked myself, why not bring those things into prisons? And how can this be done without hampering security?" So says one of the main architects of new French prisons. It would not be prudent to say more.
5. The silence that constantly surrounds the daily operation of prisons requires us to sometimes speak on behalf of prisoners. With that special feeling of being "on the right side of the barricade." For a long time, ONE has also spoken on behalf of workers, of the proletariat, of the undocumented etc. Until they started speaking for themselves and they said something entirely different than what ONE expected. This failing has a name: *political ventriloquism*. All political ventriloquism places us comfortably inside a parenthesis: our speech is free of any risk to ourselves, as it does not implicate us. It spares us from acknowledging that under Empire, under a regime of power that does not tolerate any radical exteriority, all existence is *abject* inasmuch as it participates, even passively, in the continuous crime that is the survival of this society. If one needed a just cause in order to revolt, none of the citizens of the metropolis would be entitled to do so, given all the benefits we draw every day from the universal pillaging. And no militant Stakhanovism, no self-sacrifice can expiate this connivance. Our condition is not that of the working class during the first "industrial revolution," which could still pit the morals of producers against

those of consumers, against *bourgeois* morals. Our condition is that of *plebs*. We live in the central regions of Empire, amidst an indigestible abundance of commodities. Every day we accommodate the intolerable – an armed police patrol on the streets, an old man sleeping on a subway ventilation grate, a friend who openly betrays us, but whom we do not kill, etc. Several times a day we engage in completely commodified relations. And if, setting aside our guilty conscience, we give ourselves the means for an offensive, we achieve some form of primitive accumulation. If the question is who we *are*, it's obvious that we are not "the poor," "the dispossessed," "the oppressed," precisely because of the extent to which we are still able to fight. In truth, what unites us is not revolt against the excess of unhappiness presently inflicted on the world, but an enduring disgust with the forms of happiness it offers us. So our position is that of the plebs – obscene, extravagant, schizophrenic – who cannot rebel against Empire without rebelling against themselves, against the position they hold. *There are no more revolts that are not at the same time revolts against ourselves*. This is the peculiarity of our time and what's in play, henceforth, in any revolutionary process.

6. "Penal justice is becoming a functional justice. A justice of security and protection. A justice system that, like so many other institutions, has to manage society, detect what is perilous to it, alert it to its own dangers. A justice that gives itself the task of watching over a population rather than respecting legal subjects" (Foucault). Prison is not designed for the dangerous classes, but for rebel bodies – the methodical application of coercion in bourgeois education or the global petty bourgeoisie's obsession with comfort might well explain the rarity of rebel bodies in certain milieus, and their overrepresentation in the prison population. Through prisons and so many other apparatuses, civilization aims at managing its putrefaction in order to postpone, as long as possible, its anticipated collapse. Confinement is the eventual fate Empire promises to all those who don't function, to all those who trouble the normal state of affairs. In this way, civilization hopes to outlive itself: by isolating the "barbarians."
7. We know prison, the *threat* of prison, as a definite constraint on the freedom of our gestures. The struggle against prisons waged from the outside helps us break this constraint by making prison familiar to us, by dispelling the powerful dread that's associated with it. Through this particular struggle, we suppress our very fear of struggling. As one sees, then, it is not a moral necessity which brings us to fight against prison, but a *strategic* necessity: that of making ourselves collectively stronger. "The effectiveness of true action resides *within* itself."
8. "What is being said is 'no more prison at all'. And when, in reaction to this kind of massive critique, the reasonable people, the legislators, the technocrats, the governing authorities ask 'But what is it that you want, then?', the answer is: 'It's not up to us to tell you what sauce to cook us in; we don't want to play this game of crime and punishment anymore, we no longer want to play this game of justice.'" (Foucault)
9. Revolutionary logic and the logic of supporting prisoners *as prisoners* are not the same thing. *Supporting* prisoners is in the service of an affective solidarity (human if not humanitarian) with all those who suffer, all those crushed by power – the motivation of the

Génépi Catholics has its origins here. Revolutionary logic, on the other hand, is strategic, sometimes inhuman, and often cruel. It calls for *a very different type of affect*.

10. In prison, all struggle is radical — survival or destruction, dignity or insanity: these are at stake in the contention over the smallest details. And in prison, all struggle is reformist as well because it must beg for what it obtains, even by rioting, from a sovereign power that holds the lives of the inmates in its hands.
11. In all the revolutions of the 19th century — 1830, 1848, 1870 — it was traditional for there either be revolts within prisons and for the prisoners to stand in solidarity with the revolutionary movement outside, or for the revolutionaries to force open the doors of the prisons and liberate the inmates. In any case, the shortest path to dismantling prisons remains the construction of a revolutionary movement.
12. There are no ex-convicts among us. There are friends who have served time. The convict as convict, one who, once released, becomes an *ex-convict*, is a figure of fiction, of crime fiction. The prisoner as prisoner does not exist. What exists are forms of life which the penitentiary machine would like to reduce to bare life, to docile preserved meat. The myth of the cell expresses the dream of no longer having to deal with bodies animated by intractable reasons, violent affects, and mad logics, but with inert pieces of meat, waiting.
13. Under Empire — that is, within the global civil war — friendship is a political notion. Any alliance draws a line in the general confrontation, and all confrontations impose alliances. Imprisoning someone is a political act. Liberating a friend, by bazooka for instance, as in the recent occurrence at Fresnes, is a political gesture. The members of Action Directe are not political prisoners because they were incarcerated for fighting, but because they are *still* fighting.
14. We have friends among the prisoners, but that's not all. The struggle *against* prisons is not a struggle *for* the prisoners. We want to abolish prisons because they limit our possibility of forming alliances, they temper our disputes. We want to abolish prisons so that the real wars may be freely waged, rather than the present pacification that eternalizes the false schism between guilty and innocent. Once again, for us, it is a matter of dividing the division.
15. A society that needs prisons, no less than a society that relies on the police, is perforce a society where all liberty is extinguished. On the other hand, a society without prison is not automatically a free society. There is no lack of historical examples that illustrate this point if one considers that imprisonment was only imposed as the dominant form of punishment at the beginning of the 19th century.
16. The brutality of the prison guards, the arbitrariness of the penitentiary administration, and the fact that prison is, more generally, a machine to grind and crush you — none of this provokes scandal. It is granted that the function of prison is to bring uncontrollable bodies into line, to domesticate the “violent.” Compared to the wheel, the stake, or the guillotine, imprisonment was imagined from the start as a civilized and civilizing punishment. “Imprisonment is the penalty par excellence in civilized societies,” wrote Pellegrino Rossi in his

1829 *Treatise on Criminal Law*. Patient waiting is the proper virtue of the citizen; and asking permission before any gesture is one of the ABC's of his education. Since our struggle is primarily a struggle against civilization, it is also a struggle against prison.

17. In the battle against civilization, prison is “groping fingers and the hand that kills.” But, as any sensible mind will admit, you do not win a fight by striking your enemy's fists.
18. The line of reasoning that says our society could not continue to function without its prisons and that, by attacking them, we are weakening the entire system, is logically correct but false in practice. Prison is not “the weakest link.” The recurring debate on the anachronism of prisons reminds us, through its ephemerality, that this anachronism is what guarantees the “modernity” of all the rest.
19. As a threat, prison is indeed one of the means civilization uses to dissuade us from communing with the savage within, from affirming the intensities that traverse us. From this alone, we can understand that the enemy is not entirely outside us, that we can leverage civilization to the very degree that *it possesses us*. Because, in the end, our quarrel with citizens is based on this: that we might well prefer “barbarism” to civilization.
20. In reality, the struggle against prisons in these times of extreme separation is mostly a *pretext* for us. It's not a matter of adding a new chapter to the pain of activism, but of using the project of abolishing prisons as a *locus of encounters* so as to organize ourselves more broadly. Just as the aim of any struggle inside prison is ultimately to conquer a space of self-organization necessary for the formation of a collective power against the administration, it is a question of forming ourselves *into a force*, into a *material force*, into an *autonomous material force* in the global civil war. The anti-prison struggle is at its peak intensity whenever we foil repression. It triumphs wherever we manage to achieve impunity for ourselves.
21. Faced with the essential lie of civilization, we are in the right. But “a world of lies cannot be overturned by the truth” (Kafka). All the policing that surrounds us is there to prevent such a shift, to prevent our becoming, little by little, a reality. Each day, a new apparatus is added to the grid that controls our daily existence. They want to beat us down, to ferret out any remainder of power or wildness we may still possess. By day we kowtow, we watch our step under the excessive force wrought by the avalanche of apparatuses; at night we congratulate ourselves on having survived. But that's not exactly the case: each time that we submit, we die a little. Prison is the mega-apparatus in which you cannot help but die a little bit every minute, die by surviving. If together we occupy a prison construction site, it cannot be to discuss prison, imprisonment, isolation once more, but, with the balance of power reversed, to unleash the free play of our forms-of-life. And to show that we can make an entirely different use of our bodies and of space.

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