

# Producing the intolerable

## Anti-prison struggles, abolitionist genealogies

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On September 9, 1971, detainees in the Attica prison in New York organised a collective uprising, seizing control of the building and taking hostage 42 prison staff until September 13 when the collective revolt was repressed by police and 33 prisoners were killed. A few weeks later, in the prison of Clairvaux in France, two detainees took hostage a prison guard, although the revolt was quickly repressed by police. Two months later, in December 1971, a collective uprising took place in the prison of Toul. As Michel Foucault stressed, commenting on the latter, ‘the prisoners heard about the Attica revolt; they realised that its problems were their own and that these problems were political in nature’.<sup>1</sup> In the early 1970s, the claims raised by detainees in the US during the wave of collective prison uprisings thus reverberated across the ocean and were relaunched by prisoners in France.

Such uprisings were not unique to France or the US. Two years before, in 1968, detainees revolted in Italy in the prisons of Turin, Milan, Genova and Rome: collective uprisings that were triggered by the social mobilisations which in 1968 spread across the country. Extra-parliamentary parties, like Lotta Continua, and student movements actively supported and amplified those prison revolts: prisoners initially raised very precise claims against the living conditions inside the prison but then expanded these to become a protest about the penal system at large.<sup>2</sup> In the United Kingdom, in October 1969, a prison revolt took place in Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight to protest the brutal violence to which prisoners were subjected on a daily basis.<sup>3</sup> As an article of the time noted: ‘the Parkhurst revolt was the spark which ignited three years of protests against prison conditions, some of which were organised by the Preservation of the Right of Prisoners, while others were entirely

spontaneous’.<sup>4</sup> Prison revolts happened more or less simultaneously in Norway, Sweden and in Portugal also.

The connections, convergences and partial differences between the political genealogies of these struggles within and against the carceral system that took place in many countries between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s have been only marginally discussed in current abolitionist debates. In this piece, I focus specifically on the interconnected political genealogies of the prison revolts in the US and in France, and on the partially different angles of attack and claims they mobilised, bearing in mind that such struggles took place in a larger world context of prison uprisings. While events were unfolding in the early 1970s, the members of *Le groupe d’information sur les prisons* (GIP), or the Prison Information Group, in France referred frequently in their texts to the revolts in the prisons in the US, they supported the Black Panthers, and Michel Foucault himself visited Attica in 1972. Yet, on the US side, the knowledge of what was happening in France was quite limited. This was partly due to linguistic factors – in the US the experience of the GIP was not well known, and their texts were mostly untranslated. Retracing these partially interconnected political genealogies nonetheless enables us to foreground the resonances and mutual influences between struggles that would otherwise remain bounded within national frameworks.

Before proceeding, a methodological clarification is needed: by focusing on the US and the French anti-prison movements in the 1970s, this piece does not engage in a comparative analysis; rather, the goal is to highlight specific similarities, differences and mutual influences between these two political experiences. More precisely, I am interested in showing how those movements ar-

ticated their claims in a similar way, even as, at the same time, they foregrounded and challenged different aspects of carcerality. Most obviously, as I will show, while reflections on the racialised nature of punishment and the structural racism that underpins the prison system were at the core of the US movement, such issues remained essentially unaddressed in the French anti-prison movement. Yet, if little has been said about the resonances between these contemporaneous anti-prison movements, affinities and mutual entanglements were, I argue, at stake *irrespective* of the relative lack of actual exchanges at the time. The circulation of knowledge and anti-prison struggles generates what the historian Julius Scott has defined as a ‘common wind’;<sup>5</sup> that is, a shared political lexicon and ground of tactics, even if, in many cases, these connections and reverberations were not deliberately established nor consciously thematised within the movements themselves.

Such a circulation did not take place only across space, across borders, but also over time: the memory of those anti-prison struggles has sedimented and spread, informing later carceral abolitionist movements as well as anti-racist mobilisations. Forty years on, the mutual resonances as well as the partial affinities and differences between those two anti-carceral movements can be identified more clearly. The anti-prison conjuncture which unfolded simultaneously in many countries in the world between the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s was intertwined with a broader political turmoil – with the student protests movement, anti-racist claims, strikes in the factories and international workers mobilisations. By connecting these two political genealogies of anti-prison movements what emerges is a common production of the intolerable: that is, anti-prison mobilisations aimed at making the prison system intolerable, unacceptable.

Producing and spreading an *active intolerance* about the prison system, was a deliberate goal of the GIP and of the knowledge production and modes of support they engaged in. The circulation of prisoners’ letters and subversive knowledge in the US was driven by a similar purpose: not just informing citizens about the reality of the prison but enhancing collective intolerance towards it. At the same time, multiplying the genealogies of struggles against prisons and showing how these are mutually entangled is crucial, I suggest, for provincialising the current US-centred debate on prison abolitionism.

The piece begins by tracing the influence that anti-asylum movements had on anti-prison mobilisations in the early 1970s. It then moves on to focus on three points that reveal key convergences but also partial divergences between the two movements. First, I discuss the goal of breaking the wall between inside and outside the prison, and the fact that support from outside was conceived by detainees not only as solidarity but also as an active part of the struggle. Second, I show how knowledge co-production served the purpose of producing the intolerable, of rendering the prison system as unacceptable and, therefore, non-reformable. Third, I consider how anti-prison movements from the 1970s have shaped current abolitionist horizons.

### The ‘common wind’

The radical critique of the carceral institutions that different groups developed in the early 1970s was in part an outcome of the ‘common wind’ that circulated in the early 1970s, that is, of the knowledge and practice exchanges between anti-prisons and anti-asylum movements. Anti-asylum and anti-prison movements shared a critical analysis of what they defined as total institutions. In Italy and in France particularly, prison revolts and the support from outside that these received should be situated in a specific political conjuncture, when the asylum as an institution was strongly challenged by movements like *Psichiatria Democratica* in Italy,<sup>6</sup> led by the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia, and by sociologists, such as Robert Castel in France.

The encounter and mutual influence between anti-asylum and anti-prison movements was manifested in several meetings that took place in this period.<sup>7</sup> As reported by Christian De Vito and Silvia Valiani, in 1973 Michel Foucault, Franco Basaglia, Robert Castel and the Norwegian scholar Thomas Mathiesen, as well as members of the British organisation Preservation of the Rights of Prisons (PROP), among others, attended the first Conference for the Study of Deviance & Social Control in Florence.<sup>8</sup> The conference was one of the key occasions on which anti-asylum and anti-prison movements met and exchanged their views.<sup>9</sup> The Manifesto written by the European Group for the Study of Deviance & Social Control clearly showed that both ‘crime’ and ‘deviance’ fall under the umbrella of ‘abnormality’, and denounced

the positivist approach then dominant in the social sciences and among policy-makers, for which ‘agencies of social control are studied ... from the point of view of how to make them more effective’.<sup>10</sup> Criticising and taking a radical distance from this, the Group was animated by the twofold goal of developing ‘a theoretical approach that grants “deviant actors” a conscious past, a present perceived problem and a future praxis’, and of elaborating a theory of deviance and crime that ‘delineates the nature of the whole society which engenders such problems’.

These connections between anti-asylum and anti-prison movements should not lead us to conclude that there is any simple isomorphism of different struggles against institutions. On the contrary, as Foucault noted, for those in a psychiatric hospital, it is much more difficult to revolt against the asylum and to organise a collective refusal than it is for detainees to revolt against the prison system (although this is what Franco Basaglia tried to do in Italy).<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, highlighting the mutual exchanges and political affinities between the two movements is key for showing that anti-prison mobilisations did not emerge out nowhere. Nor can they be detached from a broader contestation concerning how the state’s violence was exercised in and through total institutions. Indeed, anti-prison mobilisations both boosted and influenced movements against interconnected total institutions and a critical reflection on crime and social deviance from the standpoint of social-economic conditions.

Reconstructing the political conjuncture and the mutual influences through which anti-prison groups emerged in Europe during this period also enables us to foreground the significantly different genealogies of anti-prison movements in France and in the US. Indeed, although, in the US, critical analyses of the asylum were also developed – in particular through the work of the psychologist Thomas Szasz – the main ‘common wind’ through which anti-prisons mobilisations and prison revolts were connected was set by anti-racist mobilisations, particularly during the period when the Black Panther Party was most active, as the biographies of Angela Y. Davis and George Jackson well illustrate. Equally, despite the different political influences that shaped anti-prison movements in these and other countries, such movements also shared what we might term a genealogy rooted in a ‘long 1968’, which boosted and informed the

anti-prison movement, both because of the widespread radical criticism of repressive institutions and because of the support that detainees received from some radical leftist parties. In fact, many conceived struggles within and against prisons as part of a broader class struggle, as Sante Notarnicola, an Italian detainee who became one of the leader of the prison revolts in Italy in the late 1960s, stressed in his book *The Impossible Escape*: he refused the verdict of the court ‘because the police apparatus has been demonstrated to be an instrument for class-based oppression’.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, until recently, anti-prison mobilisations have rarely been considered as a political movement as such. For this reason, highlighting their political legacies and retracing their interconnected genealogies is an important task of a history of the present.

## Unsettling the inside-outside of the prison

The Prison Information Group (GIP) was founded in December 1970 by former prisoners, and families of detainees, as well as by a group of scholars, including, most notably, Gilles Deleuze, Daniel Defert, Pierre Vidal Naquet and Michel Foucault. Overall, in the first half of the 1970s the anti-carceral movement was characterised by an unprecedented relay between protests inside the prison and mobilisations outside. Importantly, the GIP did not emerge from radical theories about the prison system. Rather, its birth should be situated within a broader political context in which, in the aftermath of the Algerian War of independence (1954-1962), a large number of Algerian citizens were held in French prisons and an important conjuncture of movements was gaining traction: ‘the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes, followed by the Front Homosexuel d’Action Révolutionnaire ... and the student and workers’ revolt of May ‘68’ were all happening at the same time.’<sup>13</sup> The GIP challenged the prison system, above all, by unsettling the boundaries between inside and outside the prison: that is, at the core of their mobilisations was the attempt to break down the barriers to communication, building coalitions and the establishing of connections between people in prisons and those supporting their struggles.

One important observation made by the GIP was that there was a risk that the division enforced by the state between prisoners and free citizens could be replicated

also in the anti-prison movement. Political interventions aimed at raising detainees' consciousness could involve inferring that these latter were not themselves aware of their own condition, and that the work of activists and intellectuals were thus needed to achieve this. In opposition to this, the GIP insisted that the point is not 'to raise consciousness among prisoners ... they had this awareness for a long time, but it hasn't had the means to express itself ... individual experiences must be transformed into collective knowledge. That is to say, into political knowledge'.<sup>14</sup> The goal was by no means to explain to prisoners why and how they had to fight, but to give them the floor. The members of the GIP thus aimed at building up transversal alliances between those inside and those outside the jail through practices of knowledge co-production and by amplifying from outside the struggles happening within the prisons' walls. In fact, the mobilisations of the GIP were grounded in the idea that detainees face a double isolation: they were forcibly isolated from the outside and, within the prison, among themselves. Thus, supporting their struggle meant undermining both forms of isolation at once, making it possible for detainees to communicate among themselves and with the outside. Anti-prison mobilisations in France in the early 1970s thereby did more than simply amplify detainees' struggles and spread the news of this outside the prison: the support from outside was in itself constitutive of the struggle against the prison system.

Producing a collective and situated knowledge about the prison system was at the core of the GIP's activities. In a similar way, a central task of the anti-prison movement in the US consisted in breaking the wall between detainees and those outside the prison: by reading the letters written by activist prisoners, including, among others, Angela Davis and George Jackson, what emerges is the urgency of establishing connections with outside the prison as well as with other social movements – such as socialist coalitions and anti-war movements. In fact, detainees were trying both to unsettle the rigid division between inside/outside the prison – pointing to the racialised carceral continuum in the US – and to show mutual entanglements with other social movements that were unfolding at the time. By arguing that 'black revolution and socialist revolution have penetrated the wall',<sup>15</sup> and that the point was not only to struggle against prisons but 'to consolidate and solidify a mass movement

with the positive idea of socialism',<sup>16</sup> Davis voiced the way in which struggles within and against the prison system were ultimately fights against class and racial oppression at large.



N. Haroun-Romain. Plan for a penitentiary, 1840.  
A prisoner praying in his cell, facing the central surveillance tower.

The particular connections built between abolitionist groups, socialist claims and anti-racist movements were ultimately quite specific to the US context, and were far less developed in the French one. As Gilmore has remarked, 'prisons are geographical solutions to social and economic crises, politically organised by a racial state which is itself in crisis',<sup>17</sup> and the expansion of the prison system in the US is intrinsically connected to broader 'processes of displacement, abandonment and control'.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, even if in France claims against structural racism played a marginal role in anti-prison mobilisations, a common thread between the two movements was represented by the effort to demolish the clear-cut division between inside and outside, between detainees and other citizens. This became one of the main goals of the anti-prison movement more generally, insofar as it aimed at undermining and making intolerable the very functioning of the penal system and the basis upon which this was publicly justified as the unavoidable solution for tackling the problem of criminality in society.

Consequently, the multiplication of hierarchies – between inside and outside the prison, as well as among detainees – was directly targeted by the GIP: ‘the struggle against the penitentiary system ought to destroy, before anything else, the divisions that the system establishes and that permit it to subsist: the hierarchical divisions inside the prison and the isolation of families outside’.<sup>19</sup> In order to unsettle the twofold isolation inside prisons, solidarity alliances were thus built between detainees and people who supported their struggle, both in the US and in France, by making the uprisings reverberate outside the prison and by articulating punctual demands with broader claims against repression and the social punishing of the poor. Indeed, the struggle carried on by prisoners encapsulated claims and refusals that concerned the punitive society at large and, in the US context at least, the racialised carceral continuum.



Undoing the neat division between detainees and citizens outside entailed showing that the different layers of oppression at play inside the prison were similarly deployed outside its walls and that a fight against these

involved targeting all these forms of oppression together. As Daniel Defert put it: ‘we must not believe prison is an isolated black hole. In fact, the penal system ... includes three interdependent pieces: the police, the legal system, and the prison’.<sup>20</sup> The revolt in the Toul prison in December 1971 was the first collective struggle led by prisoners in France during which the division between inside and outside crumbled: prisoners went up on the roof and addressed their claims to the public opinion, to the journalists who were there and told them: ‘this is what we want’. Indeed, prisoners were aware that, by saying this, ‘they would have not found sniggering journalists, nor a hostile public opinion’.<sup>21</sup> The communication with the outside and the very fact of addressing public opinion were central tactics not only for letting people know what was happening inside but, more importantly, for building a platform for collective demands. By breaking down the barriers between inside and outside, detainees’ struggles in the US and in France ‘disrupt[ed] assumptions such as the idea that politics happens’ exclusively or primarily ‘in the milieu of the state’.<sup>22</sup>

### Intolerance-inquiries and subversive knowledges

The production of collective counter-knowledge about the carceral system played a major role in both the US and French anti-prison mobilisations. In the US, the letters written by prisoners and in particular by prisoner-activists like Angela Davis and George Jackson, had been the main channel through which the reality of the prisons and the struggles against this started to be known. In France, alongside the circulation of prisoners’ letters, the GIP initiated a mode of collective inquiry called ‘intolerance-inquiry’. The mobilisations organised by the GIP started from the twofold principle that detainees are aware of their situation and of the structural violence at play in the prison, and that, consequently, what was at stake consisted rather in putting in place the conditions for speaking up and for organising collectively. In using the expression ‘intolerance-inquiry’,<sup>23</sup> they referred to questionnaires, crafted by former prisoners, that were given to detainees and that focused on the living conditions and rights in prisons, including around food, leisure time, visits, work, medical care and access to information and lawyers. In fact, it was by centring on the material liv-

ing conditions and on what might appear to be small details (such as food quality and quantity, or the cold in the cells) that the questionnaires highlighted the unacceptability of the prison system at large. What they revealed was less the misery and the despair inside the prison than detainees' violated rights. More precisely, through the questionnaires, the GIP discovered 'a whole series of repressions still harder to endure than overcrowding, boredom or hunger',<sup>24</sup> and even harder than the privation of freedom of movement as such. As Foucault asked, if 'detention is in principle the privation of the freedom to leave ... why is it that prison must furthermore lead to the privation of a certain number of other fundamental freedoms?'<sup>25</sup> Thus, the intolerance-inquiry did not function primarily to accumulate knowledge but, rather, to generate an active intolerance towards the prison.

The purpose of intolerance-inquiries was not only to make visible the living conditions of the detainees but, more than that, to start from and point to these in order to illuminate a wide range of substantial violations and privations of freedom, showing their mutual interdependence. In other words, by paying attention to how prisoners articulated both the questions and the answers, the complaints about the living conditions revealed that the prison system was suffocating and, directly or indirectly, killing them. In fact, the wretched material conditions within the prison mirrored the biopolitical tactics for choking and 'crushing the prisoner's sense of self'.<sup>26</sup> As the Organisation of Political Prisoners contended, 'the penitentiary regime marshals all the conditions necessary to break the individual completely, physically as much as morally'.<sup>27</sup> Through the intolerance-inquiry, the GIP radically unsettled the division between detainees and external supporters, since the questionnaires were structured by prisoners and former prisoners in light of what they wanted to make visible and intolerable. Second, the intolerance-inquiry was predicated on non-extractive knowledge co-production, between the detainees and those outside. The intolerance-inquiry did not intend to be an objective description of the prison system. Rather, it was both part of what might be called a militant investigation, to echo workers' inquiries in factories in the 1960s and the 1970s that sought to produce real knowledge about workers' conditions in the factories, and, building on this, to expose the modes of exploitation at stake, and a tool of denunciation, for mak-

ing the prison system intolerable.

The persistence of the prison system does not only depend on a lack of knowledge and evidence. The question for the GIP was how to transform the evidence into an intolerable reality. Relatedly, the unacceptability of the prison should not be framed in terms of excess (of violence and detention): it is the function of the prison itself which is unacceptable as it serves the purpose of criminalising and controlling a part of the population and of maintaining unequal wealth distribution. Rendering the prison intolerable was not an isolated task: on the contrary, the goal was to produce an active intolerance about 'the legal system, the hospital system, psychiatric practice, military service, etc'.<sup>28</sup> That is, the critique of the prison-system was situated as a part of a critique of the societal confinement continuum: the prison, as abolitionist scholars contend, is in fact the most blatant expression of disciplining and confinement mechanisms that target the lower classes.

Alongside the intolerance-inquiry, the GIP produced leaflets to distribute outside prisons and in cities for amplifying the struggles of the detainees. The letters and the declarations of the prisoners were also circulated widely, in order to let people know about the collective revolts and hunger strikes that were happening in many prisons across France. It is worth remembering that the collective uprisings within French prisons started with political prisoners and then spread across and became a revolt in the name of all detainees.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, while at the beginning their claims concerned the right to be recognised as political prisoners, and not as common criminals, they soon started insisting that their collective struggle was in the service of all prisoners. But what did active intolerance towards prisons mean in terms of transformative politics? It is important to stress that prison reforms were far from the purpose of the activities of the GIP. Indeed, they firmly insisted that reforming the carceral system was not a part of their struggle and that, on the contrary, prison reforms end up in reinforcing the carceral continuum in a disguised way. Rather, as Foucault advanced, the point is to ask, 'can one in effect conceptualise a society in which power has no need for illegalities?'<sup>30</sup>

At the same time that the GIP was producing the intolerance-inquiry, in the US prisoners mobilised with different forms of collective protests as well as by writing

letters and manifestos for reaching out and showing the reality of the American prison system. In this respect, George Jackson's activism and the letters he wrote, collected in the volume *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, are well known. Indeed, Jackson, who was killed by the police in 1971 while he was trying to escape the prison, articulated a radical critique of the carceral system, showing that this latter was grounded on racialised punishment and on the criminalisation of the poor: 'most of today's black convicts have come to understand that they are the most abused victims of an unrighteous order. Up until now, the prospect of parole has kept us from confronting our captors with any real determination'.<sup>31</sup> In one of her letters from prison, Angela Davis stressed that 'black revolution and socialist revolution penetrated the walls' of the jail.

For Jackson, Davis and others, the fight against the carceral system was at the same time a struggle against state racism and a class struggle: 'the activity surrounding the protection and liberation of people who fight for us is an important aspect of the struggle, but it is important only if it provides new initiatives that redirect and advance the revolution under new progressive methods'.<sup>32</sup> As Howard Zinn remarked, 'all over the country, prisoners were obviously affected by the turmoil in the country, the black revolt, the youth upsurge, the anti-war movement'.<sup>33</sup> That is to say, not only did the anti-prison movement boost other collective struggles that mobilised for social justice, but detainees and detainees' supporters were in turn influenced by other mobilisations that were taking place outside the prison. Similarly to the French context, this was the basis in the US for an unprecedented solidarity and active engagement with non-detainees; in the words of Zinn, 'on the outside, something new was also happening, the development of prison support groups all over the country'.<sup>34</sup>

Speaking about his time in prison, George Jackson pointed out that 'men are brutalised by their environment, not the reverse';<sup>35</sup> and he explains this statement by illustrating, through a focus on the details of daily life in prison, the extent to which detainees are obstructed and their sense of self-esteem is crushed by the very materiality of the impediments standing in their way and by meticulous disciplinary controls. Such a stress on the biopolitical effects that the carceral system has on detainees' lives, beyond the deprivation of freedom, is an

important point of convergence between the anti-prison mobilisations in the US and in France. Nevertheless, the knowledge produced – through detainees' letters, inquiries and reports – and that circulated about and from within prisons, was shaped by different focuses in the US and in France, leading activists in the US to craft a critique of the carceral system which put racism at the forefront.

The antisocial function of the prison in the US was clearly stated by prisoners-activists in the 1970s: while state discourse depicted criminality as a psychological-behaviouralist problem, black prisoners insisted that 'the criminal has nothing to do with breaking the law'.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, first, the acts which are sanctioned by the law are, the argument goes, those commonly perpetuated by the lower classes, as a result of social marginalisation and unemployment. Second, the prison has little to do with law-breaking as long as it is a 'state apparatus employed to maintain exploitative and oppressive social conditions'.<sup>37</sup> For this reason – and this is a key lesson for current abolitionist projects – radical struggles against the prison system cannot be disjoined from an anti-capitalist horizon. The importance of intertwining struggles against capitalism and struggles against the carceral continuum has been constantly reiterated by later carceral abolitionist literature.<sup>38</sup> Such a focus on racialised punishment, and on the need to articulate anti-capitalist struggles and prison abolitionism together, allow us to uncover some key similarities and differences between the anti-prison movement in the US and the one in France.

As part of its intolerance-investigation, the GIP specifically highlighted political oppression as a key goal of the carceral system: the prison's main function is not to punish and correct criminals but, rather, to maintain the oppression and the exploitation of a certain part of the population. The penitentiary system 'forms part of a large, more complex system that we might call the punitive system'.<sup>39</sup> Yet it does not apply to everyone in the same way: it works precisely by strengthening socio-economic differences. The lower classes, the poor, are the target of the prison system. While both in the US and in France anti-prison movements insist that prisons allow the reproduction and multiplication of class differences, in the US this discourse is mainly inflected through the lens of racial capitalism and structural violence, as key

components of the carceral continuum. That is, while the race-based functioning of the prison is at the core of the reflection upon the prison system and collective mobilisations in the US, in the French context it is only very marginally elaborated and de facto superseded by considerations on class. The central role played by race and racism in the US anti-prison movement stems in part, of course, from the historical and political legacies of slavery (and the anti-slavery movement) and in part from the pronounced racial composition in US prisons. In 'Racialised Punishment and Prison Abolitionism' (2003), the only text in which she directly engages with Foucault's work, Angela Davis commented that we need a different genealogy from Foucault's genealogy of prisons, which is centred on the history of disciplinary powers: one which 'would accentuate the links between confinement, punishment and race'.<sup>40</sup> In her critique of Foucault's analysis of the prison system, Davis stresses that, first, racism is not a contingent aspect but, rather, a structural component of carceral mechanisms; and, second, she argues that – while for Foucault torture is no longer a part of contemporary modes of punishment – torture actually plays a key role in the functioning of prisons, and is precisely what connects it with the incarceration of slaves.

The nexus between the prison-industrial complex and the slavery system has been stressed by various recent carceral abolitionist scholars in the US, for whom the prison is a form of 'surplus land, capital, labour, and state capacity'.<sup>41</sup> A very similar analysis was present already in the texts written by American prisoners-activists in the early 1970s. For instance, the Folsom Prisoners Manifesto, written in November 1970, define prisons as 'fascist concentration camps of modern America' and as institutions of 'authoritative inhumanity'.<sup>42</sup> The specificity of the US prison system in this respect was also known by the GIP, as Foucault fleshed out after his visit to the prison of Attica in New York: 'American prisons in fact play two roles: a role as a place of punishment ... and a role as concentration camp'; and 'in the United States there must be one out of 30 or 40 black men in prison: it is here that one can see the function of massive elimination in the American prison'.<sup>43</sup> Thus, also thanks to the visits that some members of the GIP – and Foucault in particular – made to US prisons and the exchanges they had with the anti-prison movement there, the specificity of the American carceral system was quite well known.

However, racialised punishment and state racism continued to be largely unaddressed in the GIP's own critique of French prisons.

## Abolitionist legacies

Anti-prison mobilisations in the 1970s paved the way for the latest carceral abolitionist projects. Far from constituting a monolithic genealogy, the legacies of past struggles against prisons are inflected by the different ways in which the analysis and the critique of the carceral system was framed. Yet, despite these differences, both in France and in the US, anti-prison struggles shared a refusal to endorse reformist programmes and each firmly challenged the goal of building a better and fairer prison system. Indeed, the purpose of letting people outside know the reality of the carceral system was not to cultivate support for reform programmes but, rather, to render the prisons obsolete.<sup>44</sup> Abolitionism, as Angela Davis has contended, is 'not only a negative process of tearing down, it is also about building up, it is about creating new institutions'.<sup>45</sup>

Prison abolitionism cannot in fact be accomplished without radically changing ways of addressing social phenomena and addressing social marginalisation and poverty, by tackling its causes instead of repressing crime. This would also involve putting in place alternative institutions that could make this possible. In turn, as Davis puts it, prison abolitionism is 'a fundamental requirement for the revitalisation of democracy'.<sup>46</sup> Notwithstanding their differences, the anti-prison movement in France and the one in the US converge in their way of conceiving prison abolitionism. To break down prison walls, writes Jean-Marie Domenach, 'it will be necessary to invent institutions and forms of conduct' that instead of repressing delinquency 'will treat its causes and will thereby compel the transformation of a society that is encouraging crime more and more'.<sup>47</sup> This analysis is in line with the one carried out by activists in the US, according to whom carceral abolitionism entails undoing the modes of labour subordination that underpin racial capitalism. At the same time, it is important not to flatten out the specificities of the struggles against prisons that took place in France (and in Europe more generally) by squeezing these into the terms of the US' carceral abolitionism movement. As discussed above, struggles



against prisons in France were not inflected by debates on racialised punishment and the abolitionist agenda was not as explicitly articulated as it was in the US. Highlighting intertwined abolitionist legacies does not mean erasing the specificities of each political context nor does it mean superimposing the North American experience onto all other historical struggles, as a portable template for analysing anti-prison movements happening elsewhere across the world. Rather, it is a matter of amplifying abolitionist legacies beyond the North American context, foregrounding multiple resonances and, at the same time, de-centring the US debate by showing how abolitionist discourses and practices emerged elsewhere and how differently they were articulated.

Carceral abolitionism draws, both politically and historically, on black slave abolitionism. W.E.B. Du Bois' idea of 'abolition-democracy' encapsulates to some extent the very meaning of abolitionist politics in the US. Notably, in *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois retraces the key political steps that led to the official abolition of slavery in the United States. As part of that historical reconstruction, he introduced the notion of 'abolition-democracy' to stress that the abolition of racialised inequality did not end with the end of chattel slavery: rather, it required building up new institutions, and dismantling those that enable the reproduction of racism and slavery.<sup>48</sup> The idea of abolition democracy is importantly connected in Du Bois' work to the active role of the slaves in enacting their own liberation: the general strike that slaves organised in the United States in 1860 constituted a landmark in slaves' struggles for emancipation. Borrowing the notion of 'abolition democracy' from Du Bois, Angela Davis has argued that prison abolitionism does not consist in the mere abolition of the institution of the prison but, rather, it requires the dismantling of the prison-industrial complex as a whole. That is, an abolitionist approach starts from the assumption that the undoing of bordering mechanisms also requires building up and creating new institutions and ways of being-in-common that prevent the formation of social and economic inequalities and racialised punishment. For this reason, carceral abolitionism is not merely about abolishing prisons, and actually it cannot be enforced by shutting down prisons without radically transforming how the production of criminality is addressed: 'abolition is about abolishing the conditions under which prison

became the solution to problems, rather than abolishing the buildings we call prisons'.<sup>49</sup> Despite their differences, such a call for transformative political processes echoes, I suggest, the critique of the prison system framed by the GIP. First, as explained above, the members of the GIP refused the idea of prison reforms, as they started from the assumption that 'there can be no reform of the prison without the search for a new society'.<sup>50</sup> This position is not in tension with mobilisations in support of prisoners' punctual demands aimed at improving their life's conditions. Rather, the GIP repeatedly insisted on the importance of keeping the struggle going on both levels – punctual claims and radical critique of the prison system. The 'active intolerance' towards prisons that the GIP aimed at triggering could emerge only by showing that what appear as disparate 'scandalous aspects of penitentiary life' are actually 'impossible to separate'.<sup>51</sup> Struggles for getting better food or hygienic conditions and access to legal aid do not invalidate nor weaken the mobilisation against the prison system as a whole: on the contrary, they enable its grounding in the materiality of prisoners' daily struggles. By no means were detainees' punctual claims a part of a programme for reforming the prison system. Rather, they were raised in response to the unbearable living conditions within prisons. Or, better, the demands raised by the GIP and by detainees could be framed as non-reformist reforms, as they carried on political actions based on what Sandro Mezzadra has defined as a 'split temporality':<sup>52</sup> that is, fighting for the abolition of the carceral system and, at the same time, for detainees' rights inside the prison.

In fact, it can be argued, detainees' collective struggles were actually part of an abolitionist horizon, in which rights claims within the prison – e.g., about medical and psychological support, legal aid and seeing family members – allowed for the exposure of the truly intolerable character of the penitentiary system. An abolitionist approach involves challenging what Gilmore has defined as the 'problem of innocence' which sustains the reformist critique of the prison system. Indeed, the politics of white innocence that Gilmore challenges 'establishes as a hard fact that some people should be in cages ... and it does so by distinguishing degrees of innocence such that there are people, inevitably, who will become permanently not innocent', while, as she argues, it is 'only against this desirability or inevitability [that]

some change [might] occur'.<sup>53</sup> This echoes Foucault's point about the main political stake of challenging the prison system: speaking about the GIP, he explained that their actions aimed at 'erasing the deep frontier between innocence and guilt'.<sup>54</sup> By arguing this, Foucault and the members of the GIP took a clear distance from humanist positions that foregrounded human nature as the starting point of their criticism of the prison – stating for instance that even criminals should be respected as human beings.

Past collective struggles within and against prisons have, as I have said, informed current abolitionist projects, through a circulation of a political lexicon and of practical knowledge, as well as through their analysis and critique of the carceral system. The legacy of past anti-prison mobilisations reverberates into the present and, in particular, into the abolitionist projects that in the last few years have animated anti-racist movements, as well as struggles against borders. In fact, I suggest, the legacy of carceral abolitionism movements goes far beyond struggles within and against prisons, as the growing debate on border abolitionism as well as the proliferation of collective uprisings and individual escapes in immigration detention centres imply. The collective memory of racial anti-prisons claims and struggles has enabled the pushing forward of discourses against immigration detention beyond a politics of white innocence – that is, without endorsing the produced opposition between innocent and real criminals or, in this case, between people who committed crimes or otherwise. The interconnected genealogies of anti-prison movements have clearly foregrounded that an abolitionist approach cannot simply be restricted to claims for abolishing prisons. Rather, abolitionism as an analytical-political standpoint involves dismantling the material and political conditions under which the multiplication of borders and the persistence of prisons appear as a condition for people's safety and for the enjoyment of rights.

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## Notes

1. Michel Foucault, 'Prisons and Revolts in Prisons', in *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group, 1970-1980*, eds. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn, trans. Perry Zurn and Eric Beranek (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2021), 309.
2. See Christian De Vito and Silvia Vaiani, 'La libertà di lottare. Movimenti di detenuti in Europa Occidentale (1969-1975)', *Zapruder* 16 (2008), 9-23, available at: [http://storieinmovimento.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Zap16\\_02-Zoom1.pdf](http://storieinmovimento.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Zap16_02-Zoom1.pdf). The first two big collective protests organised by detainees inside prisons took place in April 1969 in Turin and, a few days later, in Genova.
3. Mike Fitzgerald, *Prisoners in revolts* (New York: Penguin, 1977).
4. Brian Stratton, 'Parkhurst prison revolt 1969', *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!* (November 1999), 12.
5. Julius Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Organization in the Revolution against Slavery* (London: Verso, 2018).
6. Psichiatria Democratica was founded by Franco Basaglia in 1973. Unlike the anti-psychiatry movement in the UK, which challenged psychiatry as such, Psichiatria Democratica's goal was to criticise and change psychiatric practices from within, and to challenge the asylum.
7. The exchanges between Franco Basaglia and two of the co-founders of the Prison Information Group, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault (along with Felix Guattari), were frequent over the years. Although this is not the purpose of this piece, and would require a separate analysis, it is important to stress that the mutual influence between anti-prison and anti-asylum movements in France and in Italy was partly due to this also.
8. Michel Foucault, 'Par-delà le bien et le mal' in *Dits et Ecrits I* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 1099.
9. In passing, it is worth noting that the positions of Foucault and Basaglia were quite different from the critique of the asylum put forth by the anti-psychiatry movement in the UK. Indeed, Basaglia refused the label of anti-psychiatry, arguing that his goal was to transform psychiatric practices; similarly, Foucault questioned the mere opposition to institutions, contending that this presupposes a repressive and juridical understanding of power that he challenged in his work.
10. European Group for the Study of Deviance & Social Control, 'Manifesto 1974', *Crime and Social Justice* 4 (1975), 47.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Sante Notarnicola, *L'evasione impossibile* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1972), 123.
13. Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn, 'Introduction: Legacies of Militancy and Theory', in *Intolerable*, eds. Thompson and Zurn, 5.
14. Michel Foucault and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, 'Inquiry on prisons. Let us break down the bars of silence', in *Intolerable*, eds. Thomson and Zurn, 109.
15. Angela Y. Davis, *If they come in the morning...: Voices of resistance* (London: Verso Books, 2016), 45.
16. *Ibid.*, 65.
17. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (London: Verso Books, 2022), 135.

18. Ibid., 187.
19. Daniel Defert, 'When information is a struggle', in *Intolerable*, eds. Zurn and Thompson, 72
20. Ibid
21. Michel Foucault, 'La prison partout', in *Dits et Ecrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 443.
22. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 'Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography', *The Professional Geographer* 54 (2002).
23. Prison Information Group, 'On prisons', in *Intolerable*, eds. Zurn and Thomas, 67,
24. Foucault and Vidal-Naquet, 'Inquiry on prisons', 112.
25. Michel Foucault, 'No, this is not an official inquiry', in *Intolerable*, eds. Zurn and Thompson, 117.
26. Organisation des prisonniers politiques, 'Report on the Prisons', in *Intolerable*, eds. Zurn and Thomas, 58.
27. Ibid., 57.
28. Groupe d'Information sur les prisons, 'On Prisons', in *Intolerable*, eds. Zurn and Thomas, 67.
29. The GIP itself was formed at the beginning of 1971 in solidarity with the collective hunger strike of a group of prisoners who claimed political status.
30. Michel Foucault, 'Alternatives to the Prison: Dissemination or Decline of Social Control?', *Theory, Culture & Society* 26 (2009), 24.
31. George Jackson, *Soledad Brother. The prison letters of George Jackson*, available at: <https://files.libcom.org/files/soledad-brother-the-prison-letters-of-george-jackson.pdf>
32. Ibid.
33. Howard Zinn, 'The US Prisoners' Movement, 1970-1978', available at <https://libcom.org/article/us-prisoners-movement-1970-1978-howard-zinn>.
34. Ibid.
35. Jackson, *Soledad Brother*.
36. Aptheker, 'The social functions of the prisons in the United States', 53.
37. Ibid., 57.
38. Angela Y. Davis, *Abolition democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 'The case for prison abolition', 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HWqYANmWLY>
39. Michel Foucault, 'Pompidou's Two Deaths', in *Intolerable*, eds. Zurn and Thomas, 306.
40. Angela Y. Davis, 'Racialised Punishment and Prison Abolition', in *A Companion to African-American Philosophy* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 364.
41. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.
42. Folsom Prisoners, 'Prisoners in Rebellion. The Folsom Prisoners Manifesto', in Angela Y. Davis, *If they come in the morning...*, 156.
43. Michel Foucault, 'On Attica', in *Intolerable*, eds. Zurn and Thomas, 295.
44. Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).
45. Davis, *Abolition Democracy*, 93.
46. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 39.
47. Jean-Marie Domenach, 'To have done with prisons', in *Intolerable*, eds. Zurn and Thomas, 342.
48. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
49. Gilmore, 'The Case for Prison Abolition'.
50. Foucault, 'Alternatives to the Prisons', 24.
51. Groupe d'information sur les prisons, 'La Santé: Questionnaire and Narratives', in *Intolerable*, eds. Zurn and Thomas, 103.
52. Sandro Mezzadra, 'Double Opening, Split Temporality, and New Spatialities: An Interview with Sandro Mezzadra on Militant Research', *Postcolonial Studies* 16 (2013), 309-319.
53. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 'Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence', in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, eds. Johnson and Lubin (London: Verso, 2017), 234.
54. Foucault, 'Par-delà le bien et le mal', 1099. See also Michel Foucault and J.J. Brochier, 'Prison Talk', *Radical Philosophy* 16 (Spring 1977), 10-15.

