

PRELIMINARIES TO THE WAR ON PRISON



TIQQUN

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When we indefinitely repeat the same refrain of the antirepressive tune, everything stays as it is and anyone can sing along without getting noticed.

Michel Foucault

1.

The war on prison does not return the way that it left. And we do not take it up in complete innocence, as if we didn't know why, in the seventies, it failed.

2.

The function of prison in the overall economy of servitude is to materialize the false distinction between guilty and innocent, between law-abiding citizens and criminals. This "service" cannot be social without being psychological as well. The imprisonment and torture of prisoners produces the feeling of a citizen's innocence. In addition, as long as the criminal aspect of *all existence* in the Empire is not admitted, the need to punish and to see punished will persist, and no *argument* against prison will be valid.

3.

The distinction between guilty and innocent is false. Abolishing it only reinforces the lie. In our struggle

against prisons, every time we cast prisoners as the good guys, as the *victims*, we renew the logic sanctioned by prisons.

4.

The phrase “prison is the holding cell of society” is true with a 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 an imaginary outside, that WE create the fiction of an inside, of an inclusion and a belonging. The fact that the *techniques* with which WE manage the daily activities of both imperialist cities and prisons are appreciably the same: that must remain the secret knowledge of administrators. “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 to do so without their precariousness being abused?” So says one of the principal architects of new French prisons; it would not be prudent to say more.

5.

The silence that constantly surrounds the operation of prisons compels us to sometimes speak *in the name* of prisoners. With that special feeling of being “on the right side of the barricades.” For a long time WE

possess. By day we kowtow, we knuckle under the excessive force wrought by the avalanche of apparatuses; at night we congratulate ourselves for having survived. But all for nothing: each time that we submit, we die a little. Prison is the mega-apparatus in which you cannot prevent yourself from dying a little bit every minute, from dying by surviving. If, together, we occupy a prison, it cannot be to once more discuss prison, imprisonment, isolation; but, the balance of power overturned, to deploy freely the play of our forms-of-life. And to show that we can make an entirely different use of our bodies, and of the space.

degree that *it possesses us*. Because, in the end, our disagreement with citizens is this: that we might prefer “barbarism” to civilization.

20.

In truth, during this period of extreme alienation that we live in, the anti-prison struggle is foremost a *pretext* for us. We do not wish to add a chapter to the punishment of militants, but to use the project of abolishing prisons as a *basis for encounters* so as to organize ourselves more broadly. Just as the stakes of any struggle in prison are, ultimately, the conquering of a space of auto-organization necessary for the formation of a collective power against the administration, we must constitute ourselves *into a force*, into a *tangible* force, into an *autonomous* tangible force within the global civil war. The anti-prison struggle is at its height each time we frustrate repression. It triumphs wherever we are able to assume impunity.

21.

Faced with the lie of civilization, we stand in the right. But “a world of lies cannot be overturned by the truth” (Kafka). All the police proliferation that surrounds us is here to prevent such a shift, to prevent our becoming, little by little, a reality. Each day, a new apparatus controls our quotidian existence. They want to beat us down, to smoke out any remainder of power or savagery we may still

have also spoken in the name of workers, of the proletariat, of the undocumented, etc. Until they started speaking for themselves and they said something entirely different than what WE expected. This is the mistake of *political ventriloquism*. All political ventriloquism places us comfortably in brackets: we carry on a discourse that does not implicate ourselves and that therefore carries no risk. It spares us from acknowledging that in the Empire, under a regime of power that does not permit radical exteriority, all existence is *abject* as long as it participates, even passively, in the permanent crime that is the survival of this society. If we need a just cause for revolt, no city dweller has any right to claim that cause as their own, for we all profit every day from the universal pillaging. And no militant Stakhanovism, no self-sacrifice can atone for 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 the morals of consumers, against *bourgeois* morals. Our condition is that of the *plebs*. We live in the central regions of the 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 steam vent, a friend who openly betrays us, but who we do not kill, etc. Several times each day we engage in purely commercial relations. And, besides a guilty conscience, if we prepare the means

for an offensive, we achieve a form of primitive accumulation. If the question is who we *are*, it is 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 our revolt against the excess of misery inflicted by the world, but an enduring disgust with the forms of happiness it proposes. Our position is, then, that of the plebs – disgraceful, extravagant, schizophrenic – who cannot rebel against the Empire without rebelling against themselves, against the position they hold. *There are no more revolts that are not revolts against ourselves.* This is the peculiarity of our time and the stakes, henceforth, of 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 in it, alert it of 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 millimillenary of coercion in bourgeois education or the obsession with comfort of the global petite bourgeoisie unquestionably explains the rarity of rebel bodies in certain milieus, and the underrepresentation of these groups in prisons.

1829 *Treaty on Criminal Law*. Standing at attention is the proper virtue of the citizen; and asking permission before any action is a fundamental of his education. It is because our struggle is primarily a struggle against civilization that it is also a struggle against prison.

17.

In the fight against civilization, prison is “the groping fingers, the hand that kills.” But you do not win a fight by aiming for your enemy’s fists.

18.

The line of reasoning that says our society could not keep running 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 everything else.

19.

Prison is, as a threat, one of the ways civilization dissuades us from communing with the savage within, from abandoning ourselves to the intense forces that traverse us. Even from this, we can understand that the enemy is not entirely exterior to us, that we have a direct hold on civilization to the

prisoners. We want to abolish prisons because they limit the possibility of forming alliances, they temper our disputes. We want to abolish prisons so that *real wars* may be freely waged, rather than the present pacification that eternalizes the false schism between guilty and innocent. It is again a matter of dividing the division.

15.

A society that needs prisons, no less than a society that relies on the police, is without fail a society where all liberty has been extinguished. On the other hand, a society without prison is not automatically a free society. If we consider that the prison only imposed itself as the dominant form of punishment at the beginning of the 19th century, there is no lack of historical examples that illustrate this point.

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 admitted 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 immediately conceived of as a civilized and civilizing punishment. "Imprisonment is the penalty *par excellence* in civilized societies," wrote P. Rossi in his

Through prisons and other apparatuses, civilization administers its putrefaction to postpone the anticipated collapse as long as possible. The Empire affirms itself to those that do not *function*, those that perturb the normal state of affairs. Thus civilization hopes to survive itself by assuring the solitary confinement of the "barbarians."

7.

We know prison, the *threat* of prison, as an overt constraint on the freedom of our actions. The war on prison waged from the outside must break this constraint by making prison familiar to us, by eliminating the powerful fear that it produces. That struggle will suppress our fear of struggle. It is not a moral necessity that compels us to fight against prison, but a *strategic* necessity: that of making ourselves, collectively, stronger. "The effectiveness of true action resides *within* itself."

8.

"We say: no more prison at all. And, when faced with such a massive critique, reasonable people, legislators, technocrats, governors ask, 'Then what do you want?', the answer is: 'It is not for us to pick our poison; we no longer wish to play this game of penalties and penal sanctions, we no longer wish to play this game of justice.'" (Foucault)

9.

Revolutionary logic and the logic of supporting prisoners *as prisoners* are not the same. *Supporting* prisoners is the demand of an affective solidarity (human if not humanitarian) with all those who suffer, all those crushed by power – the impulse of the Généri Catholics. Revolutionary logic is strategic, sometimes inhuman, and often cruel. It calls for a *completely different kind of affect*.

10.

In prison, all struggle is radical – survival or destruction, dignity or insanity: these are at stake in the contention of the smallest details. All struggle is also reformist 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.

During all the revolutions of the 19th century – 1830, 1848, 1870 – it was traditional for there to 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 either case, the shortest path to dismantling prisons remains the creation of a revolutionary movement.

12.

There are no convicts among us. There are friends who have served time. The convict as convict who, even once released, remains an *ex-convict*, is a figure of fiction, of crime fiction. The prisoner as prisoner does not exist. What exists are forms-of-life that the penitentiary machine wants to reduce to bare life, to docile preserved meat. The myth of the cell is the dream of replacing bodies animated by implacable reasons, violent affects, and insane ideas with inert pieces of meat.

13.

Under the Empire, that is to say within the global civil war, friendship is political. Any alliance forms a front in the general confrontation, and all confrontations impose alliances. Imprisoning someone is a political act. Liberating a friend, perhaps by bazooka, like 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*