

Michel Foucault on Attica: An Interview

John K. Simon

Simon: *We have just recently visited the prison at Attica and I know that in addition to your studies about exclusion — exclusion of the sick, exclusion of all sorts — you have been interested for a year or a year and a half in prison reform in France. I would like to know your reactions toward this visit. It's the first visit of a prison that you have made, I believe.*

Foucault: Well, yes, since in France one does not have the right to visit prisons. You can enter a prison only if you are yourself a prisoner, a guard, or a lawyer, and I have not, practically speaking, belonged to any of these three categories. I have never been detained by the police for more than 12 hours, and consequently I have not really been able to get to know prisons in France. It is thus thanks to you that I was able, for the first time in my life, to enter a prison, and obviously, for a Frenchman, the sight of Attica is completely overwhelming. Even though I have never entered French prisons, I have heard a lot about them from people who have spent time there, and I know that they are decrepit and dilapidated places, with the prisoners often crammed on top of one another in cells that are repellent with filth. Attica is obviously not that at all. At Attica what struck me perhaps first of all was the entrance, that kind of phony fortress *à la* Disneyland, those observation posts disguised as medieval towers with their *mâchecoulis*. And behind this rather ridiculous scenery, which dwarfs everything else, you discover it's an immense machine. And it's this notion of machinery that struck me most strongly — those very long, clean, heated corridors that prescribe, for those who pass through them, specific trajectories that are evidently calculated to be the most efficient possible and at the same time the easiest to oversee, and the most direct. Yes, and all of this ends in those huge workshops, like the metallurgical one, which are clean and appear to be close to perfection. A former Attica prisoner whom I saw the day before yesterday told me that in reality those famous workshops that they display so willingly are very dangerous, that a lot of people are hurt in them. But actually, at first sight you have the impression you are visiting

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more than just a factory, that you are visiting a machine, the inside of a machine.

So the question one obviously asks is what does the machine produce, what is that gigantic installation used for, and what comes out of it. At the time of the creation of Auburn and the Philadelphia prison, which served as models (with rather little change until now) for the great machines of incarceration, it was believed that something indeed was produced: “virtuous” men. Now we know, and the administration is perfectly aware, that no such thing is produced. That nothing at all is produced. That it is a question simply of a great trick of sleight of hand, a curious mechanism of circular elimination: society eliminates by sending to prison people whom prison breaks up, crushes, physically eliminates; and then once they have been broken up, the prison eliminates them by “freeing” them and sending them back to society; and there, their life in prison, the way in which they were treated, the state in which they come out insures that society will eliminate them once again, sending them to prison, which in turn.... Attica is a machine for elimination, a form of prodigious stomach, a kidney that consumes, destroys, breaks up, and then rejects, and that consumes in order to eliminate what it has already eliminated. You remember that when we visited Attica they spoke to us about the four wings of the building, the four corridors, the four large corridors A, B, C, and D. Well, I learned, again through the same former prisoner, that there is a fifth corridor, which they didn’t talk to us about — it’s the corridor E. And you know which one that is?

Simon: *No.*

Foucault: Ah, well, it is quite simply the machine of the machine, or rather the elimination of the elimination, elimination in the second degree: it is the psychiatric wing. That is where they send the ones who cannot even be integrated into the machine and whom the machinery cannot succeed in assimilating according to its norms, that it cannot crush in accordance with its own mechanical process. Thus, they need an additional mechanism.

Simon: *You have studied the process of exclusion as a sort of abstract concept, and I know that you are acquainted with the inside of hospitals and other institutions. To have visited a place like this — I mean physically visited — did that effect any emotional change in your attitude toward the process of exclusion? Or has the visit simply reinforced your ideas about exclusion?*

Foucault: No, they have rather been undermined; in any case a problem has arisen for me that is rather different from ones that I had been puzzling over formerly; the change was perhaps not absolutely determined by the visit to Attica, but the visit surely precipitated it. Until then I envisioned exclusion from society as a sort of general function, a bit abstract, and I tried to plot that function as in some way constitutive of society, each society being able to function only on condition that a certain number of people are excluded from

it. Traditional sociology, sociology of the Durkheim type, presented the problem rather in this way: How can society hold individuals together? What is the form of relationship, of symbolic or affective communication that is established among individuals? What is the organizational system that permits society to constitute a totality? I was interested by the somewhat opposite problem, or, if you will, by the opposite response to this problem, which is: Through what system of exclusion, by eliminating whom, by creating what division, through what game of negation and rejection can society begin to function?

Well, the question that I ask myself now is the reverse: prison is an organization that is too complex to be reduced to purely negative functions of exclusion; its cost, its importance, the care that one takes in administering it, the justifications that one tries to give for it seem to indicate that it possesses positive functions. The problem is, then, to find out what role capitalist society has its penal system play, what is the aim that is sought, and what effects are produced by all these procedures for punishment and exclusion? What is their place in the economic process, what is their importance in the exercise and the maintenance of power? What is their role in the class struggle?

Simon: *I wondered precisely to what degree you remained conscious of the political context while walking through the corridors of Attica. I myself was so terrified by the purely human side, by the sense of latent suffering and repression that there were moments, paradoxically perhaps, when I completely forgot the political context.*

Foucault: It is very difficult for me to reply on the matter of the human and virtually physical horror of what goes on at Attica. I believe that I had the same impression as you; but possibly I am less sensitive than you and perhaps a bit thick-skinned. When you go through those long corridors, which are — let me repeat — clean, a Frenchman has the impression of being in a somewhat austere private or parochial school; after all, 19th-century *lycées* and *collèges* were not that much more pleasant. But finally, after thinking it over, what appeared most terrifying to me at Attica was the strange relationship between the periphery and the inner part. I mean the double game of bars: those that separate the prison from the outside and those which, inside the prison, set apart each of the individual cells. The former, the bars on the gates — I am well aware how prison theoreticians justify them: society must be protected. (Of course, one might say that the greatest dangers for society are not produced by car thieves, but by wars, famines, exploitation, and all those who permit and provoke them, but let that pass....) Once the first bars have been passed through, you might expect to find a place where the prisoners are “readapted” to community life, to a respect for law, to a practice of justice, etc. Well, you perceive instead that the place where prisoners spend 10 to 12 hours a day, the place where they consider themselves “at home,” is a terrifying

animal cage: about two yards by one and one-half yards, entirely grated on one side. The place where they are alone, where they sleep and where they read, where they dress and take care of their needs, is a cage for wild animals. And there lies the entire hypocrisy of the prison. One suspects that the representative of the administration who conducts the visit must really be giggling inside. You have the impression that he must be saying to himself and also to us something like: "You have handed over to us robbers and murderers because you thought of them as wild beasts; you asked us to make domesticated sheep of them on the other side of the bars that protect you; but there is no reason why we, the guards, the representatives of 'law and order,' we, the instruments of your morality and your prejudices, would not think of them as wild animals, just the same as you. We are identical with you; we are you; and, consequently, in this cage where you have put us with them, we build cages that reestablish between them and us the relationship of exclusion and power that the large prison establishes between them and you. You signalled to us that they are wild beasts; we signal in turn to them. And when they will have learned it well behind their bars, we will send them back to you." The only way for prisoners to escape from this system of training is by collective action, political organization, rebellion. It appears that the American prison, much more easily than European prisons, can be a place for political action. American prisons in fact play two roles: a role as a place of punishment, as there has existed now for centuries, and a role of "concentration camp," as there existed in Europe during the war and in Africa during the European colonization (in Algeria, for example, during the period when the French were there). One must not forget that there are more than one million prisoners in the United States out of 220 million inhabitants, compared with 30,000 in France for 50 million inhabitants. The proportion is not at all the same. Then, 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. The penal system, the entire pattern of even minor prohibitions (too much drinking, speeding, smoking hashish) serves as an instrument and as a pretext for this practice of radical concentration. It is hardly surprising that the political struggle for penal justice has progressed further in the United States than in France.

Simon: *One of the things that occurred to me was the question whether such a prison, in the context of American society, might be considered as a symbol, simply as a microcosm of society in general, or — you said a moment ago that the prison resembled schools as they were formerly...*

Foucault: In Europe, in Europe....

Simon: *Yes, in Europe, but in America, now you have become acquainted with many no man's lands, areas on the outskirts of cities, suburbs; you have spoken to me in rather precise terms of drug stores in airports, places that*

seem to be nowhere. And of course there are bars everywhere in our society like those in prison. Is it such a big jump from the center of a city, from a ghetto, for example, to the situation of a prison that the latter cannot be naturally encompassed as a normal part of American society or, on the contrary, isn't the prison simply an extension of this society, an extremity of it, as it were?

Foucault: I think that your question is very much to the point because, indeed, Attica does resemble America in a profound way — in any event, America such as it is viewed by a European who is a little bit lost and not very resourceful like me; that is to say, gigantic, technological, a little terrifying, that Piranesi aspect that permeates the view of many Europeans about New York. It is true that what we have seen resembles American society, but you cannot, I think, simply be satisfied to say, “Oh, yes, American prisons are the image of American society, just as European prisons are the image of Europe”; for, if you say that too much, you finally are saying this, that ultimately we are all in prison, that, after all, in the street, in a factory, in a dormitory, one is similarly in prison. It is true that we are caught in a system of continuous surveillance and punishment. But prison is not only punitive; it is also part of an eliminative process. Prison is the physical elimination of people who come out of it, who die of it sometimes directly, and almost always indirectly in so far as they can no longer find a trade, don't have anything to live on, cannot reconstitute a family anymore, etc., and, finally, passing from one prison to another or from one crime to another, end up by actually being physically eliminated.

Simon: *Well, then, where does one begin to reform prisons, because just as with the Vietnam War, those who seek to reform prisons may be deluding themselves in feeling that they are cleaning up the source of evil simply by making the most visible symptom of it disappear? Is it not, then, an illusion to hope for reform inside prisons? Are not the prisons so much a part of the fabric of society that nothing can be achieved by beginning there?*

Foucault: The group that we have formed in France is not primarily concerned with the reform of prisons. Our project is, I think, even quite radically different. In France (I know that in America the situation is a little bit different because of the army) the penal system and imprisonment weigh in a privileged and most insistent manner upon a certain fringe of the population that is really not integrated into the working class, controlled to a certain extent by the large unions. We have often been told, on behalf of certain political organizations, that the problem of prisons is not part of the proletarian conflict. There are several reasons for that. The first one is that the fringe of the lower class that is constantly in contact with the police and law is to a large extent made up of people who are outside the factory. Whether their unemployment is voluntary or involuntary, their form of opposition to bourgeois society does not express

itself in demonstrations, politically organized struggles, and professional or economic pressures such as strikes. The second reason is that the bourgeoisie often uses this fringe of the population against the working people: it may be made into a temporary work force or even recruited by the police. The third reason is that the proletariat has been fully imbued with the bourgeois ideology concerning morality and legality, concerning theft and crime.

So we are currently at a state where different strata of the people seek to overcome conflicts and oppositions that had been established and maintained between them by the capitalist system; where struggles in the factories are linked more than they used to be with struggles outside the factories (concerning housing, the question of the "quality of life," etc.); where it is recognized that the general ideological struggle is an integral part of the political struggle. For all these reasons, the isolation of that fringe of the lower class, at the outset under the domination of police pressure, is in the process of slowly disappearing. Its reintegration into political struggles is the prime objective of our group.

Simon: *In this regard the story that you told us about Genet and the distinction that was made between certain types of prisoners — has that sort of thing become better recognized by the proletariat in France as well as in America?*

Foucault: You are evidently referring to what Genet told me one day about prisons. During the war he was in prison at the Santé and he had to be transferred to the Palais de Justice in order to be sentenced; at that time the custom was to handcuff the prisoners two-by-two to lead them to the Palais de Justice; just as Genet was about to be handcuffed to another prisoner, the latter asked the guard, "Who is this guy you're handcuffing me to?" and the guard replied: "It's a thief." The other prisoner stiffened at that point and said, "No, I'm a political prisoner, I'm a Communist, I won't be handcuffed with a thief." And Genet said to me that from that day on, with regard to all forms of political movements and actions that we have known in France, he has had not merely a distrust, but a certain contempt....

Simon: *I wonder to what extent since that time those who are involved in politics have become aware of the lack of distinction among different forms of prisoners, of the possibility that these other prisoners, victims of social problems that are at the source of their own political struggle, are not political prisoners in the proper sense of the word, but are still more profoundly prisoners, politically, than they themselves?*

Foucault: I believe that there has been a historical mutation, if you will, in the course of the 19th century. It is almost certain that labor movements and their leaders, in Europe and particularly in France, in order to escape from police repression in its more violent and savage form, were obliged to distinguish themselves from the entire criminal population. Efforts were made to present

these labor movements as organizations of murderers, as hired killers, thieves, alcoholics, etc. There was thus the necessity to avoid falling victim to these accusations and to the consequent punishments; thus, also the obligation they felt to take up, as if it were their own, the responsibility for a whole system of morality that came from the ruling class, and finally to accept the bourgeois division between virtue and vice, respect for the property of others, and so on. They were obliged to recreate for themselves a sort of moral puritanism that was for them a necessary condition for survival and a useful instrument in the struggle as well. That kind of moral rigorism finally remained with them as a part of the proletariat's daily ideology, and still now, until recent times, the proletariat and its union or political leaders had certainly continued to grant that separation between the offenders of common law and political prisoners. And after all, you must keep in mind all the struggles, all the efforts that were necessary in the 19th century so that the leaders of the workers were not treated and punished like crooks.

The change occurred a short while ago in France at the time of the imprisonment of certain Maoists. When Maoists were put in prison, they began, it must be said, by reacting a little like the traditional political groups, that is to say: "We do not want to be assimilated with the criminals of common law, we do not want our image to be mixed with theirs in the opinion of people, and we ask to be treated like political prisoners with the rights of political prisoners." This was, I think, a sort of political mistake that was rather quickly felt; there were discussions on this subject, and it was at this time that we founded our group; the Maoists quickly understood that ultimately the prison's elimination of common-law prisoners was part of the system of political elimination of which they were themselves the victims. If one makes the distinction, if one accepts the difference between political law and common law, that means that fundamentally one recognizes bourgeois morality and law as far as respect for the property of others, respect for traditional moral values, etc., are concerned. The cultural revolution in its widest sense implies that, at least in a society like ours, you no longer make the division between criminals of common law and political criminals. Common law is politics, it is, after all, the bourgeois class that, for political reasons and on a basis of its political power, defined what is called common law.

Simon: *Then what the Maoists understood was not simply a political mistake that they had committed — I mean, in the eyes of the public, the idea that they were excluding themselves, that they intended to remain an elite in prison — but this was something they learned as well in connection with politics in a much deeper sense.*

Foucault: That's right, I believe that it was for them an important deepening of their understanding, the discovery that ultimately the penal system in its entirety and ultimately the entire moral system both were the result of a power

relationship established by the bourgeoisie and constituted an instrument for exercising and maintaining that power.

Simon: *In listening to you I am reminded of a scene in the film The Battle of Algiers. This is simply one example among others, but there is a certain asceticism on the part of revolutionaries that results in their refusing to indulge in drugs and looking with disgust upon prostitution. I am reminded of that film where the heroes were sketched as being very pure, and one of them refused to go off with a prostitute. This attitude seems still to prevail in Algeria, as a matter of fact. To what extent does that asceticism on the part of certain revolutionaries who want to remain pure (and which is very likely the product of a bourgeois education) become a quality that prevents the true revolutionary from eventually succeeding in being accepted within a popular movement?*

Foucault: One can say in reply to your first question that the rigorism of the revolutionary certainly reveals his bourgeois origins, or, in any case, a cultural and ideological affinity with the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, I think that we must link that to an historical process; it seems to me that until the beginning of the 19th century, and even during the French Revolution, popular uprisings were led at one and the same time by peasants, small craftsmen, by the first laborers, and then by that category of restless elements poorly integrated into society that might be highway robbers, smugglers, and so on — at any rate, all who had been rejected by the reigning system of legality, the law of the state. And in the 19th century, in the course of political struggles that permitted the proletariat to have itself recognized as a power with compelling demands, that permitted the proletariat to escape, all the same, from violent elimination and constraint, in the course of these political struggles the proletariat was obliged in some way to establish a separation between it and that other “agitated” population. When labor unionization was founded, in order to have itself recognized, it needed to dissociate itself from all the seditious groups and from all those who refused the legal system: We are not the murderers, we are not attacking either people or goods; if we stop production, it is not in an outburst of absolute destruction, but in conjunction with very precise demands. Family morality, which had absolutely no currency in popular circles at the end of the 18th century, had become by the beginning of the 19th century one of the means by which the proletariat was able in some way to establish its respectability. Popular virtue, the “good” worker, good father, good husband, respectful of the legal system — that is the image that since the 18th century the bourgeoisie proposed and imposed on the proletariat in order to turn it away from any form of violent agitation, insurrection, any attempt to usurp power and its rules. That image the proletariat took up and used, as a matter of fact, in an often very efficient way to support its struggles. That “morality” was up to a certain point the marriage contract between the prole-

tariat and the petty bourgeoisie during the entire second half of the 19th century, from 1848 to Zola and Jaurès.

Now your second question: Isn't this puritanism an obstacle for the revolutionary leader? I would say, currently, yes. There exists indeed — at least that is the opinion of our group in any event — there exists today in our societies truly revolutionary forces made up of just those strata who are poorly integrated into society, those strata who are perpetually rejected, and who, in their turn, reject the bourgeois moral system. How can you work with them in the political battle if you do not get rid of those moral prejudices that are ours? After all, if one takes into account the habitually unemployed who say, "Me, I prefer not working to working"; if one takes into account women, prostitutes, homosexuals, drug addicts, etc., there is a force for questioning society that one has no right, I think, to neglect in the political struggle.

Simon: *If one followed your line of thought logically, one would say almost that those who are involved with the rehabilitation of prisoners are perhaps the most virulent enemies of the revolution. And then, that fellow who guided us through Attica, if I may come back to my first question, and who gave us the impression of being a very well-intentioned guy, "decent" as you would say, but totally devoid of imagination, he would be the most dangerous enemy.*

Foucault: Yes, I think what you say is profoundly true. Look, I do not want to go further, because you have presented the problem very well, but this man who is responsible for the cultural programs at Attica and who took care of our visit, I think that one can say also that he is dangerous in an immediate sense. One of the former prisoners of Attica whom I saw after our visit said to me: "He is one of the most vicious among the guards."

But afterwards we met some psychologists who were clearly very nice people, very liberal, who saw things with a good deal of accuracy. For them, stealing the property of someone else, pulling off a holdup in a bank, committing prostitution, sleeping with a man if one is male, etc. — if those acts are psychological problems that they must help the individual to resolve, are they not also fundamentally accomplices of the system? Aren't they masking the fact that ultimately committing a misdemeanor, committing a crime, questions the way society functions in a most fundamental way? So fundamental that we forget that it is social, that we have the impression that it is moral, that it involves peoples' rights....

And you see in what way one can present the problem. So that I subscribe completely to what you say, doesn't everything that concerns reintegration, everything that is a psychological or individual solution for the problem, mask the profoundly political character both of society's elimination of these people and of those people's attack on society? All of that profound struggle is, I believe, political. Crime is "a *coup d'etat* from below." That phrase is from *Les Misérables*.