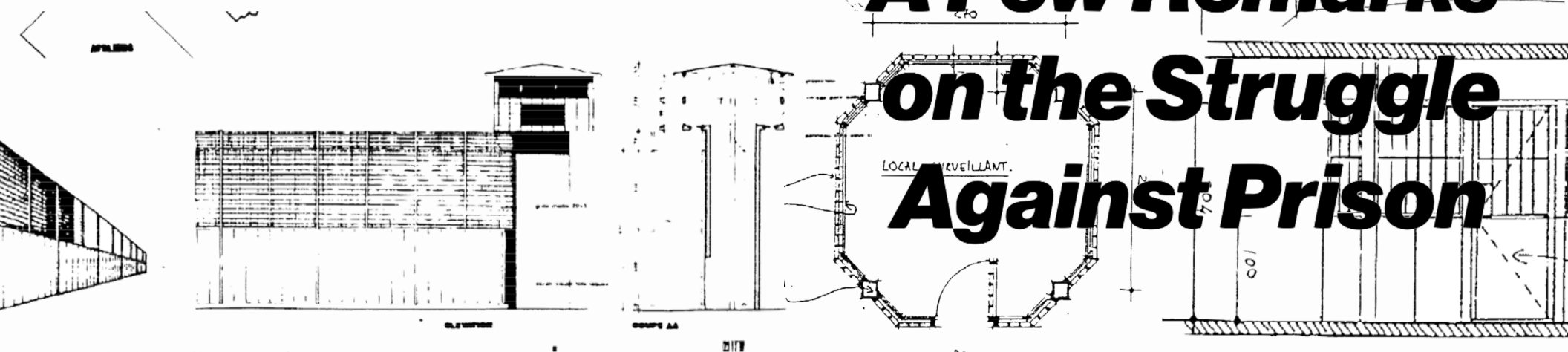
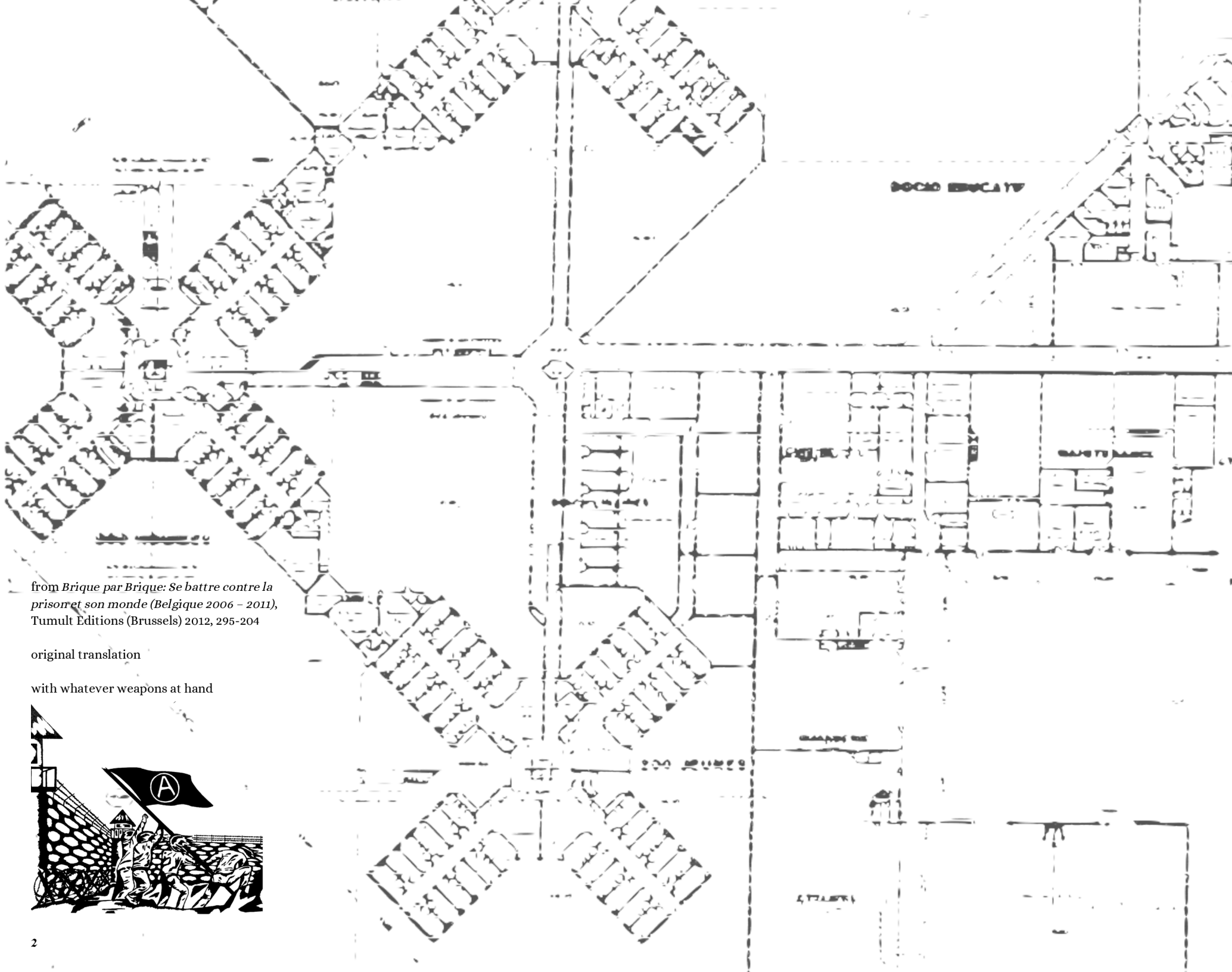


**A Few Remarks  
on the Struggle  
Against Prison**





from *Brique par Brique: Se battre contre la prison et son monde (Belgique 2006 - 2011)*, Tumult Editions (Brussels) 2012, 295-204

original translation

with whatever weapons at hand



**T**he human capacity for adaptation far exceeds the imagination. Someone may be placed in almost any situation—even one where the only certainty is death—and they’ll still manage to adapt, conforming their behavior in tune with even the most hostile environment.

This capacity is extraordinary, defining what it uniquely means to be human. It’s also infinitely tragic, for we confront power not only as implacable adversaries but also with our resignation, which is ultimately the life-blood, however putrid, of power itself.

Some might say adaptation is just a matter of survival, while others may argue it derives from the inexhaustible creative capacity that humans have demonstrated throughout history when it comes to subjugating and enslaving others. Still others will find courage from rebellion in the face of the intolerable. In any case, we see all of this in stark reality condensed in prison. But is it possible to critique prison without also considering what creates and sustains it, that is, a society based on authority and power? Nothing in this world can be analyzed *in itself*. Every aspect of our lives is intertwined with others (even, or perhaps especially, in a conflictual way), just as every social institution erected in the name of its well-being—here we’re speaking about the “well-being” of society, distinguished from the individuals that compose it—is interconnected, for instance, in the ways the physical structure of a hospital, school, retirement home, or factory resembles prison.

The active processes within society that give it substance work in harmony and in continuous exchange with each other. Were we to consider prison as a *separate question*, its problems detached from the overall social context, we would miss the point of the challenge it poses for us, or worse, play right into the hands of power which never presents itself as a totality but as a loose agglomeration of isolated institutions, each a discrete, separate element (thus susceptible to potential improvements). If these elements are indeed the foundations of society, power is the mortar that transforms

them into the brick wall of authority. The main obstacles we'll face on the path to freedom aren't separate elements—if they were, they'd actually be relatively easy to tear down—but rather the brick wall they compose and the seemingly indestructible cement of power.

## ***Prison & the Open-Air Concentration Camp of Society***

Although the struggle against prison isn't a matter of statistics, numbers, or figures—even if the logic of prison is *precisely* what reduces human beings to a cell number or a case file—it can't be ignored that never before have so many people been imprisoned in one of the state's many institutions of incarceration. The logic of concentration camps and forced internment wasn't buried away with the Nazi past. On the contrary, it has been further perfected and has now spread to encompass all of society. The growing number of *prisoners*—in the sense of people who have been *deprived of their provisional "freedom" granted by the state*—coincides with the expansion of diverse forms of imprisonment: prisons, immigrant detention centers, rehabilitation facilities, juvenile detention centers, psychiatric institutions, and, more recently, one's own home (transformed into a cage by the intrusion of an electronic ankle monitor).

But considering the diversification of imprisonment alone, separate from the direction taken by all of society, would only prompt us to ask the wrong questions. It's rather a double movement: the expansion of carceral infrastructure is inseparable from the much further reaching expansion of social control, especially via new surveillance technologies. As the number of prisons continues to grow, so does the number of people who are imprisoned, as society is gradually transformed into a vast open-air concentration camp. It could even be added that, in a way, the expansion of the capacity for incarceration is archaic compared to preventative detention, which is far more "effective."

Prison obviously can't be reduced merely to the four walls of a cell, nor even, in a wider sense, to technological and psychiatric control over human beings. *Imprisonment*—conceived as the confinement, limitation, or abolition of possibilities that a free human being might otherwise seize—is

*Five years of unrest in Belgian prisons. Five years of revolts, uprisings, & escapes.*

*Five years of agitation, actions, & attacks against the prison & its world.*

*Five years of pain, isolation, punishment, beatings, & death.*

*Five years of writings that trace the horizon of freedom & thereby pose the necessary destruction of everything that stands in its way.*

*Five years of a struggle with no set course, with no other logic, no other rhythm than the pulse of life itself & the fight for freedom it inspires.*

*This book is an attempt to share the vital force that has emboldened so many prisoners, whether inside or outside the walls, & so many unknown & anonymous comrades to fight against the prison world.*

*This book is a collection of texts, letters, pamphlets, communiqués, actions, & attacks from the last five years of struggle against the prison and its world.*

## *Prison & the Prison Mentality*

Inside the walls, the prison guards aren't the only ones to master *the techniques of domination*. Social relations between prisoners are just as saturated with authority as those on the outside. On the one hand, the prison system formalizes hierarchical relations by awarding privileges, thus directly involving some of the prisoners in managing the prison, and by isolating disruptive elements from the rest of the prison population. On the other hand, everything in prison encourages prisoners to adopt and master techniques of domination. Relationships between prisoners aren't so much determined by any sense of "solidarity" born of their shared condition but rather by society's dominant morality: competition, blackmail, extortion, snitching, division, exclusion, business, resignation, acceptance, sedation, and hierarchy. When prisoners rise up in revolt, such moments are almost always interruptions, even violations, of these social relations. Insurrections against the prison begin where snitching gives way to trust, competition to solidarity, and resignation to fighting together. Prison does everything in its power to demonstrate that these interruptions or violations always end badly for insurgent prisoners, whether through solitary confinement, brutal beatings, suppressing "rights," revoking parole, but also through the message it's always seeking to convey to prisoners: *if you stay quiet and keep your head down, it'll all be over soon*.

The act of revolt, both inside and outside, is thus a vital necessity for struggle, rather than a simple formality to achieve whatever reform. We'll never stop emphasizing this deeply human and life-affirming aspect of revolt and the significance it holds for the individual in revolt *in and of themselves*.

*from Brique par Brique, se battre contre le prison et son monde  
(Belgique 2006-2011), Tumult Editions, Spring 2012 (Brussels)*

operative in all forms of social oppression. It would be almost grotesque to speak of this in the abstract, in terms of discursive violence and authoritarian apparatuses, when it's quite easy to see how imprisonment materializes in a familial or religious context, for instance. In this sense, prison can't be considered as anything other than the consequence of every authoritarian social relation that comprises what we call "*our world*"—the nightmare that it is. And conversely, this world can only be conceived as the authoritarian consequence of prison. For it is in the image of prison that domination as a whole establishes itself in the bodies and minds of human beings. Prison is the flagrant, tangible incarnation of authoritarian logic, just as authority can never build anything other than a prison, even if it may take many different forms.

Let's get straight to the point: in the current social context, it's impossible to abolish prisons. Even if the prison walls were blown up and the cell doors were smashed down, prison would reappear in other forms as long as the principal of authority hasn't been dealt the fatal blow. Even worse, as long as states continue to exist (regardless of their form), we can expect that any hypothetical reduction of physical imprisonment would only be possible through a real reduction of freedom, that is, by ensuring that we all become a guard or a prisoner in the vast prison of society. This is the sad tragedy of past struggles against solitary confinement, for instance... The struggle against solitary isolation can either lead to the destruction of all prisons (that is, a social revolution that will abolish the principal of authority in order to encourage experimentations in freedom) or to the generalization of solitary confinement measures throughout every levels of every prison. The decisive and complete destruction of prisons can only be the result of—or, better, the vital demand of—the social revolution that seeks to overthrow all authority. Should it be concluded, then, that the struggle against prison is meaningless today, in an era where the revolutionary anarchist spirit obviously doesn't wield as much strength as domination and its false authoritarian critics? Must it be concluded that this struggle would inevitably lead to failure and defeat? If we respond affirmatively, we should never engage in struggle again. For, the same could be said about any conflict, any struggle, any attempt to rise up unfettered in revolt, not for a few reforms or small improvements, but to

destroy authority as such. Yet, subversion, thus social revolution, isn't a question of partial victories or quantifiable results on the scale of domination. The destruction of prison must begin—like any radical upheaval of all existing social relations—nowhere other than the present conflict, in the practical choice to shatter resignation and revel in revolt. Any refusal to obey the prison system and its representatives, any act of revolt against it, any moment when the desire for freedom prevails over the human tragedy of adaptation undermines the rotten walls of the prison world.

### *Delinquency & Rebellion*

The romantic bandit who defies all laws, the heroic outlaw's tragic last battle against defenders of the state, all the innumerable Robin Hoods and their folk tales... These are truly beautiful stories. They give us hope. It's not so much a question about if they're ultimately "true" or not. Can the imagination and dreams even be "true"? Still, they inspire, encourage, and lead countless endeavors, countless adventures, countless human journeys.

But this magical power of the imagination—the very essence of revolt—must not be confused with the *criminal element* as it exists today. It's simple enough: money is a pillar of this world, and there are legal and illegal ways to acquire it. For example, there's the legal method of looting and theft, committed by the bosses, the rich, and the powerful for their profit. Usually, this is called "wage labor" (looting the worker's body, mind, and spirit), "extracting natural resources" (looting the earth), or "commerce" (making money from money, profiting from human needs, preying off of human desires and dreams by transforming them into commodities to be bought and sold). The illegal methods—knowing that the very term "illegal" belongs to those who profit from it—then are looting (taking goods without paying for them), selling drugs (profiting from drug addiction), robbery (taking someone else's private property by force), and so on. So it's clear that just because someone exceeds the limits of legality doesn't mean they're engaging in subverting the foundations of this world. But you can't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

choice to defend the existing order for which they are individually responsible, is an obstacle to freedom.

Obviously, those in power couldn't care less about ethical reflections like these, nor about how we seek a coherence between how we struggle and what we desire. The powerful will never spare any cruelty. But we're not them. We don't want to become them. We're not avengers who build the scaffolds to execute the guilty. We simply fight with whatever weapons we think are necessary to ensure that there will never again be either scaffolds or executioners.

We don't need to reflect back on prison guards the monstrous image they present of us, thus perpetuating the long history of those who portray entire populations as subhuman, vermin, traitors to the nation, infidels, or lesser beings so as better to eradicate them fully. We view them for who they are: people who make the choice day after day to lock the cell doors shut. It's not because we think it would be impossible to "convert" or "convince" the executioners that we deny them humanity. It's this tension, this ethical tension towards freedom—which refuses to be another form of "justice" with laws and punishments—that makes us so different from them and gives us the courage to carry on the fight against authority with the weapons of anti-authority.

This also allows us to attack without equivocation. Because, even if the prison is a machine that infinitely diffuses responsibility for the torture that imprisonment is, a machine with the nebulous appearance of a vast, sprawling, anonymous monster, certain individuals, paradoxically, bear specific responsibilities for it. Identifying these individuals is vitally important for any struggle against prison, as is understanding who pulls the strings, how they do it, and where they are, who covers up the prison guards' abuse, and who is responsible for sending people to prison in the first place. Identifying these individual responsibilities is an essential task for enemies of prison.

## *Prison Guards & Individual Responsibility*

Even if there's no doubt whatsoever that anyone who puts on a uniform relinquishes part of their humanity, it's not useful to present prison guards as inhuman monsters, capable of any kind of torture and abuse. This would too closely resemble the inverse of the image of the subversive prisoner projected by society. It's obviously true that most, if not all, prison guards have become so accustomed to wielding authority and violence that, having become numb to it through the years, they're incapable of behaving otherwise. But it's also true that there are, as they say, "humane" guards who, from time to time, turn a blind eye when strictly following the prison rules would mean a prisoner's death. Are they also "inhuman"? What's really the difference between the "ruthless" guard drunk off his own power and the prison warden who wears no uniform and generally doesn't inflict torture and violence with his own hands? This is why when we speak of "prison guards" in this text we're referring to everyone who formally enables the day-to-day functioning of the prison: not just the actual guards, but also psychiatrists, social workers, wardens, deputies, doctors, etc.

Perhaps we should take a different approach. Instead of classifying guards according to their degree of "humanity"—thereby forgetting that the prison system is based as much on brutality as on charity, or, better yet, on their insufferable combination—it would be better to start from the fact that guards are "human beings," with all of the contradictions and complexities this entails. Humanity persists even in the torturer. The question then isn't distinguishing "those who behave appropriately" and "those who cross the line and should be punished accordingly," which would inevitably lead us into a reformist conception of the prison struggle (even if it is armed), but rather finding the means to defeat the prison guards who are—just like the walls, the barbed wire, the justice system, and dominant morality—merely one of many obstacles along the path to freedom. Attacking the prison guards isn't "only" a matter of revenge but eliminating an obstacle to our desire for freedom. If there are deaths, we won't hide behind the excuse, "I shot a uniform." Instead, we'll fully acknowledge having shot a human being who, because of their individual

Let's approach the question from a different angle. Our struggle against this world of authority and money can only be *criminal* in the truest meaning of the word: breaking from and breaking with *dominant norms*. It's impossible to bring an end to this world, divided as it is between a rich minority and a vast majority of the poor, without toppling the sacrosanct institution of private property from its pedestal. The unacceptable, untenable moralism of private property has nothing to do with "respecting" the well-being of others, but it has ensured that the poor have slightly fewer reservations about stealing from each other or selling themselves to the rich rather than taking money from those at the top of the social hierarchy. It's impossible to eradicate the *criminal tension* among the poor and the exploited in this world. Those in power can only seek to contain it through morality, religion, ideology, and repression. Instead of eradicating this tension, the state chose another method: no longer eliminating crime but managing it, assimilating it, and using it for its own ends. A good example of this is perhaps the easiest way in society to quickly amass a lot of money (or at least to believe in that illusion): selling drugs. The state drives up the price of drugs on the market by criminalizing them and profits from the consequences: facilitating trafficking networks, promoting the conversion of criminals into entrepreneurs, defusing social tension through the social anesthesia of pervasive drug use, and so on.

Through the judicial system—and so also through prison—the state manages and controls part of this criminal element. Brandishing the threat of legal prosecution and prison sentences, it also ensures it has access to a vast network of informants and snitches. And don't forget the numerous historical examples when the state recruited criminal networks to massacre revolutionaries and the insurgent masses. In sum, *criminality* as such can't be considered as an antithesis to state power.

But that's not the whole story. Within criminality there also exists those who don't accept the rules of the game and break them as easily as the break the state's laws, those who seek out money where it's found in abundance of their own autonomy, not under the orders of some crime boss or another. We don't want to construct something like a *category*

of “social rebel” here, but we can’t ignore the presence of a rebellious aspect of crime. It’s precisely this aspect that many would gladly hide. The state, just like its adversaries on the left or the right, wants the poor to remain docile and obedient. When the poor reject their resignation and search for ways to begin the necessary first step of expropriation, this is when rebellion and subversion truly begins, a path that isn’t recognized by any political tendency, because its logical consequence is ultimately *the refusal of politics* as a mode of controlling the lives of individuals. Keeping this historical tension alive and intensifying it further is fundamentally important for any subversive project, not as a glorification of criminality as such, but as the *a-legal appropriation* of the means to combat private property.

### ***Rights & Power***

Like most social conflicts, those on the front lines of the struggle in and against prison have often made recourse to a centuries old concept: *the rights of man*. It could indeed be said that every prison system is a contradiction of human rights, but ultimately this is true of every state institution in this world. But it’s no coincidence that both the powerful and their critics talk so much about human rights. It’s in the name of these very rights that so many impossible alliances are formed, seeking compromises at the negotiating table. Any discourse centered on rights can only have one result: aligning us with the state, because the state is the entity that grants and protects all rights. And when one of its granted rights is violated, it is the state (or one of its agencies) that must decide the gravity of the violation and a potential solution, or choose to deny that any violation occurred at all. *Rights are always the state’s rights*.

Take, for example, prisoners’ rights. Since these rights were formulated by the state or prison authorities, they can be revoked or suspended at any moment. Solitary confinement, in fact, is the “legal” suspension of all rights. Any margin of freedom prisoners have gained was won through struggle. Anything not won through struggle, just like in the rest of society, can be abolished tomorrow if the state so desires. All the empty discourse about prisoners’ rights confines potential future conflicts in shackles,

ensuring that the results of these conflicts will *always* be advantageous for the prison itself. This clearly was the case with the many attempts of prison administrations to formally involve prisoners in the day-to-day management of imprisonment, by forcing them to participate in their own oppression. Within this established framework, prisoners have the right to “make their voices heard,” so, instead of fighting, they can negotiate improvements.

We don’t want to argue that such material improvements don’t make a real difference in prisoners’ lives, but the question nevertheless remains how they were obtained. Let’s take a concrete example to better illustrate this point.

There’s a crucial difference between prisoners who refuse to return to their cells after yard time in order to demand more time outside and prisoners who take the legal route and try to assert their “rights” in court or in negotiations with the prison administration for more yard time. In the first case, the administration must either repress the revolt with force or concede to more yard time, and, if they do grant this concession, they are painfully aware that they should expect future revolts. In the second case, all the administration needs to do is cite a few legal objections to deny their request or ship off any prisoners who protest to a different prison. Even if the administration ultimately concedes an improvement, nothing will stop them from revoking it at any moment, because the only threat to stop them would be additional negotiations, not a prison uprising.

It’s not a question then of any opposition between reformism (the progressive reform of the prison system) and revolution (the immediate destruction of all prisons) but developing *a path of struggle* by cultivating an unyielding tension and the possibilities of forging complicity in a shared revolt. Anything else can only be a sign of weakness, achieving nothing but superficial gains that only have value on paper.