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## Critical Exchange

# Police abolition

**Geo Maher, *A world without police: How strong communities make cops obsolete*. London: Verso, 2022.**

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## An “against” and a “for”: abolitionist reckonings with the state

Geo Maher’s *A World Without Police* is an unflinching excavation of our punitive and carceral present. It demands that we understand the institution of policing in its totality and assess the fullness of the damage it has done, as well as how much better the world could be if the police were rendered obsolete. To read this book is to feel both the joyful rage of the long hot summer of 2020 and a renewed commitment to its unfinished struggle.



A commitment to the abolitionist project, however, has to see through the shape-shifting morphologies of a system desperate to preserve itself, and Maher charts its mutations: almost as quickly as calls for police abolition surged into public consciousness in 2020, counterinsurgency quenched the fires of the George Floyd uprising. White supremacists converged in cities with strong abolitionist movements; politicians paid lip service to their community's abolitionist demands while quietly ensuring business as usual; the nation's leaders falsely weaponized crime statistics to blame abolitionist movements for higher homicide rates; and even police abolition was quickly "co-opted, diverted, and repackaged as its opposite" (p. 153). Once the streets calmed, the police state swung back around, and abolitionist movements faced increasing backlash. Unfazed, *A World Without Police* draws its lessons from those organizers who understand the risks of such co-optation. The book presents a series of dialectical engagements with abolitionist theory and practice, centering both the importance of a long-term horizon and the necessity of specific, practical, and community-rooted solutions that can systemically break the foundations of police power even as it recalibrates in response to struggle (p. 96).

I take this Critical Exchange as an opportunity to think with Maher and extend a discussion about one such challenge: the relationship between abolition and state power. Maher does not directly or explicitly theorize the state as the foundation of policing, and perhaps for good reason: for some, the concept of policing as a state activity has become "an intellectual straitjacket" (Zedner, 2006), since policing is not a specific state institution but a broader social order, one that is privatized, communal, vigilante, and transnational (Johnson, 2021, p. 164). Yet by Maher's own admission, abolitionist movements cannot escape the state, and even struggles for abolition democracy can entrench state power in more subtle forms. "By a sort of perverse dialectics," Maher warns, "our own struggles often serve as a sort of vulnerability test that can make systems of domination more refined, more effective, more impenetrable, and harder to fight in the future" (p. 153). For Maher, this is a core paradox of abolitionist struggle: abolition is a horizon of "total transformation" yet only becomes concrete when it "targets specific institutions" (p. 153). However, in the process of dividing and conquering the various elements of the carceral state—the death penalty, immigration enforcement, police funding—the necessary disaggregation of struggle also makes it easier for the state to co-opt various movements through a divide and conquer strategy. This prospect of a recursive cycle of co-optation can be discouraging, and it raises urgent questions for abolitionists: is abolition democracy a project that should seek to dismantle the carceral state and transform our world through nonsovereign forms of democratic governance (Lester, 2021), or should it seek to capture and refashion the state, to negotiate priorities around "what the state can and should be" (Berger and Stein, 2021)? Are abolitionist campaigns that aim to shift state policy more likely to re-legitimize dominant systems than ones focused on building autonomous



self-reliance? As Kaba and Ritchie (2022, p. 220) astutely put it: “if we must deal with the state for now, how can we avoid unintentionally re-legitimizing or even expanding it?”

One way to begin answering these questions is to distinguish between different modalities of abolitionist action and their relation to the capitalist state in order to draw out their different strategic conclusions. Learning from organizers with Rustbelt Abolition Radio, we might categorize the examples Maher raises in his book into three forms of action: procedural abolition, autonomist abolition, and insurrectionary abolition (RAR, 2020). Though not necessarily opposed to or mutually exclusive of each other, each charts a different philosophical and practical tradition of eroding or transforming the carceral and punitive roots of society. What follows is a sketch of these three forms in *A World Without Police* and the potential challenges each raises.

First, procedural abolition entails demanding and winning non-reformist reforms that seek not to “fix” policing but to reduce and eliminate police power. Existing state spending demonstrates its centuries-long commitment to “preserving racist social control through police and prisons” (Berger & Stein, 2021). Understanding this, procedural abolition jostles for power within and against the state to “actually help weaken the system we oppose” (Gilmore in Maher, p. 92). The most prominent procedural strategy since the George Floyd rebellion has been the defund campaign waged in cities across the United States. Rather than putting public funding towards the death-making police, such campaigns argue that “there are far better ways to spend the massive resources squandered by already overburdened and underfunded cities” (p. 94). Drawing from abolitionist organizer and educator Mariame Kaba, Maher suggests that non-reformist reforms might seek instead to provide reparations to survivors of police violence, siphon funds away from the police and toward the community, and disarm the police—all with the goal of eliminating the state’s capacity for repression and providing “a practical bridge toward a world with no police at all” (Kaba, 2021, p. 94). At its best, then, procedural abolition seeks to contest and *take* political power from the state to invest it in a radically democratic organization of community safety by and for the people.

Maher warns that defunding carries “fraught potential” that can quickly become both “an alibi for the system and a possible strategy for its undoing” (p. 94). He points to the overwhelming backlash and disappointment that occurred when politicians began backtracking on radical promises or engaging in purely symbolic, deceptive budget shuffles as examples (pp. 92–96; see also Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, pp. 221–225). At times, however, he describes non-reformist reforms as if they have a clearly demarcated, ontological status distinct from reformist reforms—defining, for example, non-reformist reforms as those that “do not strengthen policing, but operate outside and beyond the logic of the world of police” (p. 92). Yet, every reform is a process and a social relation: at each stage of negotiation,



from proposal to ballot to enactment, even the most principled non-reformist demand undergoes change in practice. The reality of reforms, even non-reformist ones, is that in the course of this movement, they procedurally interface with managers of the state apparatus, and in the friction of that encounter their implementation often necessitates concessions to forces within the state.

As I see it, then, procedural abolition's challenge does not only come from state forces outside ourselves. Focusing collective organizing energy on maneuvering within the state can, in spite of the best intentions, inadvertently generate recursive investments in the affirmation of institutional legitimacy. If, as structuralist views of the state hold, the colonial capitalist state as it exists is compelled to govern in the interest of capitalism because of its structural dependency on capital (McCarthy, 2019), the procedural concessions that the state can grant will not transform but rather buttress the underlying structure of the state's material interests in protecting its propertarian foundations. No state would ever agree to defund itself; in fact, redirecting funding is a key source of the state's political power. Thus building abolitionist campaigns primarily focused on procedural elements of carceral policy can easily run into the limitations of investing movement-energy in the settler colonial capitalist state as a vehicle for transition. Abolitionist organizers are not naïve about this: "Policing," Kaba and Ritchie (2022, p. 225) remind us, "will continue to reconfigure itself to give the illusion of change while remaining fundamentally the same." But how we should channel the often-limited capacities and energies of abolitionist organizing remains an open question, especially given how frequently electoral and procedural work sucks the air out of other autonomous forms of grounded struggle.

One possible response to this challenge is to view the state not as a monolith, but, as Nicos Poulantzas (2014) has argued, as relational and as a structure constituted by social forces. In this view, the state is an arena in which class coalitions and alliances "are forged, buttressed, destroyed, and everything in between" (Levenson & Kalisz, 2019). What determines the long-term outcomes and impacts of a procedural abolitionist strategy, then, is not the specific content of non-reformist reform but *how* grassroots struggle is built, whom it mobilizes, and whether it can energize abolitionist movements to continue fighting (see Kalisz, 2019). As Maher warns, we should remember that "abolition is not a policy platform" (p. 151). *Real* power, he suggests, comes from social movements on the ground capable of forcing the political establishment to act. After all, "All reforms are two things at once: A containment strategy whereby those in power seek desperately to maintain the status quo, and the concession to—and index of—the power of our movements in the streets" (p. 94). The rub lies in the latter half of Maher's sentence: what matters most for building abolitionist futures is not whether the right combination of non-reformist reforms will eventually lead to the transformation of the state, but whether the abolitionist strategy is founded on a powerful grassroots movement



that can take power from the state and fight to transform the entirety of the social system.

If the precondition for any abolitionist reckoning with the state is a principled commitment to base-building and growing the power of the streets, Rustbelt Abolition's second and third forms of action serve as useful vehicles for considering where abolitionist organizing can most effectively mobilize, organize the unorganized, and build the kind of mass movements we need. Rather than engage the state, insurrectionary and autonomist forms of abolition seek to build autonomous capacities outside of it. For RAR, insurrectionary abolition stages a direct and antagonistic confrontation with the police, whereas autonomist abolition pursues "a strategy of fugitivity" which refuses to engage with the carceral state while "building hyperlocal infrastructures for sustaining bodies in resistance" (RAR, 2020). Maher dedicates much of his book to exploring combinations of those two forms of action through self-defense and practices of community mutual aid: autodefensas in Oaxaca and Cherán in Mexico, and La Paz in Bolivia, provide instances of neighbor-organized civilian block patrols modeled on indigenous traditions of community policing, which protects communities from police repression while building mutual aid around communal barricades (pp. 168–173). Whether in their confrontational or fugitive form, both insurrectionary and autonomist abolition emphasize how building alternatives is "a material struggle" that entails not community control *of* the police but "community control *against* the police" (emphasis mine, pp. 179, 180).

Maher's vision of community self-defense is explicitly positioned against the institutionalization of such formations into state entities. He envisions the global struggle against police as one that "seeks to establish ever-expanding liberated territories, insurgent zones where occupiers...dare not set foot" (p. 180). This is not a simple fetishization of prefigurative fugitive spaces; Maher shows that the root of what makes spaces of self-defense effective is "stronger communities" (p. 180). Tracing multiple examples of such forms of community making, the later chapters of the book demonstrate that what is most useful about insurrectionary and autonomist forms of abolition is that they do not seek permission from the state or wait for it to enact its self-preserving reforms. Instead, it is in the experience of acting collectively—in pooling resources, sharing, risking one's body and life to state violence for the protection of others, and learning to be accountable to people we care for, while simultaneously confronting the state—that communities build a process for growing and strengthening genuine grassroots movements, with the aim of developing global mass movements with enough capacity to demand and take power from the state.

We have much to learn from Maher's insistence on learning from movements for self-defense and on an autonomist abolition that is inseparable from insurrectionary and more oppositional forms. In the last two years, the language of mutual aid has moved quickly into the mainstream, becoming a celebrated, even romanticized



object of the left's affection. This is for good reason: mutual aid generates our self-managed capacities to take care of each other and redistribute resources in the face of the austerity state, and I have elsewhere considered what we can learn from such practices that flourished during the George Floyd uprising (Chua, 2020). Yet just because they organize beyond or outside of the state, such acts of care do not sidestep the question of the state—and the state doesn't ignore them, either.

Two examples illustrate this. During the 2020 uprising in Minneapolis, organizers including myself sought to create autonomous zones during the height of the National Guard's occupation of Minneapolis in order to provide safety for houseless people, first transforming a 136-room hotel into a self-managed commune for houseless residents and later turning city parks into sanctuary tent-cities. Shortly after over 200 houseless people moved into encampments established in Powderhorn Park, I watched as public Metro Transit buses stopped in front of the camps and unloaded a stream of unhoused people at our volunteer table. When asked what had happened, the unhoused told us that the police had evicted other encampments, put them on busses, and sent them to our autonomous encampment with the promise of hot meals and services. Not only did the Minneapolis government fail to respond to the housing crisis, but it was also happy to abdicate further responsibility by drawing on the pooled resources of civil society to serve the populations it had abandoned.

As sociologist Peer Illner chronicles, a similar dynamic occurred during Occupy Sandy: when mutual aid efforts filled the egregious gaps in disaster aid left by the federal emergency management agency (FEMA), activist efforts inadvertently opened the gates for the austerity state. Citing Occupy Sandy as one of the leading humanitarian groups to provide relief to hurricane survivors, the Department of Homeland Security later proposed a \$1 billion cut to FEMA's annual budget in disaster relief funding (a 14% reduction) given the "superiority" of community-run disaster aid (Illner, 2021, p. 103). In an austerity state, Illner writes, "mutual aid risks legitimating government withdrawal by covering domains of social reproduction that the state has abandoned (Illner, 2021, p. 123)." Despite Occupy Sandy's efforts to build communitarian engagement and genuine solidarity, once the movement "lost its unique value as an oppositional practice" (p. 103), its activities became "haunted by their complicity with the neoliberal transfer of social responsibility onto voluntary aid providers" (Illner, p. 108). At worst, then, social movements not only step in when the state retreats but also run the risk of justifying and indeed "helping to create the austerity state" (Illner, p. 108).

Autonomist abolitionist movements are not necessarily safe from state co-optation just because they do not depend on it. What I find most valuable about Maher's book is its unflinching analysis of the necessity to fight against the police state—a fight that understands itself both strategically and tactically as a war against the deathly, racist violence that the police state wages. Maher insists on an antagonistic and insurrectionary relationship to the police, even as he emphasizes



the importance of procedural and autonomist efforts to change the system and care for the people harmed by the inequality and violence embedded within it. We can learn from Maher that abolition requires a “for”—a reconstructive effort to build the world we want to see—and that this “for” requires an “against”—an oppositional movement to dismantle police departments and the worlds they protect. A world without police will require abolitionists to learn how to strike this fine balance and protect each other while simultaneously building a mass movement that threatens the state, opposes its deadly institutions, and opens the gate for something new.

Charmaine Chua

### **The horror of the pig majority**

*A World Without Police* gives us a lot to think about. Accessible and sophisticated in its argumentation, this expansive fast-moving text maps the terrain of the struggle against state oppression while offering practical alternatives to community safety that reject the edicts of bourgeois security. Expansive as it is, I was admittedly a bit directionless as to where to enter this conversation—directionless, that is, until 14 May 2022 when an 18 year-old white man drove 200 miles from his home along the New York/Pennsylvania border upstate to Buffalo, walked into a supermarket in a predominately Black neighborhood, turned on a livestream broadcast from a helmet-mounted camera, raised a Bushmaster rifle and murdered ten people. In a 180-page screed posted online two days before the attack, the self-identified “national socialist”, “antisemite” and “ethnonationalist” explained his motivations and described his radicalization on racist message boards during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Inspired by similar attacks in South Carolina, Oslo and Christchurch, the Buffalo killer was driven by paranoid warnings of “white genocide” and “The Great Replacement.” Circulating in the white-supremacist cesspool for decades, these theories warn fearful whites of the ground they are losing on all fronts—political, cultural, demographic—and insist that without direct violent action, they are sure to be supplanted or utterly wiped out by a rising non-white insurgency. Donning body armor and Nazi insignia and with slogans like “white lives matter,” “here’s your reparations” and stop your genocide against our white nations (SYGAOWN) scrawled across his weapons, the Buffalo killer answered the call to defend the “white race” and joined the swelling ranks of those whose grotesque acts have transformed ordinary public spaces—supermarkets, schools, youth camps, churches, synagogues—into tormented sites of mass atrocity.

There is no shortage of unprincipled politicians and pundits who will seize upon and manipulate the raw insecurity provoked by such acts to argue for more police—funding, powers, presence—to calm its anxious constituency. This is the paradox of



police. Their inability to “fight crime,” let alone provide security in an insecure world, invariably doubles back to reaffirm their own necessity. So how might Maher’s unflinching critique of this broken system help us confront, comprehend and maybe even avert future tragedies like that in Buffalo?

The core of his argument, and his key contribution to the critique of police, is my focus here. It is outlined in the first chapter, aptly titled “The Pig Majority.” Maher draws his organizing premise from a few lines buried in Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*:

And so to challenge the police is to challenge the American people who send them into the ghettos armed with the same self-generated fears that compelled the people who think they are white to flee the cities and into the Dream. The problem with the police is not that they are fascist pigs but that our country is ruled by *majoritarian pigs* (Coates, 2015, p. 79).

“If whiteness were a job,” Maher writes, “it would be the police” (p. 26). Crucially, however, he begs us to look beyond the uniformed police and focus our critique on the effortless, perhaps innate drives towards violent self-deputization that unite and organize members of the “pig majority” and “all those volunteer deputies eagerly doing their violent work alongside them.” He argues:

It is the judges, the courts, the juries and the grand juries. It is the mayors and the district attorneys who demand “law and order” and denounce those who protest police brutality as “mindless rioters and looters.” It is the racist media apparatus that bends over backwards to turn victims into aggressors and—above all when the former are Black and the latter white—killers into saints (p. 22).

Like their uniformed brethren, members of the pig majority answer the call to defend property and the racial order, indeed civilization itself.

In practice, Maher’s pig majority resembles what I have called “the political theology of the thin blue line” (Linnemann, 2022), where the self-appointed defenders of liberal order administer violence on behalf of their imagined and imperiled white, Christian, propertied community. While the Buffalo killer wasn’t a cop, or even acting in the name of police, he nevertheless performed a core police function: taking up arms in defense of the “white world”, lest he and his kind be “replaced.” This is a point Maher presciently underscores: “From colonial expansion to white supremacist fears of ‘white genocide’ and the threat of a ‘great replacement’ today, the violent policing of the boundaries of whiteness is motivated by a powerful and dangerous victim complex” (p. 41).

Like Du Bois, Maher traces the fearful racist drives to self-deputization at the center of so many sad deaths today to the very first whispers of “America.” In the earliest days of the colonial plantation economy, the contract law securing property rights of slave owners generated social practices whereby white people came to see





themselves as having supervisory authority over Black people. In the context of the patriarchal household, in which Markus Dirk Dubber (2005) locates the wellspring of the police power, southern white women were empowered to assume quasi-police authority over enslaved Black people, even as they were themselves subject to the coercive powers of a highly gendered division of labor. In the century-long afterlife of slavery, that sense of superiority evolved into everyday practices which demanded the deference and subservience of Black people. In short, where Black people were first policed *as* property, they were later policed as *threats* to property. The social police that emerged from the ashes of chattel slavery was, as Du Bois famously explained, engineered to “deal with blacks alone, and tacitly assumed that every white man was *ipso facto* a member of the police” (2015, pp. 120-121). From mass murders and lynching to seemingly trivial but no less insidious instances of “racialized police communication” (McNamara, 2018, p. 335) and “weaponized white womanhood” (Armstrong, 2021, p. 27), Maher shows how police power operates as a key organizing principle of modern life, not only interpellating subjects *to* power but also remaking them into vessels of the police power itself. And so, while Ahmaud Arbery wasn’t murdered by the boys in blue, he was nevertheless murdered by self-deputized members of the pig majority who saw his very presence as a threat to their safe, ordered white neighborhood. It should perhaps then come as no surprise that among the names Roof, Breivik, Tarrant and other “heroes” which the Buffalo killer scrawled across his weapons, were also the names of Arbery’s killers. Whether they act out of a powerful “victimization complex” or simply “white fear”—from George Zimmerman to Kyle Rittenhouse—behind it all, at times both imperceptible and inescapable, is the police power.

To study the police is to study death. So it would be rather easy, even satisfying, to simply list the grim details, the corruption and murders, to defiantly scream “*fuck the police!*” and offer nothing more. But not once does Maher throw up his hands and allow his critique to drift into post-political apathy. Speaking directly to his readers, including, importantly, his enemies, he states and restates the ethic that runs throughout: “the pig majority might include you, too. *But it doesn’t have to*” (p. 23).

This is the profound insight of Maher’s work and the grim truth we must all face. The problems of police are as much existential as they are political; they include the police but far exceed them as well. The horror we must face is that this monstrous thing we have created and loosed upon the world was born of our own fear and insatiable desire for security. As daunting as it is, Maher’s lesson is that freeing ourselves from the violence of police requires that we not only imagine a world without them but also how we might live, together, in another world entirely.

Travis Linnemann



## **No cops, courts, or cages means no state**

Geo Maher's *A World Without Police* provides concise abolitionist analysis of the role and nature of policing, the necessity of ending all forms of criminalization and caging, and the discernment needed to avoid the traps of system-sustaining liberal reforms. The book appeared at a pivotal moment: the 2020 uprising brought the idea of abolition into the mainstream, forcing politicians, institutions, and other elites to acknowledge anti-Black racism and the violence of systems of criminalization. Almost immediately, those people and institutions walked back their lip service, absorbing militant and disruptive ideas and selling them back as minimal reforms and promises about "diversity." In this important moment, Maher offers key interventions from abolitionist analysis and practice in digestible chapters that can be used in classrooms and community reading groups, grounds those ideas in clear examples that make pathways to action accessible and illuminates pitfalls of reform and ways abolitionists avoid and resist them.

Since June 2020, campaigns to defund police have exploded across the country, with people working relentlessly at city and county levels to reverse the expansion of police budgets, reduce the number of cops, stop the adoption of new surveillance technologies, and move various services (like parking enforcement and emergency response) out of police departments. These experiments reveal significant tensions between abolitionists about how to regard governments. When we demand that cities move money from police to housing and childcare, are we imagining that city governments can and should provide these things to people? Or are we trying to reduce the harms of the policing system by shrinking it and exposing its costs and impacts? Do we think that cities and the non-profits they hire can justly provide these services, given the historically racist, sexist, ableist design and delivery of government and non-profit social services? Do we imagine that genocidal and colonial city, county, state and federal governments in the United States can become legitimate means to organize care and infrastructure if we elect the right candidates? What other ways to organize care and infrastructure without the colonial nation-state have been proposed and practiced in Indigenous and Black freedom struggles or anarchists across many movements? Do we need to definitively know or agree on whether to reform or tear down governments to work together on abolitionist projects? At this incendiary moment, when the legitimacy of criminalization systems has been shaken and our opposition is struggling to recuperate these institutions, abolitionists need to engage these questions together.

Defund campaigns expose the immense cost of policing and criminalization (which make up 40–50% of most city and county budgets) and juxtapose it with unmet needs of housing, transit, childcare, and health care. These campaigns can help delegitimize policing, expose its costs and harms, and mobilize public debate



about what really causes violence and suffering and what generates safety. Defund campaigns expose the disconnect between city and county governments and the people they rule. Most people don't understand budgeting processes or know how tax money is spent, and are disconnected from the processes that determine their life conditions beyond occasionally voting for politicians beholden to elites. Cities are run by chambers of commerce, police, and real estate interests, and local governments are unwilling to shift their long-standing allegiances to police and business interests despite significant disruptive uprising. Defund campaigns are one tactic for organizing people to expose the pervasiveness of policing and materially attack it.

This new phase of abolitionist experimentation in city and county budgets joins other decades-long efforts to stop the expansion of criminalization infrastructure and dismantle it. These include campaigns to halt construction of new criminalization and immigration enforcement facilities, close existing facilities, decriminalize whatever we can, oppose new criminal laws, close courts, oppose adoption of new policing technologies, get cops out of schools, and more. These experiments are complex and necessary. They are pragmatic in that they seek to both reduce numbers of cops, weapons they carry, people they capture and cage, and mobilize people to take immediate, local, direct collective action. They create space for people to build relationships based in shared analysis of current conditions and ways out of them. They can be taken up by people who believe it is possible to elect abolitionist politicians and create governments without police, borders, or prisons, and by those who observe that capitalist, colonial, racist governments cannot be fundamentally transformed by socialist politicians but rather *need* half their budgets allocated to cops, courts and cages to operate the illegitimate domination and extraction that are their purpose.

Police, prisons, borders, and militaries are co-constitutive with the state form, and the authority of the state cannot be maintained without them. In a recent episode of *The Dig* on abolition with Geo Maher and Mariame Kaba, Kaba described state function as the capacity to “protect and redistribute.” What contemporary states protect are private property relations which make it possible for a small elite to extract from most people and the planet. They redistribute wealth upward, concentrate it and protect that concentration from attacks by the people from whom it was extracted. Even communist and socialist countries have been organized to facilitate this domination and extraction for elite interests.

Some on the left believe that states could become caregiving by redistributing money downward and protecting people from harms of elite-serving systems. For example, some think the government will protect us from pollution, poisoning, and labor-abuse through regulation. However, in the United States, government regulations merely establish *how much* each industry can exploit, poison, and pollute, while insulating bosses, landlords, and industry from liability and preventing us from stopping these harms. For example, workers' compensation



benefits, are designed not to ensure that workers get the care they need when injured on the job but to limit how much redress workers can seek after being harmed by dangerous conditions. Another example is California's AB 1054, passed after the utility company PG&E caused the deadly and devastating Camp Fire in 2018. AB 1054 protects PG&E from liability for the fire, allowing the company to continue its negligent operations. Or consider how the court system regulates the relationship between landlords and tenants, workers and owners, forcing tenants and workers to fruitlessly pursue (often at great risk) individual claims through rigged procedures where wealthy judges determine outcomes and bosses and landlords write the laws. "Housing rights" and "workers' rights" regulations are designed to redirect people away from collective action that works better to win justice, such as labor and rent strikes, rural and urban land and factory takeovers, fighting the cops to stop eviction attempts, and squatting. State regulation does not protect people from owners, bosses, and landlords but facilitates their domination and regulates people, limiting how we can resist. Regulation is used to protect extraction and keep people subject to it, such as by creating and enforcing immigration statuses to keep some workers especially exploitable or creating licensure schemes that prevent us from organizing health and care projects outside of racist, ableist and patriarchal care industries. Health care licensure and insurance schemes, for example, ensure profits for the health care industry and make many forms of community-based care illegal, such that mutual aid projects providing medicine, counseling, or other basic care face criminalization.

Some people also believe that through taxation, the state can redistribute wealth and reduce inequality. However, taxation primarily collects money for military and criminalization apparatuses to control people and facilitate extraction, not to support well-being. State infrastructure projects are overwhelmingly used to support white life and white property values and displace and poison non-elites. The state form developed with and through racial capitalism and its very purpose is to protect and sustain private property relations that make people exploitable, make almost everything for profit, and prevent people from meeting our own needs. The technologies of domination that have created the drastic material inequality under which we live are what produce and maintain state and corporate power, wealth concentration, and ecological crisis. When governments appear to redistribute wealth downward, it is almost always a temporary concession to quell dissent and stabilize the status quo. Governments are functioning exactly as designed, with flexibility and responsiveness to keep the scheme running.

I will focus on my experiences being a poverty lawyer and abolitionist in a U.S. context, although many theorists suggest these arguments can be applied more broadly. As a settler colonial, racial project established through chattel slavery and genocide, it's particularly difficult to imagine the U.S. government as a site of caregiving. Feminist, anti-racist, and disability justice movements have consistently demonstrated that care programs like welfare and social services police and punish



marginalized groups and sort people in crisis into hierarchies of deservingness that justify stigma, abandonment, and premature death (Mink, 1990; Neubeck & Cazanave, 2001; Roberts, 2002; Sparks, 2003;). Care systems often expand to respond to uprisings but quickly recede when elites regain control (Piven & Cloward, 1993). The benefits and schemes they create are revocable and conditional and carefully crafted to exclude stigmatized populations. Feminist and disability justice insights about the problems of state violence masquerading as care, such as in welfare, disability benefits, and family policing systems, are crucial for abolitionists as our opponents respond to critiques with new proposals for “softer” interventions, from police social workers to electronic home monitoring schemes to supposedly feminist jails (Abolition and Disability Justice Coalition, 2020).

US history and contemporary conditions provide fertile ground for exploring these themes. We can also study how states formed and developed by reading scholars like Peter Kropotkin, Peter Gelderloos, Dilar Dirik, and Modibo Kadalie who ask these larger questions. Their work suggests that states are created when an elite conquers a territory, draws borders, invents external and internal enemies through racialization and gendering processes that invent populations to be cultivated and populations to be abandoned, and legitimizes practices by which people are ruled by people they don't know. Creating states requires preventing people from accessing collective capacities for reproduction and survival and rerouting them through a system designed to benefit elite interests. We can see this today in forced participation in a for-profit-wage economy to meet our basic needs, or coerced dependence on the criminalization system for safety even as it supports the wealth-concentrating arrangements that endanger our lives. It has taken a long time to create this arrangement of domination and extraction, and people have always resisted it creatively and relentlessly.

Resistance movements often call for collective self-determination—making decisions about our food, transportation, health, education, and energy systems, how we understand harm and cultivate safety ourselves. We want to be able to decide to power our communities and build food systems ourselves without fossil fuels, to block new prisons, dams, mines, or pipelines, to move without borders, to never be taxed for war and cops. The many crises we face, created by governments that control us on behalf of the elites that control them, require real solutions. These solutions will not be generated by the same entity that created the crises.

Does it matter? Can we work on abolition even if we disagree about taking over or getting rid of these governments? We can, up to a point. We can do anti-expansion and dismantling campaigns, support criminalized people and build mutual aid projects. But disagreement will influence our approach to the work—for example, with regard to time and resources given to electoral campaigns or to the amount of faith we have in the “invest” part of invest/divest defund tactics. Those who believe state capacity can turn toward well-being might see more potential for



winning housing, childcare, healthcare, or income support through budget shifts. Others might see the invest/divest strategy as a chance to shrink the carceral apparatus, knowing we can gain concessions that reduce suffering, even if temporarily for a limited number of people in conditional and revocable ways, and recruit more people to abolitionist mobilizations. We might take up invest work as an experiment to see what we can get from the budget in the short term, knowing that the system of profit extraction, taxation, and spending cannot build vitally needed beneficial infrastructure for reproducing our lives. Others might see the invest/divest strategy as perpetuating the fantasy of a caregiving state, misdirecting efforts away from building autonomous survival infrastructure. They might be wary of non-profitization when imagining the outcomes of invest work, aware that budget reallocations for survival needs will, at best, be funneled to non-profits which siphon off overhead expenses, distribute necessities in ways that perpetuate exclusions and stigma, and are limited by philanthropic control (INCITE!, 2007). Non-profit governance and stewardship of human needs is insufficiently distinct from government or corporate rule, and fail to create more participatory ways of creating and sustaining what people need to survive.

Disagreement about getting rid of or taking over the state can also impact movement culture and tactics. Often, those interested in seizing the state are more likely to limit dissent, whereas those interested in eliminating governments tend to endorse disobedience, disruption, and attack. Historically, disruption is what makes change; condoned dissent is absorbed and stabilizes and perpetuates the systems that produce crises.

What happens if we abolitionist analysis of police and prisons to the state form? What abolitionists believe about cops and cages also holds for government:

- Built for domination, control, and extraction, not to keep us safe
- Serves elite interests, masquerades as belonging to the people
- Is actually working exactly as designed so tinkering or “fixing” is futile
- Fantasies of it becoming caring prevent us from addressing its harms
- People fear chaos, violence, and mayhem without it, yet we know that it produces rather than prevents or addresses violence, and that shared practices of care and collective self-determination can better meet our needs than systems based in extraction and domination

Many people fear life without current forms of government because they can't imagine building systems we need to survive “to scale.” They worry about the capacity to produce vaccines and our ability to rescue each other or rebuild after fires and storms. But current systems of domination already leave millions without vaccines, disaster preparation, and emergency services. Governments aren't saving us from disaster; they convert each crisis into an opportunity for more wealth concentration. They are ensuring our imminent destruction at a species level.



People are *more* capable of collaborating, innovating, demonstrating solidarity, and saving each other without systems like police, military, private property, and borders. People fear that the transition away from current structures will be violent and bloody but fail to recognize that there already is mass suffering, violence, and premature death—and that this is worsening in the face of ecological crisis.

Hundreds of years of government counterinsurgency have ensured, even among abolitionists, widespread ignorance of the histories of anti-state ideas and interventions and caricatures of “anarchy” and “anarchism”. Perhaps the most dangerous of these is that anti-state or anarchist ideas are white and patriarchal. In this time of predictable co-optation and reformism, abolitionism must be defined by our actions and responses. It requires us to rigorously engage the question of the state, drawing from anti-colonial, anti-racist and feminist analysis and practices that reimagine infrastructure and care outside of centralized authority and the domination it inevitably requires. Abolitionists already follow anarchist principles of voluntary association, direct action, and mutual aid in efforts to dismantle dominant institutions and build a new world through decentralized experimentation. The more vigorously we can engage this question and take up the wisdom of past and present anti-state resistance formations, the better our chance to build the world we are collectively imagining.

Dean Spade

### **Keep “us” safe without calling the cops: An analytic analogy**

A close reading of the Thirteenth Amendment of the US Constitution asks that “we” attend to what the end of slavery could not abolish: mastery and slavery as punitive justice. Slave patrols reemerge as police to patrol and protect proprietary interests over people. What “we” learn about “our” reliance on policing to keep “us” safe, what “we” track while watching the patterns and reading the times, are paradoxical gaps in the social fabric of negative rights, equal opportunity, due process.

Naming the gaps is a struggle. Whenever folks say, “Now, imagine if those folks were black?” in discussions of Charlottesville in 2016 or the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, what I hear is that law and order are not colorblind. The law, as Cheryl I. Harris (1993) reminds us, has limitations and does not serve or protect all people, in all places, in the same ways, all the time. Projecting counterfactual racial histories onto shared accounts of present conditions is, then, more than hyperbole. It is a story-sharing practice that helps some of us watching patterns of police protection give a name, shape, and narrative to what Joy James (2023) and Felicia Denaud (2022) called the unnamed war of the master-state-complex.

The mastery that remains in the wake of the constitutional end of slavery in the nineteenth century cannot solve the problem of racial divide, which DuBois called





the line that would define the twentieth century. Now, well into the twenty-first, existential concerns still arise in proximity to racial blackness. In fact, any movement towards black bodies and black communities, as well as speculative imaginations of the futures of black life require that “we” exercise caution and orient ourselves such that “we” too do not become caught in the crossfire. Though the Civil War Amendments extend equal rights and protections to the formerly enslaved and make them citizens, there was no formal account for the wrong of slavery. The right to feel all right in the places we call home is not a right shared by all who exist in the United States or under its jurisdiction. Without protection from the powers, predations, and priorities of, or sanctioned by, the state, with no one else to call on for safe passage, one risks physical, mental, and spiritual surrender to the counterpunch that constitutes the great paradox of racializing political recognition in the wake of slavery. This is the ever-present presumption and proliferation of a perception in the spirit and letter of the law: while legal recognition for most marks modern progress, racial blackness remains framed by a time that has no future without a master.

Geo Maher’s *A World Without Police* (2021) tells another story about another kind of future in the making. The book records movement knowledges and activist archives as authoritative sources of political theory and analysis and evidences practical strategies for the collectively organized defense of communities under siege. Maher’s book models the prophetic authority of abolition as a way of seeing, recognizing and telling the times against the authoritative narratives of the master-state-complex. He shapes a theory of praxis as a method of theory that is embodied, relational, and transcendent only in service to the contingent sites of social transformation that co-create them. Maher details incidents of white supremacist and police violence that were not met with lethal force, choke holds, or knees on necks. It was the global recognition of George Floyd’s humanity that began to change how “we” respond, not just to the vestiges of slavery in the twenty-first century but also to what the end of slavery could not abolish: mastery. Only three years later, we see how easily forgotten that moment of collective recognition is. “As a rotten system pulls out all the stops to stabilize the status quo,” Maher writes, “it’s important not to forget those heady days of that long summer, when for a moment anything seemed possible and we were winning more than we had ever imagined” (pp. 9–10). Maher’s view of abolition shows where the dialectic of mastery comes undone under the weight of an immersive, emergent, diasporic yet integrated retreat of the people from the predations of the master-state-complex and into self-organized community to build trust, mutual aid, and community defense.

Maher shows that where safety is most needed, the police do not protect, and nothing and no one is truly safe; everything is contested, and the consequences of state terror are far from academic. Each encounter with police power is a chance to see ourselves differently, to peer through the false idealism of the American reliance on policing for public safety, and to bear witness to the collective labors of





generations of people organizing across space and time to transform the conditions of domestic terror and warfare by changing themselves and society's response to harm and emergency.

Centering the wrongs of mastery, Maher's first chapter, "The Pig Majority," takes a materialist approach to ideological structures of violence that link vigilantes to the police to reveal what spectacles of violence with impunity conceal. Policing, in this view, is far more than a civic institution: it is a mood, a mode of being, a posture and dream of power. By linking policing to white fragility, Maher exposes the economic incentives that conscript us all into abnegating responsibility for perceived threat, instead calling on external authorities. In this sense, white fragility is the consequence of class crisis more than an identity politics. As such it is not limited to those racialized white. "This pig majority might include you too," writes Maher. "But it doesn't have to" (p. 35).

Protecting a certain kind of future while keeping others captive is the very pretense of policing as state craft. Disrupting this carceral future has been a strategy of abolition since its inception. In addition to direct attacks on slave power, early abolitionist literature popularized cultural critique of the domestic institution of slavery in the nineteenth century. From slave narratives to anti-slavery pamphlets, from newspapers to novels, the cultural remnants of the abolitionist tradition became, by the end of the century, the analytic foundation of Black Studies as an academic discipline. Works like Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (Bois, 2004) not only affirmed the radical right to self-author the "strange meaning of blackness" but also proclaimed that in the twentieth century, the greatest threat to the common good were not black people but the racializing political consciousness by which black lives were seen, sensed, and understood.

Catalyzed by Black Study with Du Bois at the helm, the abolitionist tradition brings into the academy an embodied analytic practice of reading the times according to accounts passed down by those most directly impacted by racializing legacies of juridical mastery and subjection. The prophetic authority of Maher's abolitionist analytic comes from this tradition of witness-based scholarship, which accompanies struggles for self-determination and brings us to a discussion of police abolition wherein the wrongs of slavery are not limited to objects of captivity but have prophetic bearing on how people keep people as objects, as captives.

Abolitionist struggles challenge the means and ends of protection as defined by the state and radically reimagine the future of freedom we ought to fight to protect. As poet and prison studies scholar Jackie Wang argues, "abolition ... require[s] us to work toward the total transformation of all social relations" by offering space to work out, play with, or otherwise divest from habituated tendencies of "calling the police," literally or figuratively, in the face of threat, theft, and existential or epistemic violence (Wang, 2018, p. 297).

Current movements against police power from Minneapolis to Iran teach us that no matter why or where public faith in policing fails, the material, somatic,



spiritual, and moral consequence of public divestment from police power is that the public becomes the problem, putting targets on people's backs and increasing terror in already under-resourced and grieving communities (Sabaah, 2017). The result are genocidal scales of existential, psychological, and environmental loss and trauma (Tayebi, 2022; Vargas, 2010). In addition to teaching us to document the horrors of state-sanctioned predation for which the victim is blamed, abolitionists migrate the threats of predation by wielding their own personal accounts of protection and self-determined protocols of safety. Like prophets from the margins, their readings of the times are divined from an inner knowing, a gut feeling to fledgling praxis to theory, transforming wounds to words and words to worlds. Incarcerated abolitionists, for instance, pass their own protocols of protection among each other, their analyses of power migrating beyond prison walls to influence movements, collectives, and organizations outside. But carceral culture, too, exceeds the prison (Abdullah, 2019; Gray-Garcia, 2019). It is embedded in racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy and shapes how we defend ourselves, name ourselves, protect our people and property—not only literally or legally but also analytically.

What “they” can’t see when “they” see “us” is that calling for police reveals the state’s own view of what is safe and what poses a clear threat and imminent harm to a political community. At the level of self-defense, policing is not just for times of emergency: folks see like the state when scanning for threats in classrooms, in Central Park, on public transportation. In the academy, defense is an intellectual posture that weaponizes gated knowledges and arms us with evidence for protecting ourselves from erasure. We drive state-authorized archives of historical documents, like tanks through city streets, in the name of the common good.

Our standing as citizens is authorized by our faith in and fidelity not to each other but to traditional institutions and ideals of mastery, the order of things, and their registers of punitive protection. “The political prisoners currently contained in U.S. penal sites,” James writes, “present us with difficult questions and challenges as critical thinkers and actors: What is our relationship to the ‘imprisoned intellectual’? ... Who or what are *we* in relation to visionary, risk taking struggle?” (James, 2003, p. 4). We might consider practical responses to James’ call for accountability: initiatives for inclusion, representation, and consciousness raising that increase visibility and recognition of abolitionist histories and struggles. We might consider grant support for prison education or advocacy to fund curricular accountability to those most impacted by the prison industrial complex. We are also forced to consider strategies for how (public) university instructors might prepare to respond to guns in the classroom or ICE on campus.

Embodied social relationships to threat, safety, privacy, and protection are not limited to prisoners or those most regularly targeted by police. They are a general part of our political culture. Who we cite to support our arguments, how we defend or support our studies, and how we curate our appearance in the intellectual places



in which we seek refuge, academic abolition requires that we notice the stories of safety carceral culture demands we rehearse, accept, conceal and cosign to feel at home in empire (Abu Jamal, 2015). For those of us who partake, traffic, and invest in the sanctity of gated space, partitions, walls, and police, the freedom to own (intellectual and other) property also conceals a paradox or trap of dependence on the predation of authorities to protect shared futures.

It is our responsibility to notice when the analytic tools we use to authorize our arguments reinforce the authority of the master-state-complex. Even those who lift up abolitionist moments can slip up and fetishize resistance, inevitably reproducing logics and postures of domination and defense. As Ehn Nothing (Nothing, 2021) writes,

STAR [Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries] is just one historical note in a legacy of queer insurgency. With the rise of queer theory and transgender history as respectable subjects of study, other accounts of queer and gender-variant revolt are being rescued from oblivion ... For queer insurgents, then, recovering our history from obscurity and recuperation is a necessary element of struggle. If we do not critically engage this history, we not only lose analytic tools that could aid the spread and sharpening of our revolt, but also abandon the dead to vultures who reduce everything to image and commodity. Everywhere we falter in our analysis ... cops will turn those struggles toward their ends (STAR, p. 10).

This reshaping of a politics of recognition from below draws upon collective witness, embodied practices, a relational knowledge based on the daily will to be seen and checked in on by each other, especially when our conditioned reliance on cultures of carceral power manifest as our unchecked pig majority consciousness policing ourselves or punishing each other to survive. What if rather than defaulting to proprietary relationships to knowing that compete with one another for dominance and inevitably fail to honor the origins of abolitionist analytics in practice, naming the silenced prophetic authority of political prisoners, criminalized communities, and poverty scholars as part of our shared inheritance were also part of police abolition?

Abolitionist movements, particularly those led by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated organizers, artists, and shapeshifters, have long been calling educators *in* to mutually reflect on who we serve and protect—in the classroom, on campus, and in our research, publications, and public scholarship. Learning to honor the ecologies of intimacy that saturate western investments in protecting the future of autonomy means reckoning with the harm our allegiance to gated spaces justifies, flaunts, and conceals (Betasamosake Simpson, 2017). Works of academic scholarship can be accountable not just to abolitionist ideas but also abolitionist ways of seeing, sensing, and protecting each other from harm—understood as both everyday and exceptional emergencies for which most of us are trained to “call the



cops.” Abolitionism is a style of political education that jumps genre to combine memoir, personal essay, and movement scholarship in an anarchic frame of analytic narration that shows what it aims to tell about a world without police which, in some places and for some communities, already exists. Integrating academic, street, and embodied wisdoms to carefully detail the gaps and contours in the objective, rationale, and cultural logic of policing, Maher’s book situates both author and audience within the hold of police power that knows no borders and shows how its logic leads us, time and again, back to the master’s house.

In a chapter about abolitionist self-defense for example, Maher tells the story of a Venezuelan community in a city under siege to co-create, author, and defend a protocol of public safety that does not rely on police. “Sinking their roots deeply into these abandoned zones full of abandoned people,” he explains, “militants contributed to the emergence of new social movements that demanded one thing above all: community control” (p. 157). While containment, punishment, and erasure maintain colonial and carceral protocols of law, order, patrol and punishment, Maher reminds us that abandoned zones contain their own emergent strategies of self-determination, authority, and defense, however provisional and tenuous.

Another play on not calling the police, Sarah Haley’s *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Haley, 2016), reveals, by centering, a loophole in the credibility of the ideal of academic objectivity itself. Rather than leaning on witness, Haley shines light on the limit of state archives and artifacts of labor camps in post-reconstruction Georgia to teach us what future its captives fought to protect. When movement knowledges are largely inaccessible, the black feminist scholar employs historical narration to invite readers to think and feel what archival records alone cannot elicit. Haley joins Saidiya Hartman, Tiya Alicia Miles, Lisa Lowe and others in an ethic of abolitionist representation called critical fabulation, an iteration of archival elision that accounts for the witness and wisdom of rule breakers otherwise gone missing from official records. Hayley explains this method of speculative narration of carceral history.

[My]narrative is informed by critical fabulation, the writing practice brilliantly proposed by Saidiya Hartman in “Venus in Two Acts,” offering a narrative “at the intersection of the fictive and the historical” (p. 12) ... Although this introductory account does not necessarily throw the archive into crisis in [the] explicit ways ... Hartman suggests, it does *contest archival authority* by shrouding the archival-historical in the speculative-fictive, “straining against the limits of the archive,” in an attempt to raise rather than resolve questions regarding captive black women’s lives (p. 271 emphasis is my own).



While this method of study can “draw from a wide array of archival sources,” the resulting account “also lingers where the archive is brutally silent, in the realm of [black women’s] relationship with each other” (p. 271).

Haley’s and Maher’s works both live in the questions they raise about archival authority, historical authenticity, and objectivity: questions of rule, recognition, and representation sound different alarms in worlds without access to, or assurance of, police protection. Academic freedom here becomes less about securing the right to be left alone and more about calling on us all to better practice naming and honoring what our scholarship is fighting for and how accountability to each other and our respective knowledges of, and how we know about, time, protection, and security matter.

As Maher argues, “people without alternatives will continue to call the police.” Thus, “our inescapable task is to build those alternatives now—alternatives that provide the foundation for an entirely different kind of world” (p. 129). Abolition in the twenty-first century has evolved as an idea, a phenomenon, a praxis, and a political project to challenge a fundamental logic of opposition: an essential binary that organizes the very concept of the political developed in the Western canon of political thought. The friend/enemy distinction is understood to precede rather than simply govern the political order. Police abolition requires societies to practice alternatives to policing and punishment in the presence of threat, harm, and emergency by cocreating democratically determined strategies beyond isolation and abjection and emergent strategies of collective defense or transformative justice based on collective repair.

The friend/enemy distinction is a fundamental principle of the carceral imagination of the common good and public safety, one which police abolition necessarily counters to limit and reimagine social reliance on an ever-expanding matrix of carceral policies, protocols, and politics of distrust and disgust. The friend/enemy distinction also creates a crisis of imagination, wherein all reasonable attempts to identify and redress the root causes of harm and violence and seek accountability for systemic and structural state-sanctioned violence (chattel slavery, colonialism, the cold war, the war on terror) are rendered irrational, unwinnable, dangerous, a waste.

I am concerned that analytically the friend/enemy distinction is an infectious, universalizing eclipse of a logic whose abolition poses a problem for political theory itself, unsettling both common sense notions of public safety and how we theorize the political from the ground up. Therefore I have come to think of abolition as a politics of friendship-to-come: an everyday practice of shaping horizontal relational power and a long-term transcendent vision for the popular transformation of “all social relations” (Wang, 2018, p. 297). Friendship, in this context, coheres by way of a political order whose democratic “terms of engagement,” as Rachel Herzing writes, “don’t root our survival in the suppression or denial of another’s humanity” (Herzing, 2016, p. 276). Abolition functions as a



relational ethical order that asks not “Who is with me?” but rather, “What is it going to take for us all to get through this together?” In an invitation to consider what love’s got to do with abolitionist scholarship, James expands on Herzing’s vision of relational humanism to add accountability to righteous love and rage. She writes, “Love for community, freedom, and justice, for the incarcerated and for the ‘disappeared’—for those dying or surviving in war zones. To the extent that love for humanity leads to rage against injustice, we also must ask and answer: Where does rage lead us?” (p. 4)

Knowing that fear will only pull us further apart means noticing and honoring how our own reticence to attend to how political recognition works to conceal and cast out what Rebecca Hall calls “the erased, the unspoken, the blank spaces” of ourselves and each other (Hall, 2021). There is a prophetic register in abolitionist demands that come not from sublime divination or sovereign decision but a cumulative practice of inner knowing, bearing witness to power, and archiving everyday experiences and moments of their dialogic analysis in real time and over generations. A cultural commons of narration and naming, accounting and reimagining, that is often overlooked in canonical accounts of social theory become the basis for a truant metric of “what counts” and “what is kept in memory and whose legend is archived” (Derrida, 1997, p. 78). Indeed, when people deviate from standard protocols of political temporality, legitimacy, and belonging to co-create less determinate and more speculative spaces of protection and terms of engagement, they are documenting what they see from where they stand. From here we can not only deconstruct the social constructions of racial formation but also shape freedom. Prophetic registers of political community, safety, and protection are thus crafted by way of their emergence, cohering first by necessity in response to an emergency on the scale of a pandemic, second by choice, and eventually as common practices of culture. When the people keep their own accounts of what counts, remapping the political times through which they pass, the romance of identity dissolves, the contradictions that constitute affinity are revealed, and new political relations to affinity, fidelity, and agency can take their place.

Perhaps, then, the condition of possibility for overcoming opposition, threat, and insecurity is not police and punishment but the collective will to learn to listen to the prophets on the margins—those authors of another imperative of shared struggle for safety from harm whose dreams move us towards the protection of future imaginations of freedom otherwise.

Jasmine Syedullah

## **A reply: Abolition comes of age**

Abolition is maturing. Demands once dismissed as too extreme for serious consideration—calls to dismantle prisons, police, and the entire carceral



apparatus—have been forced upon the political mainstream by a rebellious street militancy that refuses to be ignored. The causality here cannot be overstated: we aren't talking about dismantling or even defunding carceral institutions today because oppressed communities asked nicely, engaged in civil debate, or tugged at the moral heartstrings of the nation. We're having these conversations because courageous rebels in Minneapolis and beyond responded to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery by marching, protesting, and lighting fires, by tearing statues from their pedestals, disrupting business as usual, and making clear that there will be consequences if something—*everything*—doesn't change (Gilmore, 2023). “The rich are only defeated,” counsels the great C.L.R. James, “when running for their lives” (James, 1963, p. 78). So it has been and so it shall continue to be.

Despite the virality of their spread and breadth of their scope, however, the 2020 rebellions remained a largely minoritarian affair. How did the actions of the few so rapidly shift the outlook of the many? We have seen this peculiar alchemy before. More than 150 years ago, the namesake of contemporary abolitionism made a similar qualitative leap. A combination of militant agitation, ethical intransigence, slave revolt, and armed insurrection by the few conspired to produce open war and a historical tipping-point in which the many were forced to pick a side, and the abolitionist demand went from being an extremist article of faith to something like a majority opinion within a few short years. It was this radical intransigence and the seismic political effects it unleashed that led the late Joel Olson to cast abolition as a zealotry bordering on fanaticism (Olson, 2007).

To be clear, however, this coming of age is not about age at all, but about the maturation of mass consciousness in and through struggle. As Frantz Fanon insisted in the context of revolutionary decolonization, which itself confronts and overturns the arrested development that colonization produces among and projects onto the colonized, maturity is an intrinsically collective project that is synonymous with consciousness, responsibility, unity, and liberation—and that requires “rigorous organization” (2004, p. 95). “The political education of the masses is meant to make adults out of them, not to make them infantile” (p. 124), Fanon wrote, national consciousness and the new decolonized human emerging in tandem, bound together. This maturation brings with it new challenges, however. We stand amid a movement of thousands demanding abolition in myriad different and even contradictory ways, and as a result, we confront the task of clarifying *what* we mean by abolition and *how* to achieve it.

Finding ourselves at this crossroads doesn't mean we have taken a wrong turn, however, that we should have been narrower in our framing, rigid in our theories, or exclusive in our organizing, accepting only the purest souls to the cause. Rather, this is just part of the work—growing pains, as it were. This doesn't mean that the work is easy. Today we confront the twin dangers of sectarian narrowness and amorphous breadth, dogmatic rigidity and an anything-goes, big-tent liberalism in





which all views are good—two equally cowardly postures united by the desire to evade theoretical and strategic conflict. But as the poet Antonio Machado once put it, in a phrase that has long inspired Latin American revolutionaries stumbling—bravely and clumsily—toward an as-yet unwritten future, “there is no path, the path is made by walking” (Machado, 1999, p. 203). We are condemned to make the path as we walk it, but this condemnation is also a liberation.

I thank the contributors to this Critical Exchange for making the path with me. To join these comrades in stumbling toward abolition would be an immense honor under any circumstances—to do so in conversation with *A World Without Police* is too much to bear. Each has already made crucial contributions to how we grasp abolition today, and I want to pause for a moment to emphasize their work. Charmaine Chua, one of our most important critical analysts of global logistics, is a militant organizer whose own praxis has led her to reflect on the contours of the “constant struggle” of abolition today (Chua, 2020). Travis Linnemann, one of a crucial cadre of radical criminologists, has dedicated his recent *The Horror of Police* (Linnemann, 2022) to unmasking the monstrosity that is contemporary policing. Dean Spade is a longtime abolitionist organizer and lawyer whose most recent book, *Mutual Aid*, centers the prefigurative, reconstructive aspect of abolition (Spade, 2020). And Jasmine Syedullah, who infuses Black feminist and queer critique into Buddhist practices, has recently formulated what she deems a “congregational abolition” (Syedullah, 2022). This is all an unnecessarily roundabout way of saying that I count myself lucky to even be here. In what follows, I’ll consider their contributions in two broad pairs. Roughly, Linnemann and Syedullah flesh out and extend my concept of the “pig majority,” its effects/affects, its practical and psychic contours, and how it limits our world and our imagination in the same gesture. Chua and Spade, by contrast, take aim directly at the fraught and increasingly pressing question of how abolishing carceral institutions means abolishing the state as well.

In *A World Without Police*, I speak of the pig majority to describe a reality in which policing is much bigger than the police. If police departments as formal institutions are undeniably central to upholding and reproducing the color line and the rule of capital, we can’t ignore that these institutions stand like the tip of an iceberg on an immense, submerged foundation that encompasses whiteness while exceeding it, that comprises judges, juries, neo-Nazis, and everyday citizens, and that spans the practical and psychic registers to shape how we understand our place in a world built around policing. Both Linnemann and Syedullah plumb this psychic register. For Linnemann, policing is fundamentally theological, indeed eschatological: “To study the police is to study death,” he writes. But this economy of mortality, this decision to let live or make die that for Ruth Wilson Gilmore is synonymous with racism itself, is not determined or distributed solely, or even primarily, by the police strictly speaking. Instead, as for Gilmore, the eschatology of policing is “state-sanctioned or extralegal” (Gilmore, 2007, p. 28) or both at





once, always invoking white terror—which we should understand in both its white supremacist and historically anti-communist valences.

Linnemann thus approaches the appointed guardians of order by centering their self-appointed shadows, emphasizing the “violent self-deputization” of the 2022 Buffalo supermarket shooter, who like so many others volunteered his life to protect an imagined world in which property and whiteness reign supreme against those who, despite having been property themselves, have always represented the most serious threats to both. This is the horror unleashed by the police but also by Pinkertons and Texas Rangers, by Derek Chauvin and Kyle Rittenhouse, and it remains an open question, as Joe Lowndes has asked, whether the “cherub-cheeked Rittenhouse in his red, white, and blue Crocs,” blurring the line between white supremacy and everyday Americana, is more terrifying and “ghoulish” than even Dylann Roof (2021). Two interrelated imperatives are crucial here. The first is that we take seriously the terror and horror that policing begets—not a metaphor but a very real affect produced by and productive of the world of police. The second follows from the first: that white terror isn’t external to us. “The horror we must all face is that this monstrous thing we have created and loosed upon the world was born of our own fear and insatiable desire for security,” Linnemann maintains, and on a certain level, affect must be defeated by affect.

Syedullah plumbs these affective depths still further, feeling around in the dark for what it means to “call the cops” in the world and in our heads—to appeal to authority both literally and figuratively. Particularly in academia, she asks to what structures of authorization we appeal and what punitive and hierarchical frames these uphold, even—or especially—when claiming to do the opposite. Certainly, the cops in our collective heads reflect something that we might call ideology, but on a deeper level. Perpetually scanning for threats shapes even our habit and behavior, encoding the world around us and its inhabitants. The logic of calling the cops, in other words, is a perverse way of “seeing like a state,” a blurry lens that produces a distorted understanding of safety and threat—despite prevailing narratives about “Karens,” we all want to talk to the manager sometimes. Syedullah urges us to resist this temptation, deepening abolitionist alternatives in movement spaces and in academia, where she poses a laudable call for academic engagement, even if my own jaded post-academic perspective sees too many academics solely concerned with what she deems “securing the right to be left alone” (full disclosure: I, too, like to be left alone).

Abolitionist theory and praxis, grounded in the lived experience of white supremacist state terror, offer an alternative vision of safety not built on calling the cops, “transforming wounds to words and words to worlds.” This world without police is a concrete reality built upon “immersive, emergent, diasporic yet integrated retreat... into self-organized community to build trust, mutual aid, and community defense.” But grounding this new world, for Syedullah, means overcoming the friend/enemy distinction most famously associated with the Nazi-



adjacent jurist Carl Schmitt, which she sees as the “fundamental principle of the carceral imagination.” Dividing the world in so Manichaeic a fashion, she worries, risks proliferating “an ever-expanding matrix of carceral policies, protocols, and politics of distrust and disgust” and, perhaps most perniciously, contributes to “a crisis of imagination.” At a certain point, it is enemies all the way down. Instead, abolition disintegrates the boundary between friends and enemies through the prophetic congregational community-building that she calls “friendship-to-come.”

By harnessing abolition to a friendship-to-come, Syedullah poses difficult questions about the pace and rhythm of radical change, specifically the balance between abolition’s two broad gestures: dismantling (oppositional-dialectical) the existing and reconstructing (refigurative-analectical) the new. As a political theorist who struggled with Schmitt, only to settle on the more revolutionary enmity of thinkers like Georges Sorel and Frantz Fanon, I take this challenge seriously. My starting point, however, is that we have many enemies to defeat, and the abolitionist dynamic thus requires a momentary hardening of the antagonistic boundary between the friends of abolition and its most ferocious enemies, some of whom might meet their fate in a latter-day Piazzale Loreto, Ipatiev House, or Pottawatomie Creek. The only way beyond such enmity is *through* it. But while “there is no need to waste one tear or one drop of ink” on them (James, 1963, p. 373), we are ultimately about abolishing social positions rather than the individuals occupying those positions at any given moment. While this will do little to assuage Syedullah’s worry about a “crisis of imagination,” I don’t believe this is a foregone conclusion.

In part, this is because confronting our unavoidable enemies goes hand-in-hand with the permanent work of transcending friend–enemy distinctions *within* that protean substance that is “the community”—resolving what Mao (1964) deemed “contradictions among the people.” This is community as a concretely expansive praxis, for example resisting the pitfalls whereby community self-defense becomes a para-police neighborhood watch by embracing carceral logics of suspicion, scrutiny, and ostracism. To the question Syedullah poses via Rachel Herzog, “Where does rage lead us?,” Fanon’s response is clear: while rage may explain why many join the struggle, vengeance “alone cannot nurture a war of liberation... hatred is not an agenda” (Fanon, 2004, p. 89). This insistence hinges Fanon’s first, Manichaeic stage of decolonization to the second: social revolution. But the difficulty, especially when we’re talking about carceral culture, is that one simply doesn’t change gears so easily. The shift from oppositional logics to the generosity of friendship-to-come, from identity to revolutionary internationalism, is hard enough for many to make in the course of a lifetime, much less the span of years—months, even—that for Fanon marked the pace of decolonization.

Or take Marx’s (1970, p. 57) definition of communism as “the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things,” which is similarly dialectical in the insistence on both enmity and imagination, both abolition and reconstruction, and



here we inevitably confront the question of the state, albeit in its broadest sense. What does it mean to think the abolition of the state through Marx? First, that abolition-communism is far broader than slavery and its direct heirs and instead stands against capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy all at once. Second, that it is a *real* movement—the emphasis was Marx’s own—meaning that, like the world without police, it already exists as a living, breathing reality, and that our task is to make it increasingly real in the world. And third, that while communism is often understood as strictly economic, it instead denotes a far broader abolitionist horizon that takes aim at “the present state of things” as a whole.

It is this question, of the state in all its senses, that both Chua and Spade take up. Here is perhaps the most inevitable of abolition’s growing pains, and one that has become increasingly central to debates today (see *Interrupting Criminalization*, 2022). Chua reads a latent critique of the state into my analysis of police reform and the communal self-defense movements I offer as alternatives to policing. Following Rustbelt Abolition Radio, she distinguishes three modalities of abolitionist organizing: procedural, insurrectionary, and autonomist. Of these three abolitionist ideal types, procedural abolition—although I cringe at the term—is the broadest, comprising strategies that engage directly with the state to “contest and *take* political power” and ultimately “invest it in a radically democratic organization of community safety by and for the people.” By contrast, insurrectionary abolition momentarily confronts the state while autonomist abolition builds prefigurative alternatives outside the state’s orbit. For Chua, the danger of procedural abolition—one shared by reformist and non-reformist reforms—is that *any* contact with the state carries a certain “friction” that threatens to undermine abolitionist aims—contaminating how we think while crowding out radical alternatives—and is subject to hard structural limits: “No state,” she writes, “would ever *agree* to defund itself.”

Spade doubles down on this structural analysis to stake out a hard, anti-state position for abolitionists today. The modern state in general, he argues, grew out of a long historical process of violently expropriating resources and power, a process only underlined by the “genocidal and colonial” specificity of the US state. And yet some notable abolitionists propose strategically leveraging the state to redistribute money and protect the most vulnerable—even defunding campaigns are built on the demand to re-fund state social services. Spade’s exasperation here is palpable: why would anyone, much less abolitionists, believe that the state could be anything but a repressive institution? And how could abolitionists possibly believe that we can dismantle “police, prisons, borders, and militaries”—institutions fundamentally “co-constitutive with the state form”—while leaving the underlying state intact? Here, Spade draws upon examples from labor, environmental, and immigration law to convincingly flip our collective script: rather than protect us, he shows, the state establishes limitations on what kinds of protection we can claim; rather than redistribute resources, it sets barriers to



claiming resources that are ultimately our own; and rather than prevent extraction, the state instead renders us permanently extractable resources. Against the state, Spade offers an unashamedly anarchist position whose fundamental principle is self-determination, and which shares much ground with Chua's insurrectionist and autonomist modalities.

The question, or rather the tension, of the state runs like a red thread throughout my work, and Lenin's *State and Revolution* has always been key to how I understand the dynamic of state abolition. To refresh: Lenin sought to stake out a position against not only those "anarchists" who demanded the immediate abolition of the state but also—and this side of the argument goes too often overlooked—those "opportunist" socialists who saw the state as a neutral institution that could be seized ready-made and put to revolutionary use. Against both, Lenin famously argued for seizing the bourgeois state before smashing and refashioning it into a temporary tool of the struggle (the oft-maligned "dictatorship of the proletariat") that would then "wither away" as the social contradictions that provide the state's *raison d'être* are overcome. As I note in *A World Without Police*, this formulation—according to which the state can only wither away insofar as social inequalities are eliminated—closely parallels abolitionist arguments for making police and prisons "obsolete."

Here, I want to raise three crucial caveats. First, the state is complex. As an observer of the Venezuelan revolutionary process—with all its radical possibilities and profound contradictions—the need for a complex and dynamic approach to the question of the state has always struck me as inescapable (2013, 2016). Refusing to engage the massive Venezuelan petro-state, much less the revolutionary movements grouped in and around Chavismo, has never been a viable revolutionary path, and hard experience has shown that the state itself is riven with internal ruptures, tensions, and potential points of leverage. In practice, this has meant resisting the tendency to fetishize the state either negatively or positively and understanding that, while certain state institutions might be unavoidable and necessary weapons in the short term, they are also supremely dangerous to popular power and must be wielded with the utmost caution pending abolition.

Second, we should resist formalism. As I argue in *Decolonizing Dialectics*, more important than the word is the thing, and this is doubly true of that thing we call "the state." We oppose the state for what it does, its effects in the world, not because it is called state. Given the substantive overlap between the political state as an institution, racial status, and the broader state of things (the status quo), the best way to attack and dismantle those broader structures is *not* through a narrow and formalistic emphasis on the state but through a broader strategy targeting the (economic, racial, gendered) state of things that upholds it (2017, p. 170). This has direct implications for policing, not only because policing is broader than the institution, but also because we have examples of non-police community



alternatives like the CRAC-PC in the Mexican state of Guerrero that nevertheless go by the name “community police.”

Third, structure isn’t all-powerful. Structural readings of state power and the “friction” movements encounter when engaging with it are absolutely necessary today in the face of abolitionist mainstreaming and a reformist counteroffensive. But taken too far, structural analyses—like all *structuralisms*—can be too reductive, exaggerating the power of our enemies while minimizing our own. In this view, all concessions we win look like a conspiracy to strengthen the state rather than the messy product of a clash between our own power and theirs: we bring an overwhelming force that destabilizes the existing order, which the system then scrambles to rearrange to ensure its material investments in whiteness and property. We should claim no easy victories, as Amílcar Cabral cautions, but nor should we concede easy defeats. If Spade rightly argues that the state shouldn’t be seen as protective or redistributive, it’s worth remembering that even the paltry protections, rights, and resources that it concedes are the product of struggle, without which the state would function as an undisturbed drivebelt binding economic to political power. Any reform, Chua writes, is “a process and a social relation,” but this also means that our own power is an essential ingredient in this relation that shouldn’t be minimized. No, states don’t voluntarily defund themselves, which is exactly why we don’t plan on giving them a choice.

Despite the severity of these critiques of the state, however, neither Chua nor Spade fall prey to dogmatic sectarianism but instead read “procedural” abolitionist strategies—and defund campaigns in particular—as complex experiments capable of producing a whole spectrum of countervailing effects. While fighting for non-reformist reforms might legitimize the state in some ways, it can also symbolically subvert the world of police by disarming the cops in our heads, subject municipal budgets to heightened scrutiny, and above all bring people together in the streets and beyond—this last piece is key. As Chua concedes, insurrectionary and autonomist approaches aren’t immune to some of these same dangers: just because movements ignore the state, Chua writes, “the state doesn’t ignore them”—echoing Joel Olson’s (2009) critique of the mere oscillation among anarchist organizers “Between Infoshops and Insurrections,” autonomist alternatives and street clashes. Rather than reject any modality of abolitionist struggle out of hand, however, Spade asks the crucial question for organizers today: “Does it matter?” Can we do joint work despite disagreeing on the question of the state? The answer is both yes and no. Or better: *yes* to building broad movements and abolitionist experiments, but doing so with an awareness that the abolitionist horizon permeates our understanding of strategy and tactics alike, dictating our ratio of electoral to autonomist work for example, and the faith we invest in each.

It’s possible to envision a modality in which the procedural, insurrectionary, and autonomist all work hand-in-hand, albeit in shifting and radically unpredictable ways. This was true in Venezuela, where a mass 1989 insurrection



grounded in autonomous territorial self-defense made the 1998 elections matter in ways they otherwise would not have, seizing strategic leverage points within the state and unleashing further subterranean earthquakes seeking to dismantle that state and build grassroots alternatives. Or think of Cochabamba, Bolivia, where the dialectics of insurrectionary autonomy proved more cunning still: communities abandoned by the state in the 1990s stepped up to dig their own wells and provide water to isolated communities. But when the state came back in to sell off water rights to Bechtel in 1999, those same communities rebelled, and the rest is history. Everything hinges, as Chua eloquently puts it, on striking a “fine balance, learning to protect each other while simultaneously building a mass movement that threatens the state, opposes its deathly institutions, and opens the gate for something new.”

Or indeed, blows that gate wide open.

Geo Maher

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