

Why Socialists Must be Abolitionists

Challenging Carcerality in Socialist Spaces

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It has become fashionable to repeat abolitionist slogans and demands—All Cops Are Bastards (ACAB), “defund,” or “abolish.” In the Philippines, it is in vogue to demand the defunding or the abolition of the NTF-ELCAC, the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict—an explicitly anti-communist agency with a mandate for red-baiting. These demands are taken verbatim from the Black and abolitionist insurrections in the United States, but they are often repeated as divorced from the question of carcerality. These calls to defund or abolish NTF-ELCAC seek to expunge only the worst offending symptoms of carcerality, leaving much of carceral logic intact—the police, the prisons, the penal plantations, the borders, etc. Indeed, in Jose Maria Sison’s theory of National Democracy, the problem is not policing and incarceration itself, but merely its “mercenary tradition” that needs to be expunged.¹ Much of the discourse on police and prisons in the Philippine Left remains on the level of liberal ideology—that only *some* aspects of policing and incarceration need to be abated (in this case, the red-baiting), and that the institutions of carcerality can still be used to serve a greater good. But a socialist movement must oppose carceral institutions—the police, prisons and systems of surveillance—and challenge the very logic of these institutions—carcerality. To merely target the institutions of carcerality and not its logic risks reconstituting carceral institutions in new forms. In the 1986 People Power Revolution, the left and liberal opposition in the Philippines may have succeeded in abolishing the dreaded Philippine Constabulary, the police force of the Marcos dictatorship, but the logic of carcerality remained and reconstituted another carceral institution in the Philippine National Police (PNP).

Yet the logic of carcerality is not limited to the systems of domination that characterize our capitalist society. Carcerality is also a logic that permeates the socialist movement. The most obvious and egregious example of this are leftists who defend mass incarceration and mass deportations under the former Soviet Union and the current People’s Republic of China, but also more subtly through social democrats and democratic socialists upholding borders, police, and prisons. In an example of the subtle way carcerality persists among radicals, it has become common in radical spaces in the Philippines to hear “abolish the Philippine National Police” followed by proposals for the creation of a decentralized, local, or refounded police—again, a repeat of replacing the Philippine Constabulary with the PNP. Such proposals fail to address the root causes of the violence of policing, merely rearranging how this violence is carried out. It is not enough to oppose carceral institutions: the very logic of carcerality must be interrupted in our own spaces and expunged from our programs.

Against the logic of carcerality, socialists must adopt abolition, and struggle to defund the carceral systems of policing, incarceration, surveillance, and borders. We have to reorient our idea of justice away from carcerality because these institutions and their logic reinforce the systems of domination facing socialists and the working class. To challenge carcerality in the socialist milieu, we need to critically appraise how socialist projects used carceral logic in ways that hurt the self-emancipation of the working class. To fight for abolition at home, we cannot legitimize carcerality in our favorite states abroad, for the logic of carcerality is built into the capitalist world-system.

Instead of carceral institutions, socialists must learn from abolitionists in recovering alternative approaches to avoid and minimize harm; approaches that are preventive and center survivor accountability. Carceral institutions do not keep people safe but are rather mechanisms for the mass production of unsafety.

Carcerality and Class

“Carceral” is an adjective meaning relating to incarceration. However, “carcerality” cannot be limited to police and prisons. Carcerality is a logic and ideology grounded in social relationships of control and subjugation, predicated on violence or its threat. Beyond the prison walls, carceral institutions include the psychiatric hospital, the border patrols, and Orwellian modes of surveillance: all mechanisms by which to police and incarcerate.

As a logic and ideology, carcerality extends beyond these institutions to uphold the oppressive economic and social relations within a particular society. Mass incarceration was the solution to a Black working class in the

¹ Jose Maria Sison, “The Mercenary Tradition in The AFP,” in *Struggle for National Democracy*, (1995).

United States that could not be employed and exploited for their labor.² To the problem of an Indigenous non-Christian population in Canadian society, the carceral solution was to subjugate indigenous children to residential schools in order to forcibly separate them from their culture. Even something as supposedly politically neutral as responding to the COVID-19 pandemic is affected by the logic of carcerality: instead of medical professionals with the competencies to respond to a pandemic, former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte police officers and military generals in charge, those empowered to shoot and kill the very people a pandemic response is supposed to protect.³ Carcerality profoundly shapes how institutions manage the political and the social.

Carcerality treats certain classes of people as disposable through the process of criminalization. The process of criminalization deems certain actions as “illegal,” and certain people and whole communities as “criminal.”⁴ Indeed, in the late 19th century, free Black women were targeted with vagrancy laws to criminalize their freedom and forcibly integrate them into the system of wage-labor.⁵

However, carcerality is not *merely* the legal framework for criminalization: carcerality is its ideology, *its animating force*, in service of upholding the oppressive relations in society. For Black women, carcerality upholds patriarchy, racism, and wage-labor. For indigenous peoples, carcerality upholds colonization. When slavery still openly persisted in the world, carcerality upheld slavery for the enslaved. For the Philippines, carcerality upholds the ruling class in place through red-baiting, military occupations of the periphery, and constant surveillance of the left. For the international empire of capital, carcerality is used virtually everywhere to suppress working class militancy and protect the capitalist class.

For socialists, carcerality and its tools, policing and criminalization, is the way the capitalist ruling class enforces its regime. Modern police and prisons have only been systematized in the past few hundred years and their purpose has always been the oppression of subaltern classes, be they the enslaved, proletarians, or colonized subjects. In the Philippines, Spanish colonists created the police and prisons, which American colonists reconstituted as the dreaded Philippine Constabulary. As abolitionists have noted, the Philippine Constabulary became the model for the 1905 founding of the Pennsylvania State Police used to crush militant workers.⁶ The techniques of policing used to control colonized subjects in the Philippines were then used to control proletarianized subjects in the US. This fact is something already intuitively understood by proletarians, the colonized and the enslaved: prisons, police, and surveillance are created to undermine their class power and organization. From the earliest days of when the capitalist mode of production began to cohere in England, expropriation and primitive accumulation “was accompanied by systematic violence and terror, organized through the criminal sanction, public searches, the prisons, martial law, capital punishment, banishment, forced labor, and colonization.”⁷ The tools developed from carcerality have deep roots in the coherence of the capitalist mode of production and the management of subaltern peoples and are ultimately bound up together.

Because carceral institutions were constructed specifically to control and subjugate subaltern classes, it is impossible for subaltern classes to use carceral institutions for the abolition of their class. “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” as Audre Lorde reminds us.⁸ Slaves seeking to abolish slavery do not use whips and chains to emancipate themselves but rather destroy these tools of slavery in their emancipation. Carcerality, its logic, and its institutions uphold and reinforce specific class relations. What this means for workers is that the tools of proletarianization—wage-labor, value, money, carcerality, policing, and criminalization—cannot be used for their

² Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 21.

³ I thank Kenneth Cardenas for his understanding of the “logic of counterinsurgency” in the pandemic response. Elsewhere and independently, I also discuss the pandemic response in Simoun Magsalin, “Abolitionism Against Pandemic Policing in the Philippines,” *ROAR Magazine*, September 4, 2020, <https://roarmag.org/essays/philippines-pandemic-abolition/>.

⁴ Critical Resistance, *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ Saidiya Hartman, “The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (July 2018): 465–90, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-6942093>.

⁶ Alex S. Vitale, *The End of Policing* (London ; New York: Verso, 2017), ch. 2.

⁷ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 49; See also ch. 2.

⁸ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984).

emancipation but can and must be destroyed through the self-emancipation and self-abolition of their class. A revolution that reconstitutes carcerality in a new set of institutions will reproduce class relations, rather than erode or abolish them. Revolution, then, must not only be anti-capitalist (whether this be socialist, anarchist, or communist), but must also be *abolitionist*. This is something many socialists failed to understand historically and still misunderstand today.

Carcerality and Socialism

Carcerality is a part of socialist history. The 1917 Russian Revolution saw the emptying of the Tsar's prisons and concentration camps and the dismemberment of the Tsarist secret police, but the Bolsheviks reconstituted these as the dreaded gulags and Cheka. To make the continuity between the Tsar's terror and the Red Terror all the more obvious, the Cheka, as well as its successor, the KGB, were housed at the Lubyanka, which once hosted the headquarters of the secret police of Catherine the Great.⁹ In failing to problematize carcerality, the Bolsheviks could not understand that institutions of oppression—police and prisons—could never be used for liberatory ends by the working class.

Some may argue that we cannot fault the Bolsheviks for their carcerality if they were limited by their time. After all, opposition to carcerality within the 19th century Atlantic proletarian milieu was largely limited to the anarchists.¹⁰ Famous anarchists like Peter Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta, Voltairine de Cleyre, Alexander Berkman, and Emma Goldman all wrote against the prison and carceral society. Through their work, anarchists developed a storied tradition of critical criminology that prefigured many of the abolitionist movements we see today. However, a failure for anarchist criminology to break beyond the bounds of anarchism and engage with non-anarchist socialist tendencies (such as the Bolsheviks) marred their key contributions to relative obscurity.

Beyond anarchism, the revolutionary spirit animating the 1917 Russian Revolution inspired many in Russia to imagine alternatives to carcerality. Even Vladimir Lenin, in his April Theses, called for the abolition of police.¹¹ Police and courts were abolished, and popular courts and judicial innovations were experimented with. As brian bean describes it, “[n]otions of guilt and punishment of individuals were questioned in ways that presaged current conceptions of alternatives to punishment and present an understanding of crime as a social problem to be solved collectively.”¹² Bolshevik theorists from Evgeny Pashukanis to Victor Serge theorized conceptions of justice beyond the bourgeois notions of carcerality. Serge, for example, looked to preventive models of harm reduction:

*The building of the new society—which will be without prisons—does not begin with the construction of ideal prisons. This is beyond doubt; but the impulse is there, and a thorough reform has begun. Like the legislature, the courts, from the clearest class standpoint, take account of the social causes of crime, and the social origins and situation of the criminal.*¹³

However, the degeneration of the Russian revolution due to civil war, foreign invasion, and revolutionary isolation permitted the worst violent excesses. As brian bean describes it, “the defeat of Bolshevik abolitionism must ultimately be understood as one part of the defeat of the Russian Revolution itself.”¹⁴

Chinese communists also instituted carcerality through the use of secret police and “laogai” penal labor camps patterned after the KGB and the gulags, respectively. In the excited moments of the Cultural Revolution, the sharpest minds and most advanced militants were those targeted for repression by the Party-state. Yu Luoke wrote against the conservative Red Guards for their use of “bloodline theory,” a new system of privilege whereby children of

⁹ Dan Richardson and Jonathon Reynolds, *The Rough Guide to Moscow* (New York: Rough Guides, 2009), 139.

¹⁰ See for example the collection of Anthony J. II Nocella, Mark Seis, and Jeff Shantz, eds., *Classic Writings in Anarchist Criminology* (AK Press, 2020).

¹¹ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. “The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution [a.k.a. The April Theses]” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2005, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/04.htm>.

¹² brian bean, “Abolish the Police,” *Rampant Magazine*, March 31, 2020, <https://rampantmag.com/2020/03/abolish-the-police/>.

¹³ Victor Serge, *What Every Radical Should Know about State Repression: A Guide for Activists* (Seven Stories Press, 2024), ch. 4.

¹⁴ bean, “Abolish the Police”.

Party members believed their blood superior to that of other workers, and for this he was executed.¹⁵ Elsewhere, conservative Red Guards would win over radical Red Guards. As the Cultural Revolution reached its close, the Hunan Provincial Proletarian Revolutionary Great Alliance Committee (Sheng-wu-lien) presciently saw the emergence of a “Red capitalist class” in China and appealed to Mao Zedong, but Mao used the Party-state to repress and incarcerate them.¹⁶

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, young students and others who grew up in those formative years gambled to preserve the revolutionary gains at the streets of Beijing and at Tinamaan Square in 1989, but the capitalist-roaders—now firmly at the helm of the Party-state—used the full force of police powers to crush the revolutionary students and workers.¹⁷

Social democrats have also reproduced carcerality. Social democratic parties have been the parties of border and immigration control, of increased funding to the police, and of expanding prisons. British Labour is the most offensive of these, promising police expansions and more carceral false solutions, even defending the border regime,¹⁸ but this is characteristic of the majority of social democrats today. Even democratic socialist darling Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who ran on a platform to “abolish ICE” (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement), moderated to “defund ICE,” eventually voted to fund it.¹⁹ Ultimately, winnability and “penal populism” win social democrats over to carcerality.

Socialists reproduce carcerality even when they do not hold State power. In the Philippines, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) reproduces carcerality using its armed wing, the New Peoples Army (NPA). While CPP-NPA cadre often make a show of using “people’s courts” that mobilize popular participation to try those they deem criminal, if the people’s court delivers an unfavorable judgment the cadre can overrule the decision and execute the defendant anyway.²⁰ While the people’s court does have the potential to be an excarceral institution that breaks with the logic of carcerality to deal with harm in a healthy way, the system of people’s courts instituted by the CPP-NPA instead reproduces the same harms as capitalism’s carceral institutions. What the people’s courts do well is integrate the participation of people themselves in the process of justice, but the ability of cadres to overrule and disregard non-punitive decisions by the people themselves renders public participation of justice moot, a Potemkin show.

The CPP-NPA has a history of support for carceral tactics. In the 1990s, the CPP-NPA detained, tortured, and executed hundreds of its own cadres and mass base in an “orgy” of paranoia during the anti-infiltration purges.²¹ It mattered little that the CPP-NPA was hardly infiltrated to begin with, and evidence points to the innocence of victims. Communists were executed by both the forces of the Philippine state and their erstwhile comrades. More recently in 2016–2017, the CPP-NPA wholeheartedly supported the War on Drugs by the fascist then-president Rodrigo Duterte.²² While the CPP would later disavow having supported Duterte or his drug war, their support of fascist policing against the working class is already public record. The mass slaughter of working class Filipinos would only be begrudgingly recognized by the CPP after Duterte broke ties with the communists, their opportunism having won no gains for the mass movement.

Carcerality is not restricted to communist movements on the left. Revolutionary anarchists in the Spanish Civil War also operated concentration camps.²³ More recently, in the 2020 uprisings, the anarchist-inflected Capitol Hill

¹⁵ Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* (Harvard University Press, 2014), ch. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

¹⁷ Mia Wong, “When Communists Crushed the International Workers’ Movement,” *Lausan*, June 6, 2021, <https://lausancollective.com/2021/communists-crushed-international-workers-movement/>.

¹⁸ Tom Belger, “Labour Policy Tracker: Full List of New (and Ditched) Pledges That Could Shape Manifesto,” *LabourList*, November 13, 2023, <https://labourlist.org/2023/11/labour-conference-what-policies-announced-pledges-manifesto/>; BBC News, “Labour Pledges to Put More Police in the Community,” *BBC News*, May 30, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1rrdzrjz1no>.

¹⁹ Scott Jay, “Abolishing ICE by Funding It,” *Black Rose/Rosa Negra Anarchist Federation*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.blackrosefed.org/aoc-abolish-ice-vote/>.

²⁰ This is the case with “Batman” in *A Rustling of Leaves: Inside the Philippine Revolution* (Kalasikas Productions, Channel 4, 1988).

²¹ Robert Francis B. Garcia, *To Suffer Thy Comrades: How the Revolution Decimated Its Own*, Revised edition (Anvil Publishing, 2018); Alex de Jong, “Hunting Specters: A Political History of the Purges in the Communist Party of the Philippines.”

²² Joseph Scalice, “First as Tragedy, Second as Farce: Marcos, Duterte and the Communist Parties of the Philippines,” *World Socialist Web Site*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2020/09/01/lect-s01.html>.

²³ Augustin Souchy, *With the Peasants of Aragon: Libertarian Communism in the Liberated Areas* (Cienfuegos Press; Soil of Liberty, 1982), 13–14, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/augustin-souchy-with-the-peasants-of-aragon>.

Autonomous Zone saw self-proclaimed people's police shoot Black teens.²⁴ In both cases we see that those in the libertarian left cannot count themselves immune to the reproduction of carcerality.

Carcerality is not something restricted to state socialist movements, but is something that can be reproduced by movements in and out of power. In Russia and China, the working class was disciplined to restore the regime of wage-labor and work, paving the way for total capitalist restoration. In countries with social democrats, the systems of police, prisons, and borders were affirmed for the reproduction of capitalist social relations. In the insurgent projects across the world, insurgents reinforced the subordinated position of those they claimed to represent. One reason carcerality is reproduced across all these tendencies on the left is that it presents itself as realistic.

The False Realism of Carcerality

“Carceral socialists” have much in common with “carceral feminists.” Carceral feminism “describes an approach that sees increased policing, prosecution, and imprisonment as the primary solution to violence against women.”²⁵ As Victoria Law shows, however, the carceral institutions that are supposed to protect women harm them instead. Women who call the police on their abusers can be subject to arrest and police violence instead. Indeed, carceral feminists “have enabled punitive policies that harm not just those who commit violence (by exposing them to sexual and other violence in jails and prisons), but also make marginalized women more likely to be arrested, prosecuted, or deported when police respond to domestic violence.”²⁶ In contrast, anti-carceral and abolition feminists argue that violence must be combated and managed at an interpersonal level without the state, its carceral institutions and its carceral logic.²⁷

So, why is it that feminist and socialist movements use carceral means to push their policies? Ultimately, socialists use carcerality because it provides an illusion of agency. This illusion of agency is *spectacular* in the sense used by the Situationists: it presents itself as reality but is actually false.²⁸ Instituting a people's police or deploying gulags and secret police are illusions of agency that present themselves as a projection of class power, that are in fact merely projections of *state* power.

Contrary to popular belief, state power and class power are not synonymous. Class power, especially that of the working class, is collective power enacted by the members of that class—as a class-for-itself—while state power is constituted for the defense of a particular political order, whether that be a capitalist political order or that of a party-state. As a class-for-itself, rather than merely constituted as a class (a class-in-itself), the working class would act under their own power for their own genuine interests, rather than the defense of a particular political order like a party-state. Indeed, if the working class as a class-for-itself fights for any order, it would rather be an *anti-political* order by which the logics of capital, the state, and the political order's carcerality are totally subverted and subsumed. The carceral illusions of agency put forward by a revolutionary party-state are clothed in revolutionary apparel. Thus, the power to execute or incarcerate people *seems* like the revolutionary agency of a class to self-abolish their class, but in actuality, this power merely *reinforces* class relations through carcerality, on behalf of a party-state and in the name of the working class. Throughout history, millions of working class people have been incarcerated or executed by various states, nominally acting in the name of a revolutionary order but in reality *reinforcing* class relations through carcerality. In these instances, the working class remains a criminalized and policed class: in other words, a *proletarianized* class. Indeed, a working class-for-itself would not see the need to summarily incarcerate and execute members of its own class. Only the insecurity of a party acting in the name of a class-in-itself would see the need to project and defend their use of carceral state power.

Carcerality also presents itself as a natural, even inevitable, feature of human social life. In this sense, carcerality is similar to the notion of “capitalist realism” as theorized by the late Mark Fisher.²⁹ Just as capitalist realism

²⁴ BBC News, “Two Teenagers Shot in Seattle's Chop Autonomous Zone,” *BBC News: US & Canada*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53224445>.

²⁵ Victoria Law, “Against Carceral Feminism,” October 17, 2014, <https://jacobin.com/2014/10/against-carceral-feminism/>.

²⁶ Anna Terwiel, “What Is Carceral Feminism?” *Political Theory* 48, no. 4 (August 2020), 4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591719889946>.

²⁷ Law; Terwiel.

²⁸ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (2014), <http://bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/index.htm>.

²⁹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009).

proclaims “there is no alternative to capitalism,”³⁰ carcerality proclaims “there is no alternative to police and prisons.” Just like capitalism, however, carcerality is neither a natural nor an inevitable feature of human social life. But while capitalist realism was only generalized following the collapse of so-called “actually existing socialism” in places like the Soviet Union, carcerality has long been presented as a natural and inevitable feature of society, leading socialists to uncritically use carceral tools of policing and incarceration, believing them to be an extension of class power. Victor Serge, for example, at first fiercely defended the use of the Cheka and revolutionary terror,³¹ seeing it as absolutely necessary. Only later in life did he acknowledge how the Cheka undermined the revolution in Russia with its brutality.³²

In the same intellectual tradition as many other critical philosophers, Fisher declares that “emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a ‘natural order,’ must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.”³³ In the same way, abolitionists must expose carcerality as historically contingent—neither natural nor inevitable. That carcerality has not always existed nor has existed everywhere suggests the possibility that it could no longer exist again. Destroying the false realism of carcerality begins by eliminating its ideology and logic from our spaces, to forward an emancipatory vision that conceives of class power as the abolition of classes. Socialism and abolition must be considered part of the same project. The struggle against policing and incarceration is also the struggle for socialism and vice versa.

Socialism and Abolition

Previous socialist movements failed to recognize how the reproduction of carceral institutions reinforced rather than undermined class relations. Whether at the hand of the ruling capitalist order or that of the party-state, the working class remained proletarianized: criminalized, surveilled, policed, and subjected to incarceration and involuntary servitude. Without an understanding of carcerality and a commitment to abolition, radicals will never transcend capitalist ideology.

To think of “proletarian” carceral institutions is to think of the proletariat in bourgeois terms. How the proletariat expresses class power cannot and will not look like capitalist class power. Bourgeois class power is constituted for the reproduction of class relations, whereas proletarian class power is constituted for the abolition of class relations. Hence, in the former Soviet Union and the current People’s Republic of China, attempts by proletarians to abolish their class were precisely undermined by “communists” who reconstituted carceral institutions to control—indeed, to *carcer*³⁴—proletarian militancy. In doing so, the party-state reconstituted capitalist society in “communist” colors and continued to suppress the proletariat, this time through a “socialist” state. Carceral institutions maintain the reproduction of class relations rather than their abolition, so their reconstitution extinguished the possibility of something qualitatively new—a classless society we know as communism. This classless society cannot be reached through the means used by class society to reproduce and defend class society. Socialists must learn from past mistakes and look to create qualitatively new institutions and ideologies that definitively break with capitalist society and its logics, including carcerality.

Towards this end, the Black radical tradition offers a unique perspective. To quote the Black Panther Fred Hampton,

*We’re not gonna fight fire with fire, we’re gonna fight fire with water. We’re not gonna fight racism with racism, we’re gonna fight racism with solidarity. **We’re not gonna fight capitalism with black***

³⁰ Ibid, 7–8.

³¹ Serge, *What Every Radical Should Know about State Repression*, ch. 4.

³² Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (NYRB Classics, 2011), 94.

³³ Fisher, 17.

³⁴ Latin of *to enclose*, root word of incarceration.

*capitalism like some of these punks in the city of Chicago want to do, we're gonna fight capitalism with socialism.*³⁵

In just the same way, we cannot fight carcerality with carcerality, we cannot fight carceral capitalism with carceral “communism,” we fight carceral capitalism with *abolition communism*. Specifically, an abolition communism which understands that struggles to abolish classes are also struggles to abolish carcerality, the expression of capitalist class power. Abolition communism makes proletarians aware of their task to abolish themselves as a class and abolish proletarianization embodied by the police and prisons.

For socialists under our current capitalist society, the struggle for abolition is the struggle against bourgeois class power. Struggling for the defunding of the police and emptying the prisons means to deprive the bourgeoisie of their apparatus of control, which creates more space for proletarians to organize freely. Socialists practicing abolition must take care not to legitimate carcerality by appealing to its use. It is pointless to demand for the incarceration of plunderers like Imelda Marcos or Donald Trump because the function of police and prisons are precisely for the control and subjugation of proletarians, not members of the ruling class. One cannot legitimate carcerality for our enemies but undermine it for our friends. Carcerality is a logic that must be abandoned altogether in the struggle for the abolition of classes.

Abolition Communism

Abolition communism is not new to socialist politics. Strains can be found in anarchism, Bolshevism, and the anti-carceral Black radical tradition. Abolition communism explicitly gives name to these preexisting tendencies. Abolition communism integrates both abolitionist and communist consciousness, understanding the transitions to abolition and communism as part of the same struggle. Abolition communism is the dismantling of carceral institutions (policing, incarceration, etc.) *alongside* and *as part of* the dismantling of wage-labor, the state, and the world of work *with the understanding* that carcerality is central to the rule of capital. Indeed, Robin D.G. Kelley noted that abolition is something very familiar to communists from Marx and Engels to Lenin.³⁶

The specter of abolition communism invites us to imagine positive alternatives beyond punitive, carceral realities and false solutions. How a revolutionary working class deals with harm cannot look like the abject use of terror deployed to proletarianize them. The violence of abolition and liberation is of a different character than that of oppression and ruling terror. While revolutions will be violent affairs, the reduction of the revolution to a contest of mass murder between revolutionaries and reactionaries misses the point. The social revolution is not the transfer of power from one class to another, or one set of rulers to another, but the transition from a class society towards a classless one. In this sense, social revolutions *subvert* social relations *more* than they inflict violence.

What that means can be seen in the first proletarian revolution of the Paris Commune, where the working class smashed the edifice of the guillotine. Once, the guillotine was a revolutionary symbol, but by the time of the Communards, it became the image of the state's repression of the working class.³⁷ The death penalty, and summary execution in particular, has always been a tool used to crush and proletarianize the working class.

But again, this revolutionary transformation towards abolition communism will still be violent. The greatest abolitionist revolution was the self-emancipation of the enslaved in Haiti, and there it was already unthinkable for the self-emancipated to take up the tool of slavery upon their oppressors. In Haiti, the character of revolutionary violence was crucially *not the extreme violence of slavery*. In the same way when we think of abolition communism for our own time, the violence of a proletariat-in-abolition that asserts its class rulership, not for class supremacy but for the abolition of all classes, *will likewise have a different character of violence* than from what we see from

³⁵ Fred Hampton, “We Have to Protect Our Leaders!”, by Fred Hampton,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2020, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/hampton/1969/05/19.htm>, emphasis added.

³⁶ “Abolition Communism with Robin D.G. Kelley and Ruth Wilson Gilmore,” <https://www.youtube.com/live/AWD-aBkX6aW0?si=POBjPzdMdhmxFbzX>.

³⁷ Journal of the Paris Commune, cited in and translated by CrimethInc.: “Against the Logic of the Guillotine : Why the Paris Commune Burned the Guillotine—and We Should Too,” *CrimethInc.*, April 8, 2019, <https://crimethinc.com/2019/04/08/against-the-logic-of-the-guillotine-why-the-paris-commune-burned-the-guillotine-and-we-should-too>.

the death machine of our current world characterized by borders, prisons, police, state terror, surveillance, penal servitude, and all.

In class war, we will undoubtedly see instances like the alleged assassination of Brian Thompson, the CEO of UnitedHealthcare. Such actions will be part of a class war that strikes against the world that proletarianizes. Such actions are not to be condemned because, they are different from the violence enacted by the state and capitalism. This does not mean that abolitionists are those who celebrate or resort to vigilantism. The point is that conditions of class war are different from the internal character of how the working class and socialist milieu treats themselves and their members, and the character and condition of working-class rulership towards self-abolition.

When it comes to how socialists deal with their mass base, the conduct of communists such as the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN(M)), and the Shining Path are carceral and deplorable in how they inflicted terror on their mass bases. The CPP's purge of their own cadre and their assassination campaign against others on the Philippine left could only prefigure a regime of terror for the sake of party dictatorship rather than the rule of a class-in-abolition.³⁸ Similarly, the Maoists of Nepal enacted violence on the very peasantry they claimed to represent in the course of setting up People's Governments.³⁹ The massacre of indigenous people and their children in the town of Lucanamarca by the Shining Path also betrays the very mass base communist revolution is to be built upon.⁴⁰ This is not conduct becoming of militants engaged in class warfare because the victims were overwhelmingly comrades, mass bases, and workers in struggle, not class enemies. When it comes to revolution, violence may be unavoidable, but *on whom* this violence is enacted matters a great deal.

Rather than the paranoia of mass murder, abolition communism challenges us to find abolitionist tools that can deal with harm in the movement *right now* and prefigure a future of abolition communism. Many in the working classes have been dealing with harm in their communities outside of and in spite of the state.⁴¹ Their inability to turn to the state and its apparatus of violence for reparation necessitates the development of different approaches. Just as Marx and Engels noted that "the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development,"⁴² abolitionists suggest that the alternative approaches and practices of the working class can be the starting point for abolition. Abolitionists give name to these: harm reduction, transformative justice, or survivor-centered accountability processes. The Black Panthers, for example, showed the world how Black communities could self-manage their safety. However, abolition does not mean lionizing each and every mode of extrastatal mode of conflict management. For example, a contributing factor to the Black Panther's decline was the routine use of corporal punishment as a means of maintaining authority within the Party.⁴³ The work of abolition communism will necessitate adjudicating between the different approaches the working class developed to deal with harm and then elevating those we would like to see as part of the emancipated and classless world we want to build.

The character of effective working class rule entails moving towards the self-abolition of the working class and therefore the abolition of all class distinctions. The state of this self-abolishing working-class rule is often called the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is a state wherein the class with the only ability to abolish itself and thus abolish all classes takes rule of the whole of society, and in doing so, moves to abolish class distinctions. What was key in the early Bolshevik abolitionist tendencies was the wisdom that the character of justice by and from working people is of a different character from the terror the ruling class has afflicted on working people throughout history. However, the task of abolition communism, of finding alternatives to party-state-sanctioned murder, to mass incarceration, will always be a difficult task. Ultimately, the Soviet Party-state understood their capacity for violence in bourgeois

³⁸ For the assassination campaign of those in the Philippine left, see Pierre Rousset, "The CPP-NPA-NDF 'Hit List' – a Preliminary Report," *International Viewpoint*, March 2005, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070101093913/http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article616>.

³⁹ Kiyoko Ogura, "Maoist People's Government, 2001–05: The Power in Wartime," in *Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of Democratization in Nepal and Its Neighbours*, ed. David N Gellner and Krishna Hachhethu (SAGE Publications, 2008), 175–231, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10272432>.

⁴⁰ Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación CVR, "La Masacre De Lucanamarca (1983)," *Peru: Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación*, August 28, 2003, <https://www.cverdad.org.pe/ifinal/pdf/TOMO%20VII/Casos%20Ilustrativos-UIE/2.6.%20LUCANAMARCA.pdf>.

⁴¹ *Everyday Practices of Transformative Justice*.

⁴² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Preface to the the 1882 Russian Edition," in *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marxists Internet Archive, 2000, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm>.

⁴³ Charles Edwin Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Black Classic Press, 2005), 408.

terms, rather than the innate emancipatory capacity the proletarianized and working classes can do for their self-emancipation and self-abolition.

More concretely, this abolition communist transition entails the working class, as a class-for-itself, tearing down prison walls, freeing incarcerated and enslaved proletarians,⁴⁴ and smashing the state's capacity for terrorism by dismantling its police and armies. This is no different from the Haitian revolutionaries burning down the plantations and smashing the edifice of slavery. Indeed, these actions have been the natural and spontaneous response of working people during revolutions, including the French and Russian revolutions. But after this transition, it is crucial that the logic of carcerality not be reproduced, lest class rulership devolve into state rulership again. This is because the character of proletarian rule—whether that be called the semi-state or the dictatorship of the proletariat—is a state that is always-already withering away, while a society characterized by state rulership prioritizes state survival over the gradual abolition of class distinctions, including and especially the abolition of the carceral functions of that state. What matters is the materiality of the transition: will it be a transition towards classlessness or towards a reinforcement of carcerality and therefore proletarianization?

There is no doubt that the revolutionary defense of working-class rule will entail the repression of reaction. Even anarchists are not swayed by illusions of a peaceable transition. But will a class-for-itself acting towards self-abolition use the same means of revolutionary defense as a party-state acting in the name of a class-in-itself? This is doubtful because the working class or proletariat are not the capitalists or the bourgeoisie, and to imagine the proletarian police, prisons, borders, and all, is to then think of the proletariat in bourgeois terms, when the proletariat as a class has as its historical mission its self-abolition, not its self-preservation.⁴⁵ No, the ways and means by which a proletariat-in-abolition deals with harm and revolutionary defense will not and cannot be on bourgeois terms. In place of the familiar modes of repression and terror that the ruling class has used against working people for centuries, the proletariat-in-abolition puts into place the marginalized practices that that class has nurtured in spite of the state and capitalism.

Under our current society, we can identify seeds that, in the revolution, will bloom into new approaches for human emancipation and flourishing. Until then, defining the contours of abolition communism will always be a utopian thought experiment. What has always mattered is the material reality of carcerality and how it plays into counterrevolution and defeat, whether before taking power or after. The seeds we have now—harm reduction, survivor-centered support, transformative justice—are to be nurtured and developed, but there has never been and will never be a definitive plan for communism, so it is also so that there will never be a definitive plan for abolition communism. What we do have are seeds in this society that can become something more in the revolutionary moment, just how money and commodities existed since antiquity but only became universalized under specific historical contingencies.

What is clear is that abolition communism is the unity of abolitionist and socialist programs. This means seeing defunding the police, decriminalization, and decarceration as part of the same struggle for higher wages, lower rents, and the eventual steps towards communism itself. Challenging carcerality in socialist spaces means rejecting the defense of execution and mass incarceration by one's favorite regimes or insurgent movements, and seeing that the struggle against carcerality in those countries is part of the same international struggle against capital itself. Challenging carcerality means challenging and rejecting carceral modes of relating to one another and our mass bases as a means of securing authority over the movement and mass bases. Practicing abolition communism *right now* as socialists and abolitionists means taking to heart harm reduction, survivor-centered accountability processes, and transformative justice. What we do for our movements and mass bases will matter if and when the revolutionary moment comes. It will prefigure and determine the course of revolutionary transition. That is to say, if we cannot develop the capacity for abolition within our own movements and mass bases, there would be little indication such capacity would be developed in a revolutionary situation. Socialists must be abolitionists because developing these capacities now matters for the years that come ahead.

⁴⁴ In the United States and the Philippines, it is constitutionally legal to enslave those convicted of a crime under the euphemism “involuntary servitude.”

⁴⁵ Cf. “To imagine a proletarian front facing off a bourgeois front is to conceive the proletariat in bourgeois terms, on the model of a political revolution or a war (seizing someone's power, occupying their territory). In so doing, one reintroduces everything that the insurrectionary movement had overwhelmed: hierarchy, a respect for specialists, for knowledge that Knows, and for techniques to solve problems — in short for everything that plays down the role of the common man.” Gilles Dauvé, “When Insurrections Die,” *Endnotes* 1, no. 1 (October 2008), 52.

The work of abolition is never easy. Abolitionist realism and common sense is counter-intuitive to the realism and common sense of what we are taught to understand under capitalism. In the same way, proletarian rule on a platform of abolition communism will be counter-intuitive to the ways capitalist states preserve themselves through the reproduction of capitalist class rule. But this counter-intuition is already the intuition of many in the working class who cannot and will not turn to the state for justice and management of harm. It is the challenge of abolitionist communists to elevate these practices and prepare a socialist movement for what lies ahead.

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Simoun Magsalin
Why Socialists Must be Abolitionists
Challenging Carcerality in Socialist Spaces
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The Cosmonaut,

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The socialist movement must oppose the carceral institutions and logic deployed by the ruling class and the left alike for the repression of the working class. As an alternative, Simoun Magsalin makes the case for abolition communism.

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