

against carceral communism,
for abolition communism!



Simoun Magzalin

Author's note: I thank all reviewers, both my friends and anonymous reviewers, for their comments on this text.

Cover: Protesters hide behind a tree after throwing a molotov cocktail on a police tank during a protest in Popayan, Colombia

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**Against Carceral Communism,
For Abolition Communism!**

by Simoun Magsalin

**this text is dedicated to
the communists who
are abolitionists and the
abolitionists who are
communists**

I. Against Carceral Communism

While the anarchists and abolitionists exclaim “ACAB! All Cops Are Bad,” the pitiful spectacle of the carceral communists would instead amend “ACAB” with drivel saying, “it’s ACCAB, All *Capitalist* Cops Are Bad.” They continue, “socialist cops are *not* bad because they are proletarian in character and protect the proletarian State.” Such convolution is mistaken in its belief that police can somehow have a proletarian character when historically the institutions of policing and incarceration were established to cement the rule of capital over proletarians. Not to mention that the notion that “socialist” cops protect the common good against criminal or “counterrevolutionary” elements is identical in content to bourgeois police apologia.

Likely nobody would identify as a carceral communist—much like nobody would identify as a carceral feminist—but carceral communists exist. Carceral communists are the people who would defend mass incarceration and deportations under the former Soviet Union and in the current People’s Republic of China. Carceral communists merely oppose *these* police and prisons and wish to propose *their own* “people’s” police and prisons.

Carceral communism is a marriage of a spectacular image of “communism” with carcerality. By “spectacular” we mean in the sense of Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* where the real is substituted by reified images of the false. Meanwhile, “carcerality” is the logic of the systems of policing and incarceration. A spectacu-

lar image of communism is the images and aesthetics of “communist” States: righteous people’s armies, waving red flags, and tightly planned economies. This spectacular image of communism is not communism itself; it is merely a false image of it—a Spectacle. Ultimately, the Spectacle presents this false image of communism to obscure what communism actually means *in practice*—the movement to abolish the current state of things. In a certain sense, this spectacular image is already infused with carcerality from the 1917 Russian Revolution onward where communists thought that carcerality could be used for proletarian ends—abolishing only the bourgeois statesmen but retaining all other features of capitalist society.

Carceral communism has so far been the main narrative of communism due to the prevalence of “communist” States from the former Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China, other socialist States, and their aligned Western parties. After the Bolshevik coup during the Russian Revolution, the party of Lenin constituted a secret police—the Cheka—and even set up their headquarters at the Lubyanka, built on the same site as the secret police of Czarina Catherine. While the revolutionary upsurge emptied the Czar’s prisons and forced labor camps, the party of Lenin reconstituted these as gulags which Stalin would later inherit to incredibly bloody effect. Carceral communists such as Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin may have opposed the Czar’s police and prisons, but only for the sake of *their own* institutions of oppression. What Lenin and the Bolsheviks failed to

realize is that communism is intrinsically a movement of proletarians struggling to abolish their class. By reconstituting “communist” police and prisons the Bolsheviks merely reproduced institutions of proletarianization and all that entailed. Bolshevik “communism” merely universalized the proletarian condition instead of its abolition and married this proletarianization with the spectacular image of communism. ACAB means “communist” cops too. Abolition means abolish “communist” police and prisons.

When the question “who polices?” is posed, the abolitionist group Critical Resistance identifies right-wing and fascist militias as those who take part in policing in the so-called United States. Here in the Philippines, fascist and right-wing militias do take part in policing, but there is also a para-State entity that espouses communism while reproducing carcerality: the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and their armed wing the New Peoples Army (NPA). In Nettie Wild’s 1988 documentary about the communist movement, *A Rustling of Leaves: Inside the Philippine Revolution*, party cadre in a guerrilla front had to deal with a young man who defected from the NPA. The young man, codenamed “Batman” in the documentary, was ordered by his uncle in a right-wing militia to defect from the NPA and provide intel for the military. Batman was eventually recaptured by the NPA. While the cadre who captured Batman made a show of giving the local community a voice in their trial of Batman in a People’s Court, the NPA headquarters found the people’s verdict unsatisfactory. In the end, NPA

cadre were ultimately Batman’s judges, jury, and executioners. It mattered little that Batman was coerced into defecting; the cadre decided he should die and that was that. Then in the 90s, the CPP-NPA detained hundreds of its own cadre and systematically tortured and executed scores of them in what became known as the anti-infiltration purges. The CPP-NPA were not actually infiltrated by government agents, but by the time the cadre found out, hundreds were already executed and mass graves are still being found today. The survivors are still tagged as counter-revolutionaries by the CPP up to today. More recently, after the 2016 elections which saw the fascist Rodrigo Duterte win the presidency, the CPP-NPA wholeheartedly backed Duterte’s War on Drugs with the NPA even conducting their own drug raids in support of Duterte’s fascist agenda. In all three of these cases, it is clear that even without taking State power, communist movements can reproduce carceral logic to lethal conclusions. Abolition in the Philippines will also mean abolishing the New Peoples Army alongside the Philippine National Police, the military, and paramilitary groups.

Even anarchists are not immune to reproducing carcerality. There have been moments where revolutionary anarchists in the Spanish and Ukrainian Revolutions reproduced policing with militants of the Federación Anarquista Ibérica even operating a concentration camp for fascists. More recently, we have seen carcerality reproduced in radical projects like the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest. There, individuals who took it

upon themselves to act as the new people's police shot and killed Black teens. It matters not if the anarcho-concentration camp was leagues better than Stalinist gulags or if the anarcho-police are somehow better; abolition means the doing away of the anarcho-police and anarcho-prisons as well.

What explains the endurance of carcerality among supposedly communist movements? Even for radicals, the ideology of police and prisons presents itself as natural, even inevitable. In this sense, carcerality is similar to Mark Fisher's conception of *Capitalist Realism* from the book by the same name. While the perspective of capitalist realism constantly propagandizes that "there is no alternative to capitalism," capitalist realism has only been generalized with the fall of so-called actually existing socialism. In comparison, carcerality has presented itself as natural long before, to the point where Bolsheviks considered it only natural that the dictatorship of the proletariat necessarily includes police and prisons.

As Fisher argued,

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.

(Capitalist Realism)

The truth of the matter is that carcerality is historically contingent—it did not always exist nor has it always been generalized to exist everywhere. In the Philippines, carcerality was introduced with

colonialism; in the United States, it was introduced with slave patrols; in Europe it was implemented to control the working class. Carcerality has always meant the social control of the proletarianized. The term "carceral capitalism" is redundant for capitalism cannot exist without carcerality. Capitalism *needs* carcerality to allow the enforcement of wage-labor. This is the key contribution in "The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner" by Saidiya Hartman where Black women who resisted working had to be criminalized by the State under vagrancy laws to enforce the regime of proletarianization upon them.

That the Bolsheviks found nothing wrong with combining their spectacular image of communism with the false "realism" of carcerality allowed the reconstruction of bourgeois society in communist aesthetics. A society without carcerality was inconceivable for the Bolsheviks, just as it was impossible for them to imagine a world without authority and the State. Without prison and police abolition, communists will never transcend capitalist ideology.



II. For Abolition Communism

In her 2014 article “Against Carceral Feminism,” the anarchist and abolitionist Victoria Law described carceral feminism as “an approach that sees increased policing, prosecution, and imprisonment as the primary solution to violence against women.” In short, carceral feminism is the idea that cops and prisons *can* keep women safe, yet as Victoria shows, women and queer folk are often subjected to police violence when they call on the police to help and are at times themselves incarcerated. Abolitionists understand that police and prisons do not keep women safe and instead exacerbate harm. Against carceral feminism is an abolition feminism that struggles for the abolition of policing and incarceration and argues for measures such as transformative justice that can keep women safe.

In a certain sense, carceral communism is alike with carceral feminism in its unwavering belief that systems of policing and incarceration can be used benevolently; it cannot. That is to say, carceral communism is the belief that police and prisons are compatible or even necessary for communism. Just as carceral feminism is incompatible with feminism due to exacerbating violence against feminized bodies, carceral communism is wholly incompatible with a coherent vision of communism. Police and prisons cannot possibly be communized, proletarianized, decolonized, indigenized or what have you as these are features that are ultimately tied up with the development of capitalism and the modern State system and are features of capitalist society that *proletarianizes*. In the Phil-

ippines, as in many parts of the world, police and prisons are instruments of colonization and counter-insurgency and up to this day indigenous communities feel that prisons divest their communities of true justice.

Communist measures requires the abolition of police and prisons. Communism is ultimately a movement that abolishes the current state of things, that state being the constant proletarianization that marks us as proles in this capitalist world. Because communism is the self-abolition of the proletariat, communist measures are activities and actions that attack proletarianization. Thus abolitionist steps that assault policing and incarceration are ultimately communist measures.

Proletarianization is ultimately a social relation imposed by capital and is the class distinction that distinguishes the proletariat. As a social relation, proletarianization is the imposition of wage-labor, the imposition of work as a separate field of human activity, and the alienation from their fruits of production. Proletarianization is a hierarchical condition of domination where capital, the State, and the ruling class dominate the proletariat.

In their 2020 booklet, *Our Communities, Our Solutions: An Organizer's Toolkit for Developing Campaigns to Abolish Policing*, Critical Resistance defines policing as “a social relationship made up of a set of practices that are empowered by the state to enforce law and social control through the use of force.” As a social relation, Critical Resistance points out that policing “reinforces oppressive

dynamics” such as slavery, segregation, racism and enforces compliance among criminalized communities. It is in this sense that policing is also a social relation that reinforces proletarianization. The proletarianized have always been a criminalized class. Witness the difference in policing among different classes: if a worker steals food they are sent to prison, but if bosses steal from workers usually nothing at all happens for wage-theft is a daily occurrence. It is in this way that policing forms part of proletarianization.

Keeping the proles in line has always been the function of policing since it was invented. Indeed, whether in bourgeois or “communist” States, the police have always been used to combat militant proletarians. This is indeed the case in imperialized countries whether in the Philippines or in former Soviet Poland. Whether it be the Mendiola Massacre in the Philippines or the harsh suppression of Solidarność in Soviet Poland, the same regime of carcerality reigns.

As radical traditions, abolition arose from the Black radical tradition while communism from the European proletarian milieu. Both abolition and communism share roots among dominated classes, one enslaved, and the other proletarianized. While anti-state communists have always had an implicitly abolitionist consciousness in their desire to eliminate policing and incarceration, the fusing of communism and abolition has rarely been articulated.

To talk of an abolition communism is in a way a redundancy because regimes of policing and incarceration could not

possibly exist in a society that has done away with classes and the State. After all, both abolition and communism aim to abolish the current order and establish a qualitatively different kind of life. In this way abolition and communism are alike. However, because communist politics has become imbued with carcerality for more than a century, it becomes necessary to explicitly articulate a communism that wholly rejects carceral logic.

Counterpoised to carceral communism, abolition communism necessarily opposes the tradition of carcerality within communist thought and necessarily opposes the carcerality of “communist” States. To paraphrase Bobby Seale: We do not fight carcerality with carcerality; we oppose carceral capitalism not with carceral communism, but with abolition communism. Mao once said that “without a People’s army, the people have nothing,” yet counterbalancing the New Peoples Army against the Philippine National Police does nothing for liberation if both institutions reproduce carcerality. Qualitatively new forms of social relations that break with carcerality is needed to definitively combat policing and incarceration. What was once presented as necessary and inevitable must be shown to be mere contingency, and what was once impossible must be shown to be attainable.

“Communist” States considered it necessary to institute carcerality to protect proletarian gains, but this is illusionary. To paraphrase Gilles Dauvé: To think that proletarian police and prisons are necessary to combat bourgeois police and prisons is to think of the proletariat

in bourgeois terms, in doing so one introduces everything that the insurrectionary movement had overwhelmed. The institutions that a proletariat-in-abolition builds cannot possibly look like bourgeois society. To reinstitute carcerality is to reconstruct bourgeois society within the spectacular image of communism. That the carcerality of “communist” States are mere mirrors of the carcerality of bourgeois society is proof enough of their embourgeoisement. How communism deals with harm cannot possibly take the bourgeois forms of police and prisons, else this is not communist at all. Abolition communism is not a qualitatively new form of communism but rather an integration of abolitionist and communist consciousness. Abolition communism is the idea that communist measures must simultaneously be abolitionist steps. This does not mean that abolitionist steps such as the defunding of police and decarceration of prisoners are necessarily communist measures, though these steps do make communist organizing under capitalism easier. Rather, communist measures implemented by abolitionist communists dismantle systems of policing and incarceration simultaneously to dismantling wage-labor, the State, work, et cetera, *precisely because* policing and incarceration are central to the rule of capital. The freeing of the prisoners and setting fire to the prisons does more for the proletariat than a hundred programs.

While abolitionist communists such as Angela Davis can articulate a vision of police and prison abolition as a State divorced from carcerality, abolitionists

who are also anarchists understand that carcerality is part and parcel to the State system itself. Anarchists are under no illusion that State power and its monopoly of violence can be used benevolently. It is idealism to think that with the right people in charge of the State’s police and prisons that these these will cease to be maleficent, or that the State can peacefully dismantle police and prisons. Just so, violence is the very *raison d’être* of the State and there has never been a non-violent State. To deprive the State of its articles of violence fulfills the old communist prophecy: the proletariat abolishes itself as a class and in doing so abolishes the State as State.

If communists cannot then indulge in fantasies of lining up capitalists onto walls to shoot them or to incarcerate them en masse in “reeducation” gulags, what then? Instead of mass executions and mass incarceration, abolition communism takes seriously the task of *excarceration*. If decarceration is the reduction of the number of incarcerated bodies by setting them free, excarceration is the doing away with imprisonment, policing, and carcerality altogether. Excarceration includes measures such as transformative justice, harm reduction, and community accountability that *can* build strong communities capable of dealing with harm in a healthy way. Excarceration potentially becomes the means by which proletarians-in-abolition deal with harm as opposed to using inherently bourgeois forms like policing and incarceration.

III. The Self-Abolition of the Incarcerated

The perennial question presents itself: What is to be done?

To quote the Prison Research Education Action Project at length:

As Frederick Douglass came to see, the source of power did not rest in the slavemaster, but in the slaves—once they realized they could refuse to be slaves.

Similarly, striking prisoners have demonstrated that the power of prisons does not lie in prison managers but in the prisoners who give their consent and cooperation in making prison life possible.

When that consent and cooperation is withdrawn, prisons cannot function. Those of us outside the walls need to recognize that we give our consent and cooperation to prisons.

(Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists)

In the same way, the proletariat also gives its consent for capitalism to continue functioning. As Proletarios Revolucionarios noted in “The Self-Abolition of the Proletariat As the End of the Capitalist World,” the proletariat is also the class of capital and for the continuation of proletarianization. Just as prison and police reformism perpetuates and reinforces carcerality, the reform of rents and wages perpetuates and reinforces proletarianization. The communist insurrection must break with proletarianization and carcerality *together*.

In the meantime, the continuing do-

minion of carceral communism on the psyche of the far left must be continually challenged by abolitionists. In the so-called United States, there are some tendencies within the Black radical tradition that could be considered abolitionist communist in orientation or as fellow travelers, even without an explicit articulation of an abolition communism. These implicit abolitionist communists have a unique position to challenge carceral communism which still persists in the larger milieus of that country. In the Philippines, carcerality runs rampant throughout Maoist, National Democratic, social democratic, and independent leftist milieus, though we abolitionists are slowly forwarding abolition. We must be abolitionists to the communists and communists to the abolitionists. Combat carcerality, spread anarchy, live communism.

Yet it will not be enough to merely propagandize our position, to shoot cops like the NPA do, to decarcerate and excarcerate, or to burn police stations like Black insurrectionists do. While carcerality and capital continue to reign, we struggle for abolition by pushing to decarcerate the victims of cages and construct systems of excarceration that can deal with harm in a productive way. But abolition communism ultimately means the destruction of carcerality and capital. We agree with Bakunin that yes, destruction is also a creative urge, but destruction is not enough. As Gilles Dauvé suggests:

The question is not: who has the guns? But rather: what do the people with the guns do?

10,000 or 100,000 proletarians armed to the teeth are nothing if they place their trust in anything beside their own power to change the world.

Otherwise, the next day, the next month or the next year, the power whose authority they recognise will take away the guns which they failed to use against it.

(“*When Insurrections Die*”)

Thus it will not be enough to wage insurrection. If the NPA shoots cops but carcerality is still reproduced by the shooters, then nothing creative is unleashed by the insurrection and the insurrection *dies*. After all, the CPP-NPA Maoists have been waging a guerrilla war for decades, yet carcerality reigns supreme on both guerrilla fronts and bourgeois strongholds. The NPA does nothing to challenge the legitimacy of policing and incarceration and instead reproduces policing and carceral patterns. What will be required is the generalization of an insurrectionary break from which there can be no return to the *status quo ante*, where carceral systems of police and prisons can no longer be reconstituted. This is what insurrectionists have so far been unable to accomplish, whose possibility remains tantalizingly close in these end of times. Though there have been moments such as in the burning of the Minneapolis Third Precinct where carceral logic had been thoroughly smashed and the forces of the State went into retreat, the carceral status quo was still restored. While it is in such moments that the necessity of abolition becomes a reality, such moments

have failed to generalize and move to a point to which there could have been no return.

What is clear, however, is that without abolitionist steps, the communist insurrection risks embourgeoisement. This is what happened in Nepal where the Nepali Maoists were able to rout the King’s forces. Yet in the shadow of the retreat of the royalist police, a new Maoist police took its place. In doing so, the possibility of a qualitatively different life was extinguished and bourgeois society reconstituted itself in Nepal, where now Maoists reign in name only. Such is the fate of the Maoist “Philippine revolution” if the carceral Communist Party of the Philippines is left in charge of it. After all, a revolution cannot be directed on high by any communist party, nor by any party of abolitionists, communists, or anarchists, but by the self-action of proletarians striking at the world that marks them as proletarians. This, of course, includes striking at the police and prisons.

In this respect, carceral “communism” is but the other side of the coin of carceral capitalism for it is merely the reconstitution of bourgeois society. Abolition communism is communism aware of its task to abolish the current state of things. Abolitionist communists are proletarians aware of their task to abolish themselves as a class and to strike at all that proletarianizes, especially the cops. Abolitionist communists are prisoners of this proletarian society ready to smash this prison. This is the communist insurrection that abolitionists work towards.

Our comrade Alfredo M. Bonanno says it best:

Hurry comrade, shoot the policeman, the judge, the boss. Now, before a new police prevent you.

Hurry to say No, before the new repression convinces you that saying no is pointless, mad, and that you should accept the hospitality of the mental asylum.

Hurry to attack capital before a new ideology makes it sacred to you.

Hurry to refuse work before some new sophist tells you yet again that “work makes you free.”

Hurry to play. Hurry to arm yourself.

(Armed Joy)



an anti military coup protester throws a Molotov cocktail on the other side of the makeshift barricade during a demonstration against the military coup

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