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Believe in New Possibilities

ABOLITION FOR THE PEOPLE

Why Arguments Against Abolition Inevitably Fail

For centuries, people have been unwilling to grasp the concept that only by undoing the foundation can we build a new future



Angela Y. Davis 1 day ago · 6 min read

This article is part of Abolition for the People, a series brought to you by a partnership between Kaepernick Publishing and LEVEL, a Medium publication for and about the lives of Black and Brown men. The series, which comprises 30 essays and conversations over four weeks, points to the crucial conclusion that policing and prisons are not solutions for the issues and people the state deems social problems — and calls for a future that puts justice and the needs of the community first.

Movements against racist police violence and against entrenched racial injustices in this country's jails and prisons can claim a history that is almost as old as the institutions themselves. Precisely because opposition and protests calling for reform have played such a central role in shaping structures of policing and punishment, the notion of reform has superseded other paths toward change. Ironically, many efforts to change these repressive structures — to reform them — have instead provided the glue that has guaranteed their continued presence and acceptance.

Both policing and punishment are firmly rooted in racism — attempts to control indigenous, Black, and Latino populations following colonization and slavery as well as Asian populations after the Chinese Exclusion Act and the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans. Attempting to undo the harm of policing and prisons without attending to these immense embodiments of systemic racism is doomed to failure. The 20th-century militarization of the police has been further intensified by Islamophobia. More generally, the evolution and expansion of the police and the prisons are constant reminders that capitalism has always fundamentally relied on racism to sustain itself.

The insight that racism is essentially systemic and structural rather than individual and attitudinal — one repeatedly asserted by health care advocates and anti-police and anti-prison activists over many decades — finally entered mainstream discourse in 2020 under the pressure of Covid-19 and its disproportionate impact on Black and Brown communities. Its most popular expression in the slogan “Defund the Police” was disseminated during the mass mobilizations protesting the police lynching of George Floyd. For those who recognize the deeply conservative repercussions of equating “reform” with change, the call to defund the police manifested an abolitionist impulse to eschew the usual calls for punishing individual police officers and instituting some form of civilian overview of the department. Instead of habitual and perfunctory calls for

“reform,” organizers began to think more deeply about pathways toward more radical change — in other words, change that would begin to respond to some of the root causes of why poor communities, and especially communities of color, are particularly vulnerable to the criminal legal system.

But for others, it had a jarring effect, conjuring up images of chaotic, crime-ridden (Black and Brown) communities, with no force in place to guarantee order. Some people, who live in so-called high crime neighborhoods, where they are preyed upon not only by the police but also by armed individuals and groups from their own communities and for whom the demand to defund the police was their first introduction to abolitionist ideas, were understandably bewildered. How would they survive at the mercy of malevolent groups who hardly care about the trajectory of stray bullets that have taken the lives of children and other bystanders? Their fears are real and not to be dismissed. But this is absolutely the moment to engage in the kind of educational activism that might help to encourage all of us, especially those of us who live in the most vulnerable neighborhoods, to purposefully rethink the meaning of safety and security.

Just as we hear calls today for more humane policing, people then called for a more humane slavery.

Educators, organizers, artists, athletes, intellectuals — everyday people — can play a major role in introducing ways of imagining the future that are not tethered to the notion that only the police can be effective guarantors of safety and that prisons alone can assure the security of people who populate the “free” world. Anti-racist feminists have long argued that relying on conventional policing and carceral strategies exacerbates gender violence rather than eliminating it. But carceral feminism, a notion that calls for the build-up of police and prisons, still dominates the mainstream. Though some education activists have challenged carceral feminism by demanding the removal of police from schools and an end to the school to prison pipeline, we have not yet achieved a consensus in understanding that a police presence in public schools corrupts the educational process. Police are so deeply entrenched in public schools in Black and Brown communities that their oppressive modes of discipline infect learning itself.

Security is not possible as long as the physical, mental, and spiritual health of our communities is ignored. Armed human beings, officially trained in efficient methods of administering death and violence, should not be dispatched in response to a Black woman experiencing an episode related to a psychiatric disability. She may not only not receive help, but her behavior may well be used as a pretext to kill her. Safety and security require education, housing, jobs, art, music, and recreation. If the funds currently directed toward these institutions — police departments, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), jails, prisons, and immigrant detention facilities — were rerouted toward the public good, the need and justification for steadily expanding institutions of state violence would certainly decline. Abolitionist approaches ask us to enlarge our field of vision so that rather than focusing myopically on the problematic institution and asking what needs to be changed about that institution, we raise radical questions about the organization of the larger society.

For those who recognize that racism feeds the proliferation of police violence and the decades-old surge of prison populations but who still insist that these institutions are simply in need of deliberate reform, it might be helpful to reflect on the fact that similar logic was used about slavery. Just as there are those who want change today but fear that these institutions are so necessary to human society that social organization would collapse without them, there were those who believed that the cruelty of the “peculiar institution” was not inherent to slavery and could indeed be eradicated by reform. Just as we hear calls today for more humane policing, people then called for a more humane slavery. Abolition — of slavery, the death penalty, prisons, police — has always been a controversial political demand, not least because it calls attention to the fact that simply reforming specific institutions without changing their foundational elements may reproduce and perhaps even exacerbate the problems reform seeks to solve.

The language of abolition evokes historical continuity. While most anti-slavery abolitionists simply wanted to get rid of slavery, there were those who did recognize early on that slavery could not be comprehensively eradicated simply by disestablishing the institution itself, leaving intact the economic, political, and cultural conditions within which slavery flourished. They understood that abolition would require a thorough reorganization of U.S. society — economically, politically, and socially — in order to guarantee the incorporation of formerly enslaved Black people into a new

democratic order. That process never occurred, and we are facing issues of systemic and structural racism in 2020 that should have been addressed more than 100 years ago.

In the meantime, racial capitalism has become far more complicated. For example, the task of solving problems rooted in colonialism and slavery requires us to recognize how the carceral system and anti-Black racism are linked to repressive border policing and detention directed at Latino communities and other immigrant communities. When we say “Defund the Police,” we should also call for the abolition of ICE. And we should always keep in mind that our predicament is shared by people in many parts of the world, from Brazil and Palestine to France and South Africa.

Abolitionist strategies are especially critical because they teach us that our visions of the future can radically depart from what exists in the present. Just as trans activists have been partially successful in encouraging us to abandon the conventional gender binary — and to comprehend its structural role in defining policing and imprisonment — this current conjuncture demands that we believe in new possibilities. Such new possibilities would include rewarding jobs, critical education, decent housing, accessible health care, recreation, and art for all. It also demands that we conduct ourselves on our campuses, in our sports arenas, and in our political struggles, cultural work, and intimate lives as individuals and communities worthy of racial, gender, and economic equality — and worthy of radical, socialist futures.

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