Fuck the Plague-Pit or, Abolition for Communists

Mark Steven

March 2021

> say no justice no peace and then say fuck the police
> — Sean Bonney

If 2020 were a poem it would be Sean Bonney's (2015) 'Letter Against the Firmament' and especially the bit where he says 'every cop, living or dead, is a walking plague-pit' (115). Published around five years earlier, this poem finds its antagonistic social substance in the riots that erupted after the police murder of an unarmed Black man named Mark Duggan in Tottenham, London, on 4 August 2011. While the familiar call-response of murder to riot has repeated many times and in many places since 2011, perhaps its most explosive rendition yet took place after the killing of George Floyd in the United States, on 25 May 2020. Within weeks, hundreds of thousands of comrades and their fellow travellers had taken to the streets in a potent expression of collective rage and systemic unmaking: fighting under clouds of tear gas, reclaiming cities on foot and horseback, smashing and looting, putting fire to precincts, establishing autonomous zones. Through the summer, a popular movement modulated in force from protest to insurrection.

Uniquely, all of this took place during an ongoing global pandemic, at a time when governments – serving capital, served by the police – actively coerced working and buying in adequate proportion to ensure profitability and accumulation, no matter how many get sick and die because of it. As even the bourgeois press made abundantly clear, COVID-19 has exposed market ideology as a death cult, with capital demanding human sacrifice, and the police have performed their apostolic duty in this unholy ritual. While capital uses police to impose the iron law of make work and let buy, those traditional paths to accumulation, via production and consumption, necessitate human bodies' cheek-by-jowl compaction into worksites, markets, and prisons. Now, within the context of the pandemic, profitability and accumulation mean sending everyone we know and love as well as innumerable unfamiliar others into variegated silos of aerosolised death. If wages have always been the key

to subsistence, the pandemic contradicts this coercive mechanism by the fact that work now kills at a rate that might finally undercut profitability. In the coincidence of the pandemic with a mass uprising against racialised policing and state murder, that ghoulish metaphor – 'walking plague-pit' – is realised as horrifyingly literal.

Even if you don't die with a boot on your neck or a bullet in your chest, you might still be killed by having to breathe as you labour or purchase the means to subsistence – and that is still murder, for which the police are still responsible. Our situation is exemplarily defined by what Friedrich Engels (1987) once described as 'social murder', which in his day meant sending proletariats to an early grave by way of the workhouse:

> when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessaries of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live – forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence – knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains. (127)

Presiding over this grim contradiction with soldierly force; guaranteeing classed, raced, and gendered exclusions from the means of survival let alone flourishing; arbitrating who will live and who might die; militarising white supremacy: this is what it means to be a cop, and this is why every cop is pestilence made flesh, a walking plague-pit.

The uprisings confirmed this in the hearts and minds of many. The police and their prisons only gave the thinking apocalyptic clarity. We can now seize that clarity by observing how the mass arrest of rioters all but guaranteed their exposure to disease pathogens or how the incarcerated have been enlisted to work in county morgues as dead bodies overwhelm state provision. In Joshua

Clover's (2020) phrase, 'the racialized underclass, most especially people whose families have been property, must bear among other things the heavy knowledge that the property system is death, and that the police as the keepers of that system are the keepers of death.' So much more than clarification, however, the insurrectionary street mobilisations, which became their own kind of political contagion as they spread across the globe from the evental epicentre in Minneapolis–Saint Paul, set forth a countervailing demand in opposition to the state and capital's civil enforcers: namely, abolition. If police and their prisons are 'the strong arm of the law', the mortally urgent objective for abolition is to rip that limb from its socket.

Figure 1. Protesters surround the Minneapolis Police Department's Third Precinct after setting fire to it on May 28, 2020. Source: Carlos Barria / Reuters

Drawing from a tradition of Black radical thought that extends from W.E.B. Du Bois through Angela Davis to Joy James and many others in the present, abolition aims for nothing less than dismantling the global carceral system. Abolitionist thought and practice begin with recognition that policing, prisons, and the entire criminal punishment apparatus are not just ineffective when it

comes to deterrence and prevention but are also an obviously racist instrument for capitalist social engineering. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) has shown, the prison-industrial system is essential to capitalist accumulation in the present. This is because the modern carceral system has come to balance the potentially critical contradictions between capitalism's four surpluses – finance capital, undeveloped land, unemployed labour power, and the state's incapacity to provide welfare – in such a way that profits through capital are now synonymous with how 'domestic militarism is concretely recapitulated in the landscapes of depopulated urban communities and rural prison towns' (Gilmore 2007, 86). With capital comes prisons and with prisons come the cops.

To insist that this all operates as a functional system and not as an aggregate of isolated aberrations – crooked cops, corrupt politicians, private prisons – is to invite the question of whether or not abolition is a revolutionary demand. For the likes of Wilson Gilmore (2020), that is exactly what it is. 'Prison abolition', she says,

> is a specific form of anti-capitalism, which is to say, prison abolition is a specific form of anti-all capitalism, all of which is racial capitalism, so it's specific to that. That is to say that the presence that's necessary to – forget imagine – live in a world without prisons has to be a presence in which all kinds of relations, all kinds of exclusions and all kinds of opportunities, have to change. Everything has to change. (171)

Raze the prisons, but raze capital with them. Or raze capital to raze the prisons. Or maybe even raze prisons on the way to razing capital. If the end of capital is on the horizon for abolition, if the goals of abolition are entwined with totalising social revolution, then perhaps when we talk about abolition we are already talking about another well-known political force, only without yet speaking its name.

To put it starkly: abolition is native to communism and, as abolitionist demands are once again being written in the language of insurrection against the world-historic backdrop of capitalism in crisis, this fact wants for reckoning. Such a thought is not entirely original but reformulated here with historical urgency, fuelled by rapidly deteriorating living conditions and the counterattack of

revolt. ‘What is, so to speak, the object of abolition?’ ask Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2004). ‘Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society’ (101). While Moten and Harney identify an ‘uncanny’ resemblance between communism and the object of abolition, I want to pursue this comparison as a clarification of revolutionary necessity. What, then, do our seemingly spontaneous mobilisations in response to racialised violence, extrajudicial murder, and other infrastructural inequalities have to do with the communist hypothesis and its regulatory functions?

Marx and Engels provide their most incisive definition of communism in *The German Ideology*, written sometime around 1846, and at a moment in argument when they have elucidated once and for all the need for materialism over idealism. ‘Communism’, they say, ‘is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself’ (1978, 162). It is not, in other words, a positive social order to be achieved through incremental reform. ‘We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things [die wirkliche Bewegung, welche den jetzigen Zustand aufhebt]’ (162). Communism is what happens in the abolition of the social whole: in the eradication of class society and all its forms, of private property, of work, of the family, of the state, of value, money, and markets, of whiteness – of every one of capital’s oppressive social forms. That remorseless suppression, or supersession, of these zombified systems is both a means to an end and an end in itself. The abolition of capital and the state and their methods of reproduction means taking down the enemy. But to outlive that enemy might also be to live into the time of communism.

Debates around police and prison abolition hold to a similar logic, or at least they might be productively engaged with this one. ‘Essential for intellectual and political development’, writes Joy James (2020), ‘alliances between abolitionists and revolutionaries are destabilized by the airbrushing of revolutionary struggles.’ This is truer now than ever. As the riots and the protests gained popular traction through the summer of 2020, amassing together under the banners of Black Lives Matter, two divergent slogans and their attendant ideologies were presented: the strategically absolutist call to

'abolish the police' alongside the more tactically circumspect call to 'defund the police', using the state budget as a mechanism for more immediate reform. Though we should perhaps approach defund in good faith as a pathway toward abolition and as more than just a euphemism, it nevertheless operates at the level of reform as circumscribed by state governance and its political economy. Defund, which works from within that system, belongs to frameworks already in place and engaged, often combatively, with prison lobbyists and police unions. It is, at worst, subject to the vicissitudes of parliamentary whim.

Defund is transformative but not revolutionary: it is what communism is not, a transformation that might lift some persons out of bad situations while foreclosing or forestalling the possibility of ending the conditions that generate those bad situations in the first place. Its limitations clarify when compared to a much earlier kind of abolition. One of the key lessons from W.E.B. DuBois (1935) in *Black Reconstruction* is that racial capitalism exists today because of the failure of two popular movements, the anti-slavery movement and the movement of free wage labourers, to become one and vanquish their common enemy:

> Emancipation loosed the finer feelings of some Southerners toward Negroes. They felt the fall of a burden – and expressed it. The nightmare was at last over. They need no longer apologize to the world for a system they were powerless to change or reconstruct. It had been changed and they were glad.
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> Emancipation left the planters poor, and with no method of earning a living, except by exploiting black labor on their only remaining capital – their land. This underlying economic urge was naturally far stronger than the philanthropic, and motivated the mass of Southerners. (670-71)

It scarcely requires mentioning that the pendulum swing from emancipation to exploitation, from chattel to wage slavery, coincides with the expansion of policing in ways designed to enforce market logic through vagrancy acts and property law. Nevertheless, the continuum between the two kinds of subjection implies a strategic question for today, which will return us to communism: is it possible to abolish within a capitalist system, when the police and the prisons are so crucial to the survival of that system?

There is only space here for the briefest of answers, but one that is firmly negative. When the carceral system is how states manage capital's contradictions – and especially the inability to provide sufficient welfare provision to an ever-expanding surplus population – to abolish the police and the prisons will mean something additional to the transformation of justice. Abolition means, on the one hand, incorporating millions into a social order from which they have been totally excluded and in which they have no place or value. For this reason alone, not to mention the carceral system's resolution of surplus land and finance capital, the reality of abolition will crater profits and inaugurate a terminal crisis for capitalism in a given state. To conceive of abolition as revolutionarily anti-capitalist is more than just a rhetorical claim; it understands and appreciates the non-negotiable material consequences of removing an essential part of the capitalist state. Taking the form of an impossible revolutionary demand, abolition forces the collapse of any order that tries to meet it. To abolish is to enact, in the most concrete sense of the phrase, a real movement against the present state of things.

More than just furnishing thought with conceptual, theoretical, and material parallels, comparing abolition with communism invites the sharing of practical strategy as well as the imagining and planning of futures. For Angela Davis (2003), worthwhile strategy toward abolition needs to be affirmative and totalising, reaching beyond any kind of simple technocratic fix:

> rather than try to imagine one single alternative to the existing system of incarceration, we might envision an array of alternatives that will require radical transformations of many aspects of our society. Alternatives that fail to address racism, male dominance, homophobia, class bias, and other structures of domination will not, in the final analysis, lead to decarceration and will not advance the goal of abolition. (108)

To align abolition with communism is not an attempt to claim the work of anti-police and anti-carceral activity, frequently led by Black feminists, as the expression of a universalist idea that has engendered its own programmes and parties and movements the world over. The point, rather, is to insist that by material necessity abolition and communism share the one horizon, which can only be crossed in the suppression of capitalism, and they might therefore work as one, moving together in the direction of real freedom.

But what might that coalescence of abolition and communism look like on the ground, as a real movement? The conditions for both abolition and communism are the lived antipode of capital, a proposition that needs to be understood here as something more "real" than abstract utopian speculation. Practically, the conditions for abolition might be found within communism, as it reconfigures existence among those for whom the regime of capital spells only suffering. In short, abolition and communism are not exclusively questions of power, of seizing power away from the state or seizing the state itself, but instead gather strength in collective actions that create the initial conditions under which communist relations can thrive and further communist measures might be undertaken. This is the affirmative meaning of communism in the present: allowing people to meet their own needs beyond the miserably austere kinds of subsistence dictated by the market – for land, bread, shelter, education, clothing, sanitation, care, entertainment, and justice. Abolition goes beyond the elimination of policing, criminalisation, and incarceration to provide a desirable substitute for the state we wish to overthrow. If this is the kind of thing Davis was suggesting as an 'array of alternatives' to racial capitalism and its carceral state, it will be worth reminding ourselves that this was also the strategy that emerged, organically and over time, for the Black Panthers.

'Revolutionary suicide' is the phrase Huey P. Newtown used to describe ideological commitment and affective intensity that energised the Panthers. If this idea captures the spirit of abolition its absolutism feels communist. 'Revolutionary suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish', Newton (1973) says: 'it means just the opposite. We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible. When reactionary forces crush us, we must move against these forces, even at the risk of death' (5). This kind of thinking informed two distinct phases in the Panthers' strategy and the necessary movement from one to the next. In the first, Newton and Bobby Seal raised money to buy shotguns selling copies of Mao's Little Red Book. In Seal's recollection: 'sell the books, make the money, buy the guns, and go on the streets with the guns. We'll protect a mother, protect a brother, and protect the community from the racist cops' (79). This was the combative mode, the war of manoeuvre, which sought to intimidate and demoralise the police. 'The emphasis on weapons was a necessary phase in our evolution', says Newton, 'based on Frantz Fanon's contention that the people have to be shown that the colonizers and their

agents – the police – are not bullet-proof' (355). But, as community organisers, this strategy was deemed insufficient when left by itself.

Carrying shotguns was effectively anti-police but did not create a welcome alternative to the state, did not communise what already is: 'we soon discovered that weapons and uniforms set us apart from the community. We were looked upon as an ad hoc military group, acting outside the community fabric and too radical to be part of it. . . We saw ourselves as the revolutionary "vanguard" and did not fully understand that only the people can create the revolution' (Newton 1973, 355). In addition to this strategy, the Panthers developed their survival programme, comprising Free Breakfast For Children, community schooling, clothing distribution, classes on politics and economics, free medical clinics, lessons on self-defence and first aid, transportation to prisons for family members of inmates, an emergency-response ambulance program, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and testing for blood disease. If the shotguns were used to delegitimise the police, to diminish the state's apparent power, the survival programme set out to replace it entirely, allowing the people to live with hope and human dignity. It is on these terms that abolition and communism confront social murder with revolutionary suicide.

If these are some of the thoughts, both theoretical and practical, that 2020 has renewed in the popular imaginary, they are also thoughts we find in Bonney's *Letters Against the Firmament* (2015), which speaks presciently or prophetically from its time through ours, to a moment when

> a sub-rhythmic jolt, call it anything, misalignment of the planets, radioactive catastrophe, even a particularly brutal piece of legislation, brings about a sudden alignment of revolutionary and normative time, meaning that all metaphors – like scurvy – come back to fucking life, creating a buckling in the basic grounding metaphor of the entire culture. (116)

Let us in closing return to that poem's central metaphors, stretched between the diseased misery of what is and the curative glory of some unrealised alternative. 'Plague', we read. 'The opposite of solidarity. Or rather, solidarity itself: the solidarity of isolation and quarantine, of the bomb-zone or the ghetto. The great silence is full of noises' (117).

We are all now in isolation and quarantine, as we subsist in the pandemic's bomb-zone and ghettoes, but perhaps we can also glimpse a way out. In Bonney's (2015) words: 'A map, a counter-map, actually, a chart of the spatio-temporal rhythm of the riot-form, its prosody and signal-frequency. A map that could show the paths not taken. And where to find them, those paths, those antidotes, those counter-plagues' (117). With the map open before us, it will be worth remembering that 'Letter Against the Firmament' is not the Bonney poem that has circulated most throughout 2020, a year of real uprisings and their online mediation. That honour surely belongs to 'ACAB – A Nursery Rhyme', Bonney's incandescent and incantatory 'fuck the police' poem, with its immortal battlecry taken from NWA and Lil Boosie, whose jams will play loudly in the score of all our coming insurrections. If abolition under the sign of communism is our path untaken, our antidote, our counter-plague, then perhaps these thoughts will acquire sufficient exit velocity when recalibrated to the sub-rhythmic pulse of Bonney's nursery rhyme: I won't say 'here ends my essay' I'll say fuck the plague-pit.

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