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BOOK REVIEWS

Abolition Geography. Essays towards Liberation by Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Brenna Bhandar (Ed), Alberto Toscano (Ed), London/New York: Verso. 2022. pp. 512. Hardcover: £20.95 USD, ISBN 1839761709

Abolition. Feminism. Now. by Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, Beth E. Richie, Chicago, IL: Haymarket. 2022. pp. 250. Softcover: £14,46 USD, ISBN: 1642593966

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It is exciting to witness the formation of a new social movement. Since the beginning of the Black Lives Matter protests and even more so since the international rebellions for Black Lives following the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020, abolitionism has gained increasingly clear contours as an independent approach to radical politics and critical theory. Abolitionism integrates contemporary critiques of the current intensification of state violence on a global scale with elements of older leftist movements such as the Black Liberation Movement, anti-colonial and indigenous struggles, queer feminist politics, and anarchist, socialist, and communist traditions, forming a new cohesive account. As such, abolitionism encompasses a *social analysis* that understands the state-sanctioned killings of Black people and people of color as an expression of a deeper structure of domination shaped by racial capitalism and patriarchal violence, a *political strategy* focused on radical social transformation and skeptical of the domesticating tendencies of superficial reform, and an *ethos* centered on the ideals of solidarity, care, and mutual aid. A characteristic of abolitionism is that its theoretical reflections always remain anchored within the experiences of real struggles of political movements and the everyday lived realities of marginalized communities.

Since 2020, multiple contributions to abolitionism's self-clarification discourse have appeared. Two long-awaited books, published in 2022, set the tone in this discourse: Ruth Wilson Gilmore's essay collection *Abolition Geography* and Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie's intervention *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*

Ruth Wilson Gilmore currently enjoys the status of a popstar in the abolitionist movement. One of the reasons for her prominence is her ability to convert complex social analysis into quotable slogans. However, in *Abolition Geography*, a collection of Gilmore's most important essays and interviews from the past three decades, it is evident that these are not superficial catchphrases but distilled summaries of theoretical analysis and political action propositions grounded in a sophisticated conceptual framework. This can be shown, for example, in one of her most frequently cited formulations, the definition of racism as "state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death" (p. 107). Thinking of racism not as individual prejudice, discriminatory inequality, or an infringement of personal autonomy, but from the experience of vulnerability to preventable death, understands human beings as dependent and precarious from the outset. From this follows an expansion and thus revision of the conventional concept of violence: violence is not the repressive injury of a pre-established integrity in the sense of a heteronomous influence on the person, but manifests itself already in the withholding of essential conditions of human well-being. The production of premature death thus occurs not only in the form of direct, state-sanctioned, and/or extralegal assault, such as police killings or the death penalty, but also includes what Gilmore calls "organized abandonment": not direct killing, but the exposure to death, the

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ejection from the realm of the livable through a heterogeneous array of techniques such as "structural adjustment, environmental degradation, privatization, genetic modification, land expropriation, forced sterilization, human organ theft, neocolonialism, involuntary and superexploited labor" (p. 113 f.). These multiple forms of expulsion or deprivation thereby also represent preparations and precursors to direct lethal state intervention. Gilmore points out that for the widespread unquestioned acceptance of the necessity of caging large segments of the population (p. 323), a stigmatization and disposability of racialized groups must have been discursively and affectively established beforehand.

Gilmore positions herself here on the side of a Marxism that emphasizes the essential importance and inherent inevitability of the production of nonexploited and nonexploitable surplus populations. In doing so, she also opposes readings within the abolitionist movement that, for example, understand the function of the prison simply as a variant of capitalist exploitation or as a form of private profit maximization on the part of "for-profit" prison operators. Following her seminal 2007 study *Golden Gulag* on the emergence of the massive Prison Industrial Complex in California, Gilmore argues that the "prison fix" instead represents a universal solution to multiple crises: a surplus of workers, land, financial capital, and "state capacities" (p. 335 f). Fueled by the interests of populist politicians and amplified by an ever-escalating media discourse, the prison fix establishes specific carceral geographies, not without itself generating a series of economic, political, and social destabilizations (p. 343). Just as capitalism is not exhaustively described as a system of exploitation through wage labor, the state, therefore, cannot be simply seen as an all-consuming "cold monster" (Nietzsche) but must be understood in the interplay of the intensification of state violence with the simultaneous dismantling of welfare state protection systems. Gilmore's concept of the "anti-state-state"—"people and parties who gain state power by denouncing state power" (p. 228)—is thus able to aptly describe the hegemonic governmentality in which neoliberal and libertarian ideologies ally with the expansion of carceral systems.

Gilmore further describes the "group-differentiated" character of the vulnerability to premature deaths with Stuart Hall as a "fatal coupling of difference and power." There is no ontological reason to interpret human difference as hierarchy (p. 108). Drawing on the work of Cedric Robinson and others, Gilmore uses the term *racial capitalism* to define the complex conditional relationship between economics and the production of difference. For Robinson, racism is neither antecedent to capitalism (as an atavism that the universalism of capitalist modernity would have overcome) nor posterior to it (as a simple ideological reflection in the cultural superstructure), but is its mode of appearance and organization (hand in hand with other operators of difference, such as gender). Already in early modern Europe, capitalism made use of regional ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differentiations by sharpening and racializing them. Colonialism and plantation slavery required additional biologistic narratives to secure white Europeans' assertion of superiority. Gilmore adds a geographical, and thus always a political, component to this analysis. Racial capitalism does not always remain the same; it must be analyzed—and attacked—in its specific variations, constellations, conjunctures, and crises (pp. 303–307).

The leitmotif of the book is clearly the question of organizing: the notion of changing "everything" should not lead us to a paralyzing resignation in the face of this Herculean task but should make visible the multiple possibilities for struggles and their connections and generate new horizons of imagination. If racism is vulnerability to premature death, then abolitionism cannot simply be the negative defense against repression but also involves the positive making of livable worlds. Gilmore anticipates more recent discussions on abolitionist care when she presents freedom as place making (p. 474) against carceral partitioning and division. The program of "Abolition Geography" is then, as Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano write in their erudite preface, really the "dialectical counter to the carceral geography of racial capitalism" (p. 6). An abolition geography is decidedly not a utopia, but a cartography of already existing possibilities and practices. Abolition does not denote a radical break in the future, but the "fleshly and material presence of social life lived differently" (p. 351).

Angela Davis is certainly the most prominent of the authors of *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, but Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie are also among the most important voices in abolitionist theory and practice of the last 20 years. Collectively, they have written a book that they want to be understood not as a "manifesto" but as a "critical genealogy" (p. xiii), that is, as an interpretive reconstruction of the central theoretical lines of development of feminist abolitionism. The authors refer to the central event of the 2001 conference jointly organized by the prison-abolitionist organization *Critical Resistance* and the (queer-) feminist of color initiative *INCITE!* at which the joint "Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex" (also printed in the volume as an appendix, pp. 175–184) was adopted. In this statement, the two groups (self-)critically diagnosed that the prison abolitionist movement hitherto had paid too little attention to the question of how the safety of women and vulnerable groups can be guaranteed within their own communities, in particular, how intimate partner violence and domestic violence can be effectively combated. On the other hand, the feminist movement against violence against women (dominated primarily by white women) has done too little to address the harmful effects of policing and incarceration on the lives of marginalized communities and has, in part, made itself complicit with the carceral state. The task of the abolitionist agenda is thus both to reduce violence *within* communities and as well as *against* the community.

Much of the discussion in this regard has been framed in terms of the concepts *Transformative Justice* and *Community Accountability* (p. 5). The idea behind them is that acts of violence are not only attributable to individual "perpetrators" but stem from the complex conditions within a patriarchal and racist society. Therefore, it cannot simply be a matter of isolating a threatening individual while leaving the background conditions intact—therefore, it is about *transformation* of the situation rather than restoration of a status quo ante. Nor should a survivor be left alone with their experience—therefore, it is about *community* rather than individual accountability. Numerous feminist groups of color have written detailed manuals and practical guides on how to deal with cases of (especially domestic, interpersonal, or sexual) violence within their own contexts without having to call on the state for support; ideas that are also documented and discussed in *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*

An important general implication for abolitionism emerges from the critique of carceral feminism on the question of reform (pp. 102–108). Feminism paradigmatically illustrates how political movements cannot only be pacified by the state and thus lose their radical edge but also become involved in the justification of white supremacist systems of oppression as soon as they convert their demands into the medium of criminal law. On the other hand, abolitionism is by no means a quietist stance that simply waits for a messianic event and otherwise deprives itself of all concrete tools to enact political change. Using a term coined by André Gorz, abolitionist movements have therefore developed the concept of "non-reformist reform" (p. 51), which can be helpful in concrete political battles. Accordingly, all reforms are to be rejected that could result in greater investment in apparatuses of state violence or as a consequence of which more people are locked up in cages. Instead, all reforms that push back state violence and thus improve not only the living reality of marginalized communities but can also serve as the starting point for more radical struggles should be welcomed. Instead of body cams and awareness trainings, abolitionists thus advocate defunding and demilitarizing the police (pp. 185–191). Like Gilmore, Davis/Dent/Meiners/Richie repeatedly emphasize that abolitionism does not simply mean doing away with something, but rather involves the constant creative reinvention of institutions of economic, political, and cultural participation—abolition feminism is an exploration of practices that are already lived by marginalized communities (p. 131).

Both books are more an intermediate report than the conclusion of a discussion. They bring together individual set pieces of a theoretical constellation that encompasses many more aspects: border abolition, disability justice, ecology, indigenous and anti-colonial struggles, struggles against algorithmic racism and surveillance—the abolitionist account attempts to bring all these strands together into a coherent framework. In doing so, a whole series of important and urgent theoretical questions are on the agenda for abolitionism in the coming years. What are the lessons to be drawn from the failed attempt in Minneapolis and other cities to defund the police? Is it possible to adopt the concept of *Transformative Justice* on a large societal scale? How does abolitionism position itself in military conflicts, such as on Russia's current attack on Ukraine? How can an entire society be organized without legal coercion? What are the normative premises and the institutional design of the concept of abolition democracy? In addressing these (and many other) challenges, abolitionist theory would certainly benefit from an exchange with the different (other) currents of contemporary critical theory. Critical theory, however, in turn, has much more homework to do in order to catch up with the rich canon of theoretical analyses and political propositions provided by abolitionist theorizing in the last years and decades. We would be well advised to no longer ignore these contributions but to let them inspire, criticize, and correct us.

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Daniel Loick is Associate Professor of Political and Social Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. He engages with critical theories of state violence, such as anarchism and abolitionism, as well as with subaltern forms of sociality. Forthcoming with MIT Press is his book The Abuse of Property.