

End of Policing Means the End of Capitalism

Some Likely but Rarely Discussed Economic Effects of Abolition

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A great deal of discussion about police abolition concerns non-police responses to violent crime, but most police work is unrelated to violent crime. Most, maybe all, of this is economic in nature – designed to keep working people from using productive property to meet their own needs directly – to keep the commons enclosed. This work means the police are inextricably integrated into the economy in surprising ways that are largely undiscussed in the context of abolition, which would trigger monumental, almost unimaginable changes in how we as a society meet our human needs through work. It's likely that the end of policing would mean the end of capitalism, which suggests that it won't be easy to achieve given the magnitude of what's at stake.

By police I mean anybody who's socially authorized to enforce laws or other social rules through the unilateral use of physical force, up to and including the intentional infliction of pain and death. If they're allowed to hurt people to enforce their commands but people aren't allowed to hurt back in self defense they're police. In this sense the existence of police to respond to violence is much less controversial than their other functions. Many, maybe most, people agree that potentially violent responses to violence are appropriate. A lot of the current discussion on post-abolition responses to violence centers on community organized and implemented solutions. It's not hard to imagine members of the community willing to organize to deal with violence in their neighborhoods, in fact, as in the case of Uvalde and many other less extreme examples, the involvement of police often prevents this natural response.

Community organization is a natural and much discussed abolitionist solution to violence, but there isn't nearly as much discussion about responses to nonviolent crimes, for instance trespassing. I don't mean lurking around in people's yards, but rather trespassing on off-limits productive property for productive purposes – to meet the human survival needs of the trespassers. Camping in parks, squatting on unoccupied public or private property, refusing to be evicted, and other forms of what might be called “subsistence trespassing.”

All of these are now crimes and prohibitions against them are enforced by the police through violence. But there's not much appetite in communities for enforcement of laws against trespassing. People's opinions on homeless encampments vary wildly but organized community removal efforts are unheard of. There are individual acts of anti-homeless vigilantism, but they're more

about the violence that violent people can inflict on the powerless than enforcing trespassing laws. Very few people are willing to evict their neighbors for not paying rent to some landlord.

It's hard to believe that trespassing laws will mean anything after abolition – who will enforce them? Will people somehow come together in community to enforce laws that they aren't willing to enforce now? Maybe private landowners would hire private security to exclude squatters from their property, but the numbers are against them. There aren't enough police now to enforce the laws and it's only the credible threat of extreme unilateral violence that keeps the laws as effective as they currently are. There's just too much unused or underused property, both public and private, and too many people who could live on it, who need to live on it, for private security to be an economically plausible solution. Whatever anti-trespassing norms persist will have to be based on people's natural respect for one another rather than on their fear of police. What might this look like?

The City of Los Angeles has 40,000 acres of parks alone along with innumerable additional unused city-owned properties. There are a million acres of parkland in the County. There are privately owned golf courses and vacant apartments and houses everywhere. Without police to stop them homeless people and their activist supporters could occupy or create permanent housing on this property very quickly. Squatters could occupy existing vacant residential property. Homelessness would end almost overnight. How could private security economically fill the role that the police now play. Even if any groups, paid or not, were willing to put in the work, without police to prevent it they'll have to be ready for violent responses to their necessarily violent attempts to enforce anti-trespassing laws. Why would anyone be willing to do this for the benefit of landlords?

And unevictable formerly homeless squatters would be only one of the post-abolition economic challenges facing landlords, among whom I include banks holding mortgages on owner-occupied residential properties. Without police to evict them why would anyone pay rent or mortgage? Again, there's just not enough private security in the world to enforce trespassing laws against pretty much everyone who's not a landlord. It's hard to imagine community groups organizing to forcibly evict their neighbors in the same economic position as themselves for the benefit of landlords and banks. Without the threat of police violence to keep people from housing themselves on open land or refusing to pay for their current housing the very possibility of landlordism as a paying business evaporates. Without police everyone would have a free place to live.

Not only would everyone be housed for free but they'd be able to use their living space for any purpose they wanted as long as it was sufficiently in line with community standards to be accepted by their neighbors. For instance, one of my neighbors runs a locally beloved full-scale restaurant in her backyard on weekends. She and her family cook and serve both food and alcohol. There are no health inspections, taxes, or other government-imposed costs involved so they reap all the value created by their work. And this is currently completely illegal. If she rents it's surely a violation of her lease and exposes her to the risk of violent eviction at the hands of the Sheriff. Whether she rents or owns she's risking a nuisance suit brought by the City of Los Angeles, the inevitable results of which would also be violently enforced by the Sheriff.

But without police to enforce the laws she's breaking she could operate openly. Without the risk of violence she could potentially quit her officially sanctioned job and run the restaurant full time – a plan which would pay even better if she had no housing costs, which post-abolition she would not. Everyone who wanted to use their living space productively would be able to do

so openly, and the range and the value of potential uses is huge. The community isn't going to organize to prohibit this kind of activity because it benefits almost all of us greatly. My neighbor's backyard restaurant is full every day it's open.

Another class of police-enforced laws unrelated to violence have to do with food production. Even as late as the early 20th Century food-producing animals, chickens and other small birds, pigs, rabbits, goats, and cows, were ubiquitous in American Cities, as well as rural areas, of course. These animals turn household scraps, bugs, and weeds into high quality protein. Food can also be hunted or gathered in both urban and rural open spaces, lakes, streams, woods, oceans. Today almost all of this direct subsistence labor is either outright banned or heavily encumbered with police-enforced regulations.

That these anti-commoning laws prevent a huge range of subsistence labor outside the formal cash economy is not a coincidence. Regardless of the purposes for which such laws were enacted they presently function to force people to sell their labor to property owners rather than to retain all the value they create. But if there were no police to enforce these laws we'd see a great renaissance of local food production. As with trespassing laws it's difficult to imagine local people coming together to enforce anti-commoning laws against their neighbors. Without police the laws would go unenforced.

Not everyone wants to raise chickens, catch fish, or keep a backyard cow, but some people do. Highly local personalized exchange networks, currently commonplace in rural areas if somewhat underground due to regulatory burdens, would flourish both in the city and the countryside. Trading eggs, milk, grazing, labor, etc. comes very naturally to neighbors. The productive capacity of these animals and various natural food sources is astonishingly high and the removal of police-enforced prohibitions would allow people to reduce their participation in the cash economy. But capitalism needs a broad and deep supply of potential wage laborers. Without them there's no one to exploit. The supply doesn't occur naturally, it must be both created and maintained. Anti-commoning laws are one of the ways in which this is done, and given the resources the government currently dedicates to their enforcement their effect must be significant. If abolition makes such laws unenforceable capitalism is threatened.

This scenario raises the question of the putative tragedy of the commons. Without police to enforce anti-animal-keeping laws, licensing requirements to hunt, fish, and gather other food, bag and size limits, and so on, maybe everyone's neighbors will have noxious stinking pigpens in their yards and all the fish will get eaten and become extinct. Even if we knew for sure that these consequences would follow it would be worth considering whether the unspeakable violence inflicted by police is worth their prevention, but I also don't think any of that would happen. Communities of people have managed common exhaustible productive resources together for hundreds of thousands of years. Effective and indefinitely sustainable communal management systems were ubiquitous before the world-wide enclosure of the commons. They seem to be a feature of human biology like language and sociability. Without police interfering in them for the benefit of property owners it seems likely that people would easily work out communal ways to manage their newly re-available common resources.

There are many, many other examples – professional licensing requirements, intellectual property laws, health codes, zoning restrictions, anti-counterfeiting laws, tax laws, compulsory schooling, laws imposing aesthetic standards of property maintenance – all are ultimately enforced by police and none of them are the kinds of things neighbors want to or can enforce

against neighbors. After abolition these restrictions will vanish – the effects are hard to predict but the magnitude of the effects is not. It will be monumental.

One thing that many of these economic laws have in common is that they require people to choose between making payments in money and risking violence at the hands of the police. There's presently no escaping the web woven by such laws. Either pay up or get hurt. And there are only two legal and reliable ways to get the necessary money – work for wages and thereby be exploited or else exploit people who work for wages. Unless people are in a position to live solely from the labor of others they have no option other than exploitation or pain.

After abolition, though, with the cops and their violence out of the picture all the laws that make wage labor most people's only option will be gone. People will have a whole range of other choices – other ways to make a living. For instance, why wouldn't workers take over their workplaces and keep all the profits for themselves? Who will stop them? Why work in a fast food restaurant and give most of the money to some owner when the people who actually run the place could divide the profits among themselves? I can't imagine people being willing to work for wages when they could as easily work for shares in whatever they're already doing. Why would their neighbors, the local community, organize to stop them? The restaurant provides food either way, and probably much better food under the control of the workers.

The very existence of a huge commoditized labor force relies on police. The fact that for the most part anyone with enough money and a task to be done can hire people to do it requires the threat of police violence. Without cops rich people won't be able to actualize their every desire – their very homes, designed to be maintained by crews of workers, assume the existence of readily available labor and will be uninhabitable by too small a group if workers aren't available. Neighbors may well voluntarily help one another out with home maintenance but each has only their own labor to contribute. This isn't a problem if everyone's living in human scale homes, but it's hard to imagine people being willing to contribute their own personal work to maintain a mansion which houses only a single family.

Without an inexhaustible supply of workers money itself will be a different thing, certainly worth less than it is now. If people have to convince other people to do what they ask rather than relying on the tacit but very real threat of police violence to force them then the range of jobs they can pay to get done will be much narrower. Rich people will have to learn to approach others as equals rather than as subjects. Radical equality and the effective end of wealth as a source of personal power are plausible results of abolition – the stakes involved in police abolition are unimaginably high.

Not just for the likely victims of police violence, whose very lives are at stake, but for property owners and everyone else who lives at least partly from other people's work. The economic effects of police abolition will be orders of magnitude greater than the uncompensated abolition of slavery in 1865 – likely greater than any event in human history. Most, maybe all, of the abolition discourse on both sides focuses on violent crime. Ultimately, though, that's not the obstacle. People with the political power to make changes of this magnitude, the ruling class, don't care at all about violence directed at anyone but themselves. Their whole project relies on the violent control of their victims, among whom a few more or less murders and rapes hardly matter.

Even if abolitionists came up with pragmatic and convincing answers to every possible question about handling violence without police, and I have no doubt that they can, will, and mostly already have done so, they'll never convince anyone that capitalism can survive abolition. It can-

not. I don't know how to get rid of the police – if I did they'd already be gone. But I think the stakes are too high, the very survival of capitalism itself, for the police to be abolished because the arguments are sound, because it's the right thing to do, because enough people want it to happen. Abolition will be a revolution. It will take a revolution to make it happen.

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