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A radical security theory is possible (and it doesn't necessarily look like left populism)
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Contents

Abolish or attack: subvert, diversify and prefigure? 6
The irreducible relationship between the state and the police 9
On techniques, technology, and security modalities . . . 11
Horizons for radical security theory 13
Conclusion 17

war-at-ground-level-a-discussion-about-experiencing-the-war-in-ukraine/(open in a new window)

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Technological totalitarianism, (neo)fascisms, war and genocide have always been present and intensifying. The accumulation of power and modernist progress, for some, is liberatory and utopian. The concept of liberation has always been partially contested. What and how liberation might be done remains a tumultuous question (Robinson, 2020), which Micheal J. Albert (2026) contributes to in the lead Forum Article. While we share common ground with Albert's (2026) opposition to militarism, policing, war and the US Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE), we disagree with the 'left populism' proposed by him. Furthermore, Albert's (2026) challenging 'purism' is correct, but we cannot ignore how 'the purism critique' disarms people maintaining political boundaries and for well-over a century remains among the favorite accusations of Leninists or evolving (crypto)authoritarian leftist forms (e.g. Tiqqunist/Appelist; see Anonymous, 2023a, 2023b; Dunlap, 2023). We are against purism, but we cannot overlook the technological omissions and statism within Albert's (2026) article.

Remember, Karl Marx, for the most part, was anti-state, believing the state would naturally wither away (Fabbri, 2017 [1922]). I.V. Lenin was also against the Tsarist and 'bourgoise state', but not his dictatorship or the so-called communist state, which through successful politicking expanded the Tsarist bureaucracy and established a secret police and GULAG system to defeat his enemies (Ryan, 2012) – among them anarchists and anti-authoritiaran Marxists in Russia and claimed territories, such as Ukraine (Cotlenko, 2018; FoAB, 2017; McKay, 2019; Iaroslavskaia-Markon, 2020). This trajectory continued under Stalin, except the liquidators of yesterday became the victims of the day (Ryan, 2012; McKay, 2019), which is why Hannah Arendt (1962 [1951], p. 6) recognizes 'the Bolshevik system' and, later, 'Russian practice' as 'even more 'advanced' than the [Nazi] German in one respect: arbitrariness of terror is not even limited by racial differentiation, while the old class categories have long since been discarded, so that anybody in Rus-

sia may suddenly become a victim of police terror'. These were matters long-predicted and foretold by Mikhail Bakunin (1990 [1873]) in his assessment of Marx's work, which even Chomsky (2005) forcefully acknowledges. Marxist-Leninist ideas – and its historical materialist 'stage theory' – were exported across the world as revolutionary while statism and modernity remained untouched (Dunlap, 2025), and anti-authoritarian struggle would be smothered by some local version of nationalist, 'Red' and 'White Terror' in distant continents.

While in no way, do we suggest Albert is a 'card carying' Leninist, we do, however, recognize a common feature of leftism that ignores, and/or celebrates, the state. This, unsuprisingly, leaves organizational and high-technology debates untouched and, collectively, ignores the problem of modernity. There are numerous assumptions and framings made within Albert's Forum Article, which we believe are hazardous and deflect from the existing political, social, economic and combative relationships necessary for social transformaiton. This comment proceeds by focusing on 'left populism', 'non-reforms reform' and the state. Next, it turns to briefly discussing the unspoken technologies – material and organizational – that are missing from this conversation. Finally, before concluding, we touch on the previous implications for an 'alternative left security' strategy (p. 4). Overall, we appreciate this candid sharing by Albert, and the possibility this forum creates to speak directly to issues and points commonly disguised within academia.

Abolish or attack: subvert, diversify and prefigure?

Albert's Forum Article reveals the poverty of leftism, from Lenin until present – which is complicit in ecocide, war, extractivism, technological domination, discrimination and repression

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(Dunlap & Brock, 2022; Khan, 2023; Danewid, 2024) – that we must move beyond. The same way authoritarian communist regimes have used the 'White Terror', 'Fascism' and (Western) Imperialism to justify and/or deflect from their internal failures – centralized planning, internal colonization, the reshuffling of the 'class system', political censorship, repression and autocratic opulence (and more) – we recognize Albert's deployment of the 'age of neofascism' or 'end times fascism' (p. 2) as avoiding the structural problems of statism. The state, assumingly for theoretical or practical reasons, is framed as the only mechanism of salvation. The so-called 'Left' and Marxists outside the autonomous tradition have consistently betrayed struggles in order to maintain statist order to the detriment of social movements. From the Russian Revolution (1917) to Ukraine (1921) to Spain (1936) and all the way to the anti-globalization movement, the 'Pink Tide', the Arab Spring/Awakening and various anti-police uprisings, we repeatedly see compromise, fragmentation and betrayal from the 'Left'. Contrary to the statism implicit in the Forum Article, we believe the state and its infrastructures – despite their enchanting technological entrapments – are the central mechanisms by which sustained political conquest, cognitive warfare and extractivism are facilitated and maintained.

This contention concerning the state, we recognize, is painfully difficult and challenging and could lead anyone to cling to the history of failed 'Left' populist strategies (Durán Matute et al., 2022; Esteva, 2009; Mckay, 2011, 2019; Machado & Zibechi, 2024 [2017]). The general, macro-scale, program pitch in the Forum Article proposes the incremental development of a more socially just version of the state. This, however, radically fails to address the state – its police, prisons, borders, infrastructure and political economy – and high-technologies designed for war, consumerism and, consequently, planetary ecocide. Progressivism, we contend, is a totalitarian concept underpinning 'Left' and 'Right'-wing political

programs (González Gómez & Tornel, 2025 [2023]; Nomad, 2024; Shanin, 1997), which remains unquestioned within Albert's article.

While the general proposal of 'non-reformist reforms' picked up from Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2023) sounds reasonable, it completely neglects where this concept comes from and some of its structural problems rooted in modernity and the state (Gordon, 2018). This failure to engage the state assumes everyone wants a fairer version of the existing and locates change superficially by emphasizing the intensified (racialized) violence of 'neofascism', 'capitalism' and 'neoliberalism' that performs a similar slight of hand once performed by Lenin's denunciation of the 'bourgoise state' but not the state itself – which confuses young rebels and senior academics alike to this day (Dunlap & Becker, 2025). Lenin was never anti-state and the logic, organization and psycho-social conditioning the state performs remain a commonly neglected feature.[1]

Abolition, like so many other academic terms, remains general, vague and houses various different tendencies and articulations. Academic abolition politics has already been critiqued for harboring a Leninism that is disparaging, and detrimental, to autonomous and anti-authoritarian struggles (Kass & Dunlap, 2025a, 2025b). The complications and challenges faced by (total) liberatory struggles are 'not easy', painfully difficult and on-going. We believe, however, that political clarity and practice remains lacking, implicitly substituted by the 'emergency' of survival in the face of rising fascism(s) and white supremacy. Academic journals, moreover, are limited spaces for discussing the practice of political transformation, which wrongfully ignore the movement(s), action and knowledge outside the university (Mullenite, 2021). Marxist statism, and the divisive embrace of the intelligentsia, are more amendable to academic structures (Springer, 2016), and generate a

[1] Fredy Perlman's work is useful in this regard, and outlined cogently by Gordon (2023).

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violent division designed to divorce theory from action, and make an industry out of radical ideas (to which we contribute today). Albert's article, in academic fashion, risks placing abolitionism in the same role as 'The Party' or intellectual vanguard or 'Leftist' political elite. We, furthermore, recognize that Albert's article completely neglects technology considered broadly, which is where we now turn.

The irreducible relationship between the state and the police

We understand the appeal for 'a left populist counteroffensive' (p. 3) and developing a 'left counter-hegemony' (p.4), but we see this running on the hamster wheel of political history. In the same way the US Democratic Party bears responsibility for Trump's election, we see the 'Left' responsible for cultivating (neo)fascisms and technological totalitarianism. All political concessions and social welfare gains came from struggle – militant, legal, administrative and social – which once acquired has slowly been eroded by the myths (e.g. ontological and epistemologies of the state), real and imagined (uneven) comforts of modernity and the structural dependencies organized by the state and capital over the long-term. The Forum Article embraces sovereignty while presupposing that state rule can be decoupled from and function without a logistics of force.

We return to the concept of the state as elaborated by Hobbes (2017), Schmitt (2007), and Foucault (1995, 2003, 2007). In these works the state is fundamentally coupled to the police, the apparatus designed to impose societal orders and define a social space, and 'peace' within that space. While states rely heavily on 'administrative decentralization' (Light, 2003) – hierarchically oriented institutional and departmental decentralization – state organizational forms differ from other organizational structures, such as nodes in

networks (Galloway & Thacker, 2007), which can embody different objectives and values. Schmitt (2007) reflects that for the state to exist, it means that sovereignty cannot be rhetorical; it must be material. Without technologies or apparatuses of coercion – police, military, bureaucratic, infrastructural and psychological – state declarations would be fundamentally hollow and its law would cease to function. These, and other legitimizing, institutions and infrastructures organize people and embody the idea of the political. This is why, as Danewid (2024) recognizes, anti-politics is a necessity for most anarchists and autonomous movements.

In Albert's proposal, the state and its corresponding relationships, discourses and power are rendered unclear. The state, we are told – almost echoing Bolsheviks regime (1917–1919) – will abolish the police and prisons, but only through a hypothetical transition period. Replicating the gradualist abolitionists and, some, openly Leninist works (Gilmore, 2023; Kaba & Ritchie, 2022; Maher, 2021), Albert implicitly separates the state from its material and, consequently, structural ideological consensus shared by 'left', 'right' and ethno-nationalist statists alike. We imagine the clear possibility of 'abolitionists', who are now in control of the state, claiming to facilitate 'transition', use their power to crush dissenting anti-authoritarian voices to preserve their 'transition;' where the imperative toward 'progress' and the certainty of possessing knowledge leads to reforming the old hegemony under a new banner. Albert's narrative does not adequately define policing and the state, instead reducing the argument to saying that anti-police struggle is more sophisticated than saying 'all cops are bastards' (ACAB), which amounts to a truism that advances a reformist position. In Albert's scenario, we are rendered passive citizens, taking whatever space the state decides to give us in our non-reformist reforms.

Albert (2026) leaves us with a series of possibilities, none of which are particularly empowering, clear, and consequently promising. Unspoken, moreover, is the extractivism of Albert's (2026) vision (Chagnon et al., 2022; Dunlap et al., 2024). The

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The question of security is one that cannot be separated from the world that security is meant to secure, and the ways that we understand that world. By relying on the continuation of the state in the process of abolishing the state we are refusing the necessity of realigning how power functions within life, limiting change to something politicians do through systems, and marginalizing the specific needs and desires of actual living people. Rather, we can take a different approach, one that is meant to secure a space of experimentation, secure a life prioritizing autonomy; but that is an approach that does not look much like 'Left' populism.

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energy and material intensive supply-chains and corresponding lifeways (e.g. 'imperial modes of living') – with all the wage slaveries, toxification and international divisions of labor they imply – must be radically acknowledged and remediated. Albert's proposal feels far removed from addressing the political, social and material: the state, police and extractivism. While challenging the state system, nationally and internationally, remains a daunting, even impossible, task, we remain unable to see the viability and/or practices of the non-reformist reforms and left populism gestured at by Albert.

On techniques, technology, and security modalities

The technologies of security, Manuel De Landa (1991) showed, co-create the environments they are produced within. Kristian Williams (2007), for example, shows how the modern police emerge alongside the state, an argument earlier established by Foucault (1995, 2003, 2007). By insisting that policing is inviolable to security, Albert also is implicitly insisting that security discourse must accept the ontological and political project of policing. By implying the state can be used to abolish the police, when it decides to (of course), Albert is attempting to separate policing from the world that it is co-produced to facilitate. Policing is not a phenomenon that emerges in a vacuum, separate from historical and political considerations; modern policing is an essential sociotechnical apparatus of the state. By rejecting the police we recognize the political objectives this technological apparatus is meant to serve – in a word: (statist) political economy.

While policing is highly integrated into market societies, which Albert responds to, this brand of abolition attempts to divorce policing from its political context. The question is not just whether we accept the police, a technology of social control and regulation, as

a force of violence in our lives, but whether we accept the social and political forms that policing is intended to facilitate. Police enforce laws, but also construct a world in which universalized abstracted law becomes 'common sense' or 'settler common sense' (Rifkin, 2013). Through this lens, we see that policing is a technology that is grounded in a specific ontological project, namely modernity, which requires the state apparatus, and policing institutions among them, to advance its objectives. If we are to allow for other pluriversal political horizons that do not assume the distinct ontological universe of modernity (Dunlap & Tornel, 2025), then we have to fundamentally allow for a discussion of technology and the fundamentally material dynamics at play. By neglecting the technical lens, Albert's analysis prevents us from seeing how radical visions of security are intertwined with radical political horizons. The state apparatus, and its multifaceted actors and technologies, seek to make truly abolitionist worlds impossible.

Military intellectual David Kilcullen's (2013) analysis of movements during the Arab Spring/Awakening explores dynamics of self-organized 'swarm' tactics within conflicts fighting to appropriate and/or abolish the state. During this conflict, networked organizational methods formed for fighting, medical support, food, and legal support alongside a counter media apparatus and other (semi-)autonomous infrastructures. These networks converged, diverged and extended far beyond Tahrir Square support logistics, movement intelligence gathering, support networks nationally and internationally. It was not just a question of whether or not people were capable of fighting the regime, but of forming new ways of living that involved conceiving of security differently and fighting for transformation immediately.

We can see similar dynamics in the informal networks that were created to fund and arm the movement alongside repelling ISIS from invading Rojava or, similarly, the decentralized forces holding off the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Petraeus & Roberts, 2023). From people manufacturing First Person View (FPVs) drones

Conclusion

Our primary contention is not that Albert's plan is insufficient, or that we have some plan that is better. Rather, the contention is with the concept and ontology of plans in relation to security theory, political organizing and organization. When we construct the plan as a core concept, often articulated as a programme, we are assuming a specific understanding of the world. We are assuming a world in which we can approach a question of what a general strategic approach would look like in some generic and abstracted moment, separate from time and space. It is a framing that leads only to abstracted generalized conclusions that imply states, centralized forms of organizing, and the current ontology of modernity.

Within security practitioner circles, the thinking around these questions has already moved beyond conceptions of security focused only on armed clashes, on controlling ground, or simplistic categories like 'winning' and 'losing'. Modern military thought, beginning in the 1990s (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001), has begun a journey of integrating recognitions of difference, the dynamism of space in conflict, the multiplicity of forms in which power and coercion express themselves, and the methods of decentralized resistance as central to security thinking. Rigid centralized strategies that are space and time agnostic have largely been confined to the dustbin of history (Kilcullen, 2013). Administrative decentralization has been more common, increasing reliance on small unit autonomy, self-organization, and the use of networks to not overwhelm adversaries and hold ground, but disrupt the ability of an adversary to operate (Petraeus & Roberts, 2023). Only with the advent of the second Trump administration have we seen a shift back to more traditional modes of statecraft and security thought (White House, 2025). Anarchist and autonomous theorizing (Crow, 2018), departing from the objectives of state, can also exceed the limited objective of statist administrative decentralization.

proach is not a strategy or a plan, but an ecosystem. What has emerged is a panopoly of organizations, collectives, cooperatives, and projects that work on different aspects of maintaining life, from maintianing communications lines and power supplies to organizing defense against jihadist raids. It is an experimental medium, where projects emerge and fall apart, approaches are tried and fail, and lessons are learned, in their context, with the people living and fighting at the center of every decision. While Rojava, and Kurdish autonomy, remains a war – with concerning political-military entanglements and violence – it attempts to depart from the state and the traditional 'Left' and emerges as a living approach to security that does not necessitate the sorts of compromises Albert (2026) seems willing to make.

In other words, what Albert is seemingly overlooking is the ways that practices of life can, and necessarily do, form within the process of resistance. This is not the same as claiming that politics is prefigurative, which assumes some sort of 'society' that we build in our methods of resistance. Rather, we are encouraging a much more mundane recognition, that resistance changes the dynamics of life; shifting dynamics redefine approaches to problems. Political possibility is created by struggles that prioritize autonomy and self-determination as core principles. This politics of learning-by-doing, 'building the world we are fighting for', is expressed in Rojava (YPG-I, 2025) and Chiapas (Marcos, 2002). Not only does this approach to security refuse a separation of security from other questions of politics, but it also frames security as a process that begins with the power to remake the world, something which necessitates a vast reordering of political power, and the abolition of centralized structures of authority in the immediate.

on their kitchen tables to crowd-sourcing tourniquets and intelligence analysis support for Ukrainian collective self-defence, we can imagine what autonomous, horizontal, self-defence and security structures can look like. What is at stake in these struggles is not just a narrow question of self-defense and security (Nomad, 2017), but also a broader question of what horizontal international struggle can look like and how that can help build a world without state violence.[2]

Horizons for radical security theory

Albert's (2026) article makes a series of assumptions with its discussion of security. Firstly, Albert's proposal assumes that the state still provides a choice, political space and that abolitionists can wither away the state. Secondly, within that space there can be one definition of security, and that, of course, is a progressive modernist one that is also populist. This fundamentally centralizes the discourse around security (and popular struggle) in a way that confines the possible political horizons that security can allow us to see or participate in.

Security discourse oriented against state forms can be seen throughout movement history. There is a shift away from Marxist-Leninist/Maoist (MLM) vanguard groups towards developing anarchy and territorial based-autonomy. Regis Debray's (2017 [1967]) reflection on Latin America began this process, departing from thinkers like Marighella, by understanding power less on organizational lines, as simple institutions, and more along operational lines, as living, breathing apparatuses that could be combatted through attrition. Whether from Illegalists and

[2] Consider listening to TBI (2025) War At Ground Level: A Discussion About Experiencing the War in Ukraine. *The Beautiful Idea* [Podcast] Available at: https://thebeautifulidea.show/war-at-ground-level-a-discussion-about-experiencing-the-war-in-ukraine/.

the Spanish Civil War, anarchists have influenced the First of May Group (Spain), the Angry Birgade (England), Tupamaros (Uruguary), informality (Morea, 2025 [1968]; Bonanno, 1998 [1977]), George Jackson Birgade (USA) and Direct Action (Canada) (Berger, 2006; Burton-Rose, 2010; Carr, 2008; Hansen, 2002; Kohl & Litt, 1974), then we see between authoritairan and autonomous organizing, whether between the Red Army Faction (RAF) and Revolutionary Cells (RZ) and Rota Zora (Smith & Moncourt, 2009: Ch. 11); the Red Birgade and vital autonomous/informal actions (Bonanno, 1998; Weir, 1990); the Black Panther and BLA members moving towards Black Anarchism (Balagoon et al., 2019; Crow, 2018). This includes the heavily armed territorial struggles of the EZLN (Marcos, 2002) and the YPG/YPJ (YPG-I, 2025), but more so the hundreds of different community self-defense groups known as *autodefensas* or some form of communitarian police (Crow, 2018; Dunlap, 2018; Gil-Vasquez, 2021), which take on various forms of self-organization and negotiation of co-optation by statist and corporate forces – whether 'illegal' transnational criminal organizations or 'legal' corporations.

This autonomous approach to security, furthermore, emerges every time hackers attack Nazi websites; every time people mobilize their own counter-surveillance and security protocols against state repression; every time a conflict is solved without calling the police or getting the state involved, which happens systematically in communities inundated with discrimination and state violence. Tools like Tor and Signal were popularized and organized to weaken the ability of the state to engage in surveillance, thereby providing security for communities fighting for autonomy. The reciprocal tit-for-tat process that has emerged means resistance is an actively developing and redeveloping concept of security to counter actions by the state (Thacker & Galloway, 2007). What emerges is a complex interlacing series of relationships between hackers, researchers, and activists that is capable of creating sophisticated security infrastructure in

decentralized and non-hierarchical ways that is responsive to situations (Doctorow, 2025), seeking to preserve the autonomy of participants as a core concept.

The autonomous tradition is frequently subsumed within a broader leftism devoted to mass politics, ignoring militant reflections, debates and attempts to understand security and self-defence through a multiplicity of means. Instead of the traditional 'Left' approach to security, we advocate basing security in a politics of refusal (Danewid, 2024; McGranahan, 2016). The politics of refusal is a refusal to engage in politics on specific terms, namely terms that are generalized, ideological and oppressive. Modernity, for example, imposes a framework of grand social visions, and those frameworks have led to tragedy (Scott, 1998), from which a politics of refusal departs, rejecting this modernist framing of singular solutions and clear future plans. We are proposing a security discourse on different terms that do not assume a unitary definition of security (regardless of the content) nor any progress toward some point in the future. We recognize struggle grounded in political priorities and ethics, advocating civil, social, and non-armed means (before armed) as essential.

In Rojava, the struggle against Assad and ISIS has shifted into one now defined by questions of maintaining autonomy from a newly consolidating state and from intervention by the Turkish military. Security, for YPG, is divided between a series of self-organized pillars: military forces, local self-defence units, non-military formations and international networks of support and assistance (YPG-I, 2025). These four pillars are organized along the lines of horizontal forms, operating through structures of direct democracy, in a fragmented power structure where no element is considered primary. This is then embedded within an ethic that builds itself around the concept of autonomy, self-determination, and the necessity of defending that autonomy. In Rojava, where local informal forces have fought off ISIS, the Assadist state, and the Turkish military, the result of this ap-