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In the explosion of interest in the topic of abolitionism during and after the explosive summer of 2020 its meaning and purpose has become distorted in its trek through the popular imagination. The topic of Transformative/Restorative Justice also increased in popularity, and as a result many people even conceptualize TJ/RJ as being one in the same with abolitionism as a political position. While this essay is not intended as an outright dismissal of the importance TJ/RJ practices, it is an examination of why they have risen to prominence and a challenge to the idea that they represent the totality of an abolitionist politic.

Abolitionism, as I will use it here, is a position that is dedicated to destroying apparatuses of domination (prisons, police, borders, the State itself) as well as a commitment to addressing harm without the use of those apparatuses. This position in action can indeed look like encouraging rigorous accountability processes in the face of harm, but that is not, and cannot effectively be, the only expression of it. A commitment to abolitionism can also look like getting a group of friends together to go beat down a local rapist rather than calling the cops. It can look like distributing information to all community members about an unrepentant abuser and shutting them

out from social spaces where vulnerable people are, or even running them out of town completely. It can look like organizing to attack and break down networks of fascists so that every member of that network experiences constant rejection, shame, and isolation everywhere they go. Abolitionism is a political position, and all of these different ways of enacting it represent different tactics to address harm: all fit to their unique context, the capacity and resources available to those who want to address harm, the type of harm, the needs of the victims, and the willingness (or unwillingness) of the harmer to be accountable and change.

The truth about harm is that there will never be a one-size-fits-all solution to challenging it. In fact, it is the very idea that there can be such a solution (prison) is what abolitionism is positioned against. Yes, accountability and change should always be an option, should always be an open door through which people who do harm can walk, but if we have no other options besides that we will very quickly find that many people do not fit the neat mold that we wish to shove them into and we will discover that we are repeatedly coming to a dead end of our own making. Some people will be challenged for harm they have done and refuse to see it as wrong or unjustifiable. Some people have built their entire sense of self on an identity conditioned by domination, a feeling of superiority, and a frank disregard for others whose concerns they have categorically deemed "lesser." Are we then meant to remain helpless to intervene on the harm they perpetuate because they are not interested in our invitations to be accountable?

Our goal is not for every single person to feel comfortable and validated, our goal is to end cycles of harm. Fundamental change in the people who enact harm is by far our preference, but lacking that we understand that our responsibility is then to reduce or destroy their *capacity* to continue to enact harm on others. We don't just sit on our hands and hope we can eventually convince them to change at the same time that their enacting of that harm continues to work in their own interest because they're surrounded by people who

revolutionary to throw up our hands and say that there's "nothing more we can do" about a serial rapist in our community because they declined our invitation to be radically transformed? What we have here is not radical abolitionism, but a reconceptualization of liberal "non-violence," which always means expecting non-violence on the part of the victimized, complicity and willful ignorance on the part of bystanders (who get to let go of any uncomfortable moral mandate to act so long as they are least preform asking for "accountability"), and unfettered violence of those who can amass enough power to get away with it.

Accountability and transformative change is absolutely our preference, and a door we would like to always leave open, but it cannot be our only option. It cannot be seen as the only possibility abolition has to offer for the victimized. Abolitionism can and does include processes of accountability, but it also must include other tactics that can work to reduce people's capacity to harm in instances where harmers refuse to engage in that accountability. We must embrace the reality that our shared social world is complex, and that not a single one of us can fully know the solution to every problem ripped away from its context. That harmers, victims, and their shared histories are equally complex. That it is a disrespect to that complexity to claim that our holy words and rituals will solve all ailments and that all other methods of combating harm are inherently heretical and worthy of excommunication. We must, ultimately, do a much more rigorous exploration of the liberal values and ideas we have yet to examine within ourselves and that we have (perhaps sometimes unknowingly) smuggled into our radical abolitionist politics.

think consequences for harm is the same as throwing someone in prison.

I do not believe that abolitionism being seen as equivalent to Transformative/Restorative Justice practices is at all an accident of miscommunication, but rather an expression of stubbornly liberal values distorting the political project of abolition to be less threatening, centered only on "non-violence," unconditional forgiveness (but please don't ask us who tends to be excluded from this forgiveness anyway), and total, slate-cleaning stories of personal redemption. If we can't put people in prison where we don't have to really see or reckon with what is done to them, we certainly don't want to have to be responsible for challenging them ourselves! Rather, we want to believe that everything can be solved in the marketplace of ideas. Anyone who is racist, abusive, a fascist, a rapist, etc. must not really "know" what they're doing, and so once we give them the "right" education they will fall in line and we will all be one happy community where there is no conflict and no one has to have (or hear about) any bad feelings.

This is also, I believe, in part because of the way that the prison system as been largely and incorrectly defined as a system of punishment, rather than a system of control. I have explored and explained the distinction in more depth in my essay "Is Punishment 'Carceral Logic'?" but it will do us well to at least touch on the subject here. Abolitionism is not a political framework against the very idea of punishment: it's a political framework against prisons, police, and the State. These are material structures of control that limit people's autonomy and ability to take real responsibility for their actions. To reduce them only to punishment accepts the State's message about the purpose of prisons: that they are punishment for harm. They are not. Prisons exist as a tool of *control* (which absolutely includes the use of horrible punishment) to attack anyone the State deems a threat to its sovereignty, or anyone who it would be beneficial to the State's image (and thus a crucial

aspect of the maintenance of its sovereignty) to bring the might of the criminalization system down upon.

We are not against prisons simply because we have an altruistic sympathy for all who get caught within it, or even because we have a distaste for any kind of punishment, but because *prisons do not work to address harm.* Many have come to abolitionism through less threatening means than having to reckon with violence: often through talk of how many people are imprisoned for drug crimes rather than violent crimes, or for political suppression, or were wrongly convicted, etc. They come to abolitionism through a sense of sympathy with people who they think should not be imprisoned or have not even done anything wrong at all. This is not a bad thing, but it does not make for principled abolitionism that can stand up to situations less neat and comfortable for us to contemplate. If you are an abolitionist because of sympathy, what do you do when you (inevitably) come across a person who has done such heinous harm that you cannot even attempt to find that sympathy for? When you are shown someone who has done a violence so horrendous that any form of punishment will seem to mild in the face of that violence, how well will your abolitionism hold up when the State wants to throw them in a cell to rot for the rest of their life?

Feelings of sympathy and empathy for the incarcerated are good and important to have, but they will not hold up your abolitionism on its own. Abolitionism does not simply articulate that innocent people are in prison, or only that the punishment in prison is too harsh and traumatizing (even though we can and should point to both of these things as well). We are abolitionists because we know that there are no "right" people to put in prison. Not because we are pacifists who believe that our moral responsibility to turn the other cheek to harm, but because prisons do not do what we are told they are meant to do. They do not stop harm, they compound it. That is our foundation, and it is that foundation that allows us to continue to be abolitionists regardless of what

villians the State might hold up as being representatives of people justifiably incarcerated. It's why we can see fascists be sent to prison and not cheer on the process, because we know that they are not being sent anywhere where they "can't hurt anyone else," but that they are being locked in spaces with incredibly vulnerable people who will be the new victims of their violence. We know that people sent to prison are ritualistically abused by the State while also being robbed of agency to change. We know that prisons are enclosed, inescapable cultures of extreme violence where utilizing harm is the only way many can survive the experience, and that when they emerge again into their communities their capacity to do differently or build trusting relationships is often deeply damaged. We know that prisons are not built to address harm, but to advance and protect the systems of capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, settler-colonialism, and more under the *guise* of addressing harm. We know that victims are ignored, retraumatized, and discarded by the criminalization system that pretends to act on their behalf. We know that our communities are not, nor ever have been, safer for the existence of police and prisons. We know that if we destroyed these apparatuses of control we would at the same time *expand* our own capacities to respond to harm in meaningful ways that fit to the context of that harm.

This essay is not to dismiss the importance of building up communal processes of accountability that allow us to address harm in ways that allow for genuine transformation of those who have done that harm. Far from it. Rather, my point is to draw attention to the underlying reasons why one tactic of addressing harm has been uplifted as not simply the prefered tactic but in fact the *only* tactic we are ethically permitted to deploy in the face of harm. Is it not telling that the conversation of abolition has been co-opted so strongly by liberal values that anything beyond nicely asking an abuser to volunteer to engage in an accountability process is accused of being one-in-the-same with State violence? Is it really so