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Is Punishment “Carceral Logic”?

Lee Shevek

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As conversations about the possibilities of abolition continue to proliferate — and as they are at the same time co-opted and distorted by liberal politics — it may help us to take a moment to be clear about the distinctions between liberatory accountability and what many refer to as “carceral logic.”

Already many of us have borne witness to the way that accusations of engaging in “carceral logic” are weaponized against the very people that abolitionism is meant to center. Survivors asking for accountability from their abuser have been met with a distorted abolitionism as a response. “No, you cannot ask for any consequences for the harm done to you, because that’s carceral logic and we are abolitionists.” I have spoken to many a survivor who has walked away from such an encounter either feeling hopeless about the possibility for accountability or with a feeling of guilt that even the act of asking for it makes them no different from the carceral system. This, it should be needless to say, is not what true abolitionism looks like.

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A primary issue seems to be that abolitionism has been distorted to such a degree that many people believe that, to be an abolitionist, one must reject anything that could be construed as punishment. The prison system is a system of punishment, so the logic goes, and so abolition should mean the absence of punishment.

One problem with this formulation is that it shows a deep misunderstanding of both the breadth, depth, and purpose of the carceral system. Prisons are not systems of punishment. Punishment certainly plays a star role, and it remains beneficial to examine the ways many often conflate justice with punishment, but ultimately the carceral system is about *control*. The carceral system does not simply dole out punishment: it takes away the agency of the people it targets. It rips them from their context and totally closes off any possibility for the expression of personal agency and accountability. It is a system of total surveillance, of excess and constant brutality, and the populations most targeted by it are also (not at all coincidentally) disproportionately the people the State most wants to exert control over. To reduce it to simply a mechanism of punishment is to concede to the State that the reason they lock people up is as they say it is: only for as a punishment of crime, rather than as a mechanism of social control and the continuation of white supremacy. Additionally, to be so crudely reductive, to draw equivalencies between survivors asking for accountability to harm done to them and a torturous carceral system, is to do a great disservice to survivors *and* the incarcerated people who have suffered or are still suffering the consequences of true carceral logic.

Another issue we come across with making carceral logic synonymous with punishment is that people have wildly different conceptualizations of what constitutes as punishment. Is socially cutting someone out of a group punishment? Is stopping being someone's friend punishment? Are reparations punishment? "If you punch a Nazi isn't that punishment which is carceral logic

which makes you just like police!?” This idea of what constitutes carceral logic is ultimately vulnerable to the question of what constitutes punishment, because a very easy argument can be made that *any* consequences for harm are punishment. Definitionally, many of them are! Punishment is a response to an offense that decreases (or at least seeks to) the likelihood of someone repeating that offense. Both throwing someone in a cell and withholding access to a space from someone until they’ve been accountable to harm they’ve done qualify, but they’re clearly not the same.

In truth, the difference between carceral logic and liberatory accountability is not the presence/lack of punishment. Rather, the difference lies in how much power the person who has done harm has. Carceral logic aims to strip them of their personal power, while liberatory accountability processes require that they take *ownership* of that power. That is, ultimately, what accountability is: taking responsibility for your power as well as for the consequences of your use of it. Recognizing your own agency in having made a choice that resulted in harm, facing the people you hurt, giving them answers and apologies, and claiming your ability to do differently. This is what the carceral system does not allow. It strips people entirely of their agency, requires of them no meaningful repair process, and locks them in a cell where they are ritualistically abused by the State. This is a process that heals no one, nor was it ever even intended for healing or repair. It is a system only of control.

Liberatory accountability processes, on the other hand, demand something incredibly difficult for people who do harm: acknowledgement of their own power, their own responsibility to the harm they do with that power and their obligation to use that same power to make amends. Taking that responsibility also means acknowledging and respecting the consequences for the harm they do. If I truly take a harm I’ve done seriously, if I genuinely see it *as harm*, then I also will respect that the person I harmed may need to put more boundaries up between us to feel safe again. If the harm is more extreme, I will see the steps

the surrounding community takes (closing my access to certain spaces, demanding my participation in ongoing accountability processes, etc.) as important responses to re-establish safety where my actions ruptured it, even if those responses are painful or uncomfortable to me. Absent of these consequences, the people most adept at doing harm while maintaining community support have free reign to continue perpetuating cycles of harm that will reverberate through years (often generations) to come, and survivors flee into solitude because there are no communal norms in place to provide them any real or trustworthy sense of safety. This is, in fact, the status quo of the world we live in now.

The real distinction between carceral logic and liberatory accountability is that one process violently strips someone of their humanity and agency, while the other demands that people who do harm take full command of their humanity and agency to atone for that harm and become better members of the community in the process. The carceral system says: “You are a criminal and you deserve to be subject to constant harm and control because of it.” Liberatory accountability says: “You are a person who chose to do harm, we believe in your capacity to choose to face the consequences of that harm and do what you can to repair it.”