**Unforming Police: The Impossibility of abolition**

by [Petero Kalulé & James Trafford](http://unforming-police-the-impossibility-of-abolition/)

The many riots and anti-police demonstrations this year have led to long-fought movements for prison and police abolition being brought into mainstream media and policy – with calls to defund police and divert money towards community support issuing from across the western political left. But in this same moment we have also witnessed calls for hugely expanded police powers in response to COVID-19 from across the political spectrum. For instance, Britain prepared for lockdown amidst a discourse underpinned by brutal militarised nationalism, nostalgic exceptionalism, and a [bill of new powers](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8858/) to restrict movement and investigate without the typical warrant process. This desire for increased policing was met with police hotlines and [“snooper” forms](https://www.avonandsomerset.police.uk/report/breach-of-covid-19-restrictions/) that were overwhelmed by over 200,000 reports in their first week of opening. Apps like Nextdoor afford the capacity to report on neighbours directly to the police, whilst [Civvl](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/civvl-eviction-new-app-help-landlords/) provides a platform for securing evictions. Together, this pandemic response continues to weave directly into policing and community securitisation at the level of lived experience as much as state domination.

In this light, we want to try to expand the concept of “abolition” beyond its recent political format by repositioning abolition in an understanding of police as an all-pervasive circuitry arrangement that is foundational to social order. Thus, beyond calls to defund and abolish the police, we want to reassess policing against its possible returns, its transformations and submergences. Whilst focus on militarisation and carcerality is necessary, policing has also become diffuse and pervasive across institutions like social work, education, housing and healthcare, and encoded in policy, law, security, and risk management. Further than this, we foreground how policing exceeds institution as a kind of form sans form. For us, the pervasiveness of police is not limited to its institutionalised form, but rather replayed within and transmitted across a cis-heteronormative, ableist, and colonial order. We suggest that even when police (and we use police here in the singular to show its nonsingularity) is temporally shaped and boundaried by borders it is also an omni-topological police without border; without determinable limit.

The effects of policing and the physical and psychic violence and harms it inspires are not new. If we go back a few hundred years, it is evident that police are integral to the very design and efficacy of the colony, the ship and the plantation. Police/policing is the constant variable in all violence perpetuated in white capitalist modern society. The spatiotemporal separations and intimacies that were instigated under empire and enslavement have given way to the management of proximate zones of subjugation and limitation that are disavowed, sublated, transformed. As its complex machinery has been internalised as colonial governance within the state, policing is a machine for the submergence and legitimation of violence as primary mode of socio-political order.

In charting this terrain of policing as a legal, administrative, economic, governing, and regulatory tool whilst considering its entangled histories and contemporaneous strategies we are concerned to reconsider abolition, or rather to think abolition differently. We want to consider how abolition has been consistent with the supposed political expedience of large-scale left movements in the US and UK that have been primarily interested in state-capture as a route towards a progressive form of social democracy. There has been a calculative matrix in which pragmatism (law and order) and progressivism (abolitionism) are supposedly played-off against one another. Critique then tends towards whether or not the left is more principled or more pragmatic. However, this obfuscates the more fundamental entanglement of both pragmatism and progressivism with the horizons of state politics and pan-nationhood. In this way – as we so regularly see – abolition is implicated within forms of political calculation that are delimited by context, situation, and the strictures of “pragmatics” (what can we persuade of the voter; what is common-sense; how can we move the Overton window; what do the polls tell us). In this environment, the possibility of abolition is also its proscription.

A number of thinkers approaching abolition from a leftist position have done so from within a [Marxist conception of state and police](https://www.versobooks.com/books/2426-the-end-of-policing) (as institution) upholding property regimes or productive of social orders structured by class and capital. This demarcates police from other social orders whose violence is supposedly confined to wage-exploitation and hegemony rather than to cages, tasers, guns, truncheons, databases and other technologies of apprehension and capture. For instance, where many have [traced the origins of policing to slave patrols](https://www.frieze.com/article/no-escape-empire-cameron-rowland-londons-ica) in Barbados and Carolina, these accounts have often been co-opted into a broader story of enforcing and protecting core mechanisms of burgeoning global capitalism. In doing so, abolition becomes intertwined with the undoing of property regimes and their protection as distinct from other forms of value-production.

For instance, instead of too-quickly adopting an account of policing intertwined with (racial) capitalism, we would argue that policing and humanistic value are inextricable. The matrix through which value is produced is one of deprivation, containment, evisceration, and deracination – that escapes, traverses, and gives coherence to economic and material explanations of the slave, the prisoner, the detainee. The manifestation of value as policing relies on a background in which whiteness and presence are coterminous. In contrast, blackness is not even tractable as absence since that would require [a prior or posterior possibility of presence](https://www.academia.edu/40177823/_Non_Presence_The_Hole_of_Metaphysics). In other words, a metaphysics of presence is given integrity through the production of a [space of otherness](https://law.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2432989/Wynter-2003-Unsettling-the-Coloniality-of-Being.pdf) as Sylvia Wynter writes. So, whilst signifying absence as the negation of whiteness, blackness is ultimately not even present in its absence (to paraphrase [Jacques Derrida](https://www.academia.edu/6562743/Diff%C3%A9rance_Ousia_and_Gram_me_Note_on_a_Note_from_Being_and_Time)).

Presence as a regime of signification (i.e., value) relies upon order and ordering as a condition of possibility. In this regard, we may not only think of “presence” or presencing as a regime of police but also think of policing as a co-production of hyper-presence without presence. This binary itself – in which the coherence of presence coincides with absence – is a production of police that cannot fully determine existence under it. A metaphysics of presence and absence thus ensures that absence is tractable under policing whilst its presence is everywhere felt as a structuring threat.

As we understand it, police not only shapes, designs and guides the functioning of violent systems but it also insidiously undergirds a great deal of leftist organising, theorising and scholarship. Indeed, a transmogrification or obfuscation of policing has been evident in the past few months where many [leftist organisations](https://theclarionmag.org/2020/06/10/labour-momentum-and-the-police/) have called for the defunding or abolition of the police but gone ahead and supported coronavirus policing during COVID-19.

Where the left polices itself against police (but becoming the police) this becomes a kind of [hyper-presencing](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-53267989) that reproduces that which it claims to abolish. Let’s not forget how policing always affects the most marginalised, many of whom for reasons we shan’t go into might not want to or cannot even be recognised as part of the left to start with. The violence of social ordering is erased in attention to the institutionalised spectacular. In other words, to think of policing as an enforcement of limits ensures that the task of abolition within much leftist politics is necessarily thought from the inside of policing itself. This is to simultaneously engage abolitionism whilst also disavowing other forms of violence that are necessary to the stability of social orders.

Perhaps, part of our failure to imagine a police-less society is due to a lack of attention to the abolition of law, its normativity and drive to conserve both itself and the order of the state. Police as a superstructure creates, preserves, protects, and modifies across what [Rancière termed police-orders](http://anselmocarranco.tripod.com/id58.html).

But where Rancière considers the separation of politics and police as fundamental to politics, we are concerned to think of politics-as-police for politics is police. Consider again the psychic retreat to policing as supposedly necessary protection and reproduction of the social order under “threat” from COVID-19. Here calculations of safety, security, and public health are symbolised in policing. They take on the form of a Geist, a mystical spirit force within the political, economic and social imaginary that diffuses everywhere. Like we have suggested above nothing about this transmogrifying structure of Geist as police is new, even when we trace its outsourced, machinic transmissions in contemporary digital technologies.

The perverse proliferation of policing everywhere, and without determinable limit, causes us to think that with abolition, we might be dealing with the impossible. And so, we might have to imagine abolition as that which grapples conceptually with the omni-topology of police and moves beyond it – impossibly.

In saying this, we do not deny the import of abolition movements. On the contrary, in observing them we want to consider how they may already operate beyond teleological limits and horizons that desire and demand the now as well as the future. We think with and of and to abolition as the impossible so as to undo the dialectic manoeuvre that would ascribe and delimit abolition to political proscription, containment and to category. We do this also to trouble the recouping and re-inscription of radical discourses of abolition within liberal normative socio-political orders i.e., within the domain of the determinable. We draw attention to the impossibility of abolition in a precise way – that within a space of possibility pre-emptively shaped by and through policing, abolition would be constricted and navigable only as a dialectical opposition that conserves the political. Which is to say, abolition inscribed within the domain of politics (which is also the domain of the possible) would no longer be abolition, for it would be conceptually confined within the dialectics of resistance, refusal, fugitivity, and Police –– all of which are limits, determinable horizons and measures of certitude. Abolition for us imagines not possible new worlds but rather the beyond, the impossible, the yet to come, after the political. In saying this, we find impetus to move impossibly beyond limits/borders and the stability and determinability of the “civic” that they re-inscribe.

To illustrate how this impossibility of abolition might work, we turn to care work. We do this because we consider care as an inarticulable practice of gathering, tending to, and being with the uncertain – in the uncertain and with the impossible. Care not only moves and works through and within modes of impossibility ([such as violence, precarity](https://read.dukeupress.edu/small-axe/article-abstract/22/3%20%2857%29/171/136952/And-to-Survive?redirectedFrom=fulltext), [despair, grief, and mourning](https://gukira.wordpress.com/2018/06/21/in-despair/)) but traverses beyond their structural forms (and reforms), while simultaneously unravelling what we might call a non-delimitable freedom. A non-delimitable, non-reformable freedom knows the terror and violence of police but is not conceptually predicated upon it. Care through freedom is not concerned with conserving the form of violence. Care is not merely an [antidote to police violence](https://www.facebook.com/BCRW.Feminism/posts/care-is-the-antidote-to-violence-saidiya-hartman-powerful-conversation-with-chri/10154481676477297/) but care, perhaps through practices of [freedom dreaming](https://www.vogue.com/article/filmmaker-and-activist-tourmaline-on-how-to-freedom-dream) incalculably unforms police in all its nebulous obfuscated forms.

Thus we ask: How might we think and practice care as not only a bypassing of order and apprehension but also as an unforming of the violence of police that is found in all structures of presencing, of mastery, and of order and apprehension? Could we attempt to push abolition beyond such mastery, beyond the economic order, its matrices of conditionality and its provisional boundaries of certitude, value, coherence and worth in general?

Could our care be thought of as that which attends [to whatever and whoever is still uncertain](https://www.harun-farocki-institut.org/en/2020/07/07/ecologies-of-care-journal-of-visual-culture-hafi-34-2/) – to the to-come, [to the improbable, to the “yet to come”](https://read.dukeupress.edu/small-axe/article-abstract/22/3%20%2857%29/151/136949/Freedom-Now-SuiteBlack-Feminist-Turns-of-Voice?redirectedFrom=fulltext)? Could we then explore care as a means of bypassing and upending frames of order and normativity, which is to say all modes of calculation, and all the itineraries and rules and laws they carry? Could such an ane-order of the yet to come open us to a care that is attentive and responsive to an unforming of all that is de-limited, organised, appropriable, anticipatable, pre-ordered and thus policed?

All we can do here is to provisionally open the form of abolition up to questions. These questions might be thought of as attempts at unforming all-pervasive forms of police that may infiltrate or creep back into our imaginations of abolition – especially if we hold onto the belief that police violence (as a form of order-ing) only belongs to the structure of uniformed patrol and prison cell. In opening up these questions, we also hope that we have presented care as a mode of being that goes beyond forms of overcoming and mastery whilst still embracing a relational dimension of non-delimitable freedom to whoever and whatever is improbable and yet to come.

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