

Ray Acheson, *Abolishing State Violence: A World Beyond Bombs, Border, and Cages*, Haymarket Books, Chicago 2022, pp. 360.

The world is beset by multiple crises. Climate change, famines, multiple wars, nuclear arms races, rising global inequality, and the global rise of racism and authoritarianism give us plenty of reason to despair. Ray Acheson's *Abolishing State Violence: A World Beyond Bombs, Borders, and Cages* intervenes into this bleak context to give us a vision for the future and plenty of tools to work toward it. Centering the transformative potential of 'abolition' – as imaginary and as concrete practice – Acheson challenges us to dare to craft another world, reminding us of the debt we owe to countless abolitionists who came before and the many activists who continue to do that work at sometimes great personal risks. It is not just imperative, argues Acheson, to live otherwise, but it is possible.

The analytic scope of *Abolishing State Violence* is global, but its empirical focus is the United States. Acheson justifies this focus on the grounds that the U.S. remains the most powerful country in the world, and its policies and practices have massive global repercussions (p.15). One might worry that this kind of focus risks reproducing US-centricity. Yet Acheson is right to draw attention to the imperial reach of US might. What is also interesting to note is how some of the massive movements for change that have emerged in the US have likewise found global reach. Sometimes, especially in the last couple of decades, it has appeared that the imperial center is imploding from multiple directions, but that implosion is being picked up and rearticulated into broader global struggles. If abolition is to become our common future, this is perhaps where one can take hope.

I would like to highlight four such moments of implosion that have occurred in just the last couple of decades, each of which has pivoted around a particular axis of oppression, and some of which are discussed extensively by Acheson. Each gives us a sense of the enormous hunger for change in the US and abroad, making Acheson's project particularly timely.

Class: "Occupy Wall Street" started in September 2011 as a peaceful occupation in Manhattan to protest the bailout of major financial institutions responsible for the Great Recession of 2008 and the sharp rise in disparities of wealth fed by the corporate greed that had been unleashed in the first three decades of economic globalization. The phrase "We are the 99%" became a signature slogan of what came to be known more widely across the country (and overseas) as the Occupy Movement, pointing to the structural effects of a late capitalism that enriches a few, while impoverishing the majority within most countries.

Gender: On January 21st, 2017, a day after the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States, in what at the time became the largest single day of protest in United States history, huge numbers of women came out to march all over the United States (and the world), to voice their opposition to misogyny and advocate for women's rights. Concerns about reproductive rights, sexual harassment, and gender-based discrimination became the occasion to examine the contin-

uing manifestations of patriarchy in women's lives across different contexts. Queer critiques were a crucial aspect of this movement.

Race: The “Black Lives Matter” movement that had emerged in 2013 to protest racially-motivated police brutality turned into full-blown mass protests following the brutal murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020. Millions of people came out to protest all over the US, and many in countries across the world took on the BLM moniker to draw attention to systemic violence against Black people, and racial minorities more broadly. Calls to “defund the police” led to public discussions about the vulnerabilities that emerge from the persistence of structural racism within a state.

Colonialism: The launch of a genocidal campaign by Israel in occupied Gaza in response to a Hamas attack led in 2023-24 to massive protests across university campuses in the United States (and abroad). Protesting US financial and military support of Israeli state violence, protestors offered complex analyses of the relationship between the carceral logics of settler colonialism, militarism, and state violence. ‘Colonialism’ was no longer an abstract theoretical concept to be debated within the classroom; instead, it became an analytic that helped make sense of what was occurring on the ground in real time.

Each of these movements emerged in the United States, but very rapidly became global. Each was organized around a different analytic of oppression. From these different perspectives, each offered a critique of the state as a structure of oppression. Taken together, they help us see the state as a racial and patriarchal agent of imperial capitalism. This is the intersectional state that Acheson describes so compellingly by documenting in great detail how it manifests through police violence, the prison-industrial complex, militarized borders, invasive surveillance, the military-security apparatus, and the workings of late industrial capitalism.

Acheson draws our attention to the toll these institutions and practices of the state takes on the vulnerable, whether they be profiled racial minorities, women denied reproductive care, or workers toiling away in increasingly precarious conditions of work. The state, Acheson reminds us repeatedly throughout the book, is not working for us, where the “us” is the majority of the world's population. This is a point worth emphasizing. Fractures along the lines of class, race, gender, and colonialism may prevent us from generating the kinds of intersectional analyses that help us realize that the racialized, patriarchal, capitalist state only serves a very small elite. If the basis of the social contract is an exchange of citizen obedience for the promise of protection from harm (Tilly 1985; Young 2003), then for the great majority of the state's citizens, the state is not keeping up its end of the bargain. Indeed, in many cases, such as for Black people facing police brutality or women denied abortions, the state has become an active agent of harm. The challenge ahead is for the massive numbers of people who have taken to the streets in the last couple of decades to see their causes as connected, to see the task of transformation that Acheson urges as to embrace as a common task.

Why transformation? Acheson leads us through a complex analysis of the connection between abolition and reformism (pp. 10-12). In some ways, this discussion echoes a distinction made a long time ago by feminist scholar Maxine Molyneux (1985) between “practical gender interests” and “strategic gender interests.” Women, argues Molyneux, encounter problems or face challenges that need immediate attention, problems and challenges that cannot be set aside in the larger struggle for a longer-term transformative overhaul of patriarchy. But there are ways to attend to those “practical gender interests” that either diminish or enhance “women’s strategic gender interests,” i.e. ways that entrench structural patriarchy or unsettle it. Rather than outrightly rejecting all reforms of existing systems, “(t)here is a difference,” says Acheson, “between reforms that strengthen the status quo and reforms that fundamentally challenge and change the existing structure of violent power” (p.11). Some reforms (‘greenwashing’ corporate expansion, police bias training) simply prolong structures of violence, while others (worker safety regulations in factories, cutbacks in police budgets) might be steps toward larger systemic change. For those who find the project of abolition to be either too idealist or impossibly large, Acheson reminds us that abolition is not just a goal, but a “practical organizing strategy” (p.12), it helps orient the ‘how’ of change, it guides us toward action that avoids unintended harm and has transformative potential. In many ways, the strength of *Abolishing State Violence* is to keep reminding us that abolition is practical, is achievable, is already in motion in the work of countless activists in the US and abroad.

Abolition is also about building, Acheson tells us (pp. 12-14). While the word “abolition” might connote destruction or dismantling, the concept “abolition” – which has a storied career in both academic and activist work – has always been generative. It is unfortunate, I believe, that despite Acheson’s recognition of this positive quality of abolitionist work, each chapter title (albeit not the content) frames the project in negativist terms. Words like “Disbanding,” “Deconstructing,” “Demolishing” that accompany each title do not seem to fully capture the generative potential of abolitionist work. But the content of each chapter shows us, in concrete ways, the new institutions and practices that are already in the making and the many models and plans for generating new structures and relations.

The chapters on “Disbanding the Police” and “Dismantling Prisons” gesture toward the need to invest in communities of self-governance and its associated practices of care (pp. 36; 58-60). The chapter titled “Deconstructing Borders” pushes us to move away from an “us” vs “them” frame towards relationships of mutuality (pp. 130-132). The chapter on “Demobilizing War” makes a case for re-directing military spending toward social needs and building models for nonviolent change (pp. 168). The chapter on “Decommissioning Nuclear Weapons” shows us how the hard work of abolitionist activists (of whom Acheson herself was one of the most prominent) led to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the concrete accomplishment of a vision that centers the experiences of nuclear survivors (pp. 212-213). The chapter titled “Demolishing Capitalism” documents not just the staggering negative effects of capitalist greed on the lives of people and the environment, but also, in what is perhaps the most extensive discussion of alternatives in the book, points us to the many models and plans already in motion to en-

act a different future, from “sustainable development” and the “New Green Deal” to the “Degrowth” and “Land Back” movements (pp. 242-255). All this is to say that Acheson is fully aware that while abolitionists have worked toward dismantling systems of oppression, they have also simultaneously imagined other worlds – ones that prioritizes cooperation over competition, community over rugged individualism, peace and diplomacy over coercion and militarism, reparations and reconciliation over punishment and incarceration. Additionally, many have provided blueprints for alternative institutional structures and practices, many examples of which readers will find in the book.

Abolition is not just a vision for the future, it is a movement, Acheson reminds us in the closing chapter of the book. In one sense, it is a movement that pull together all other movements. What makes *Abolishing State Violence* so remarkable is Acheson’s ability to pull so many different strands of both academic and activist analyses into a coherent argument for solidarity towards a more peaceful and just future. Its analysis brings into conversation intellectual heavyweights like Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Michelle Alexander, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Dylan Rodríguez and many others with the inspiring organizational work of the Red Nation, ACT UP, the International Campaign for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) and many other large and small grassroots groups. Anyone despairing about the current state of our world will find in its pages the tools to both critically analyze its systemic failures and to dismantle and rebuild new systems. This is a must-read for anyone genuinely interested in social justice.

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References

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