

“carceral archipelago”: an abolitionist dialogue

adam elliot-cooper, geo maher, d-7

D-7: Our guests are Adam Elliott-Cooper and Geo Maher. Let us first discuss the origins of policing in your motherlands.

Adam: Policing develops in uneven ways across different parts of Europe, for instance, the police forces in Britain, the US, and Britain’s Caribbean colonies cross fertilise, and thus emerge simultaneously.¹ But I think it’s worth noting a few things. First, in the British context, we might call proto-policing or proto-police forces, weren’t called the police, but might be called the yeomanry, or simply the army. They have been around for a very long time and their purpose was generally to protect property – that of the aristocrats, other landlords and parts of the ruling

class. But also connected to that – to control or repress peasant rebellions, when people demanded better working conditions, lower taxes or other kinds of rights, freedoms and liberties.²

We really begin to see this set of institutions becoming more formalised with the emergence of wage labour. In other words, when larger numbers of people start earning money for a living, rather than being paid through the products that they are able to yield through their agricultural work. This is connected to property, but also imperialism and, therefore, race in a number of ways. The first is that if people are being paid a wage in places like the docks of London, Liverpool or Bristol in the Britain, then property owners, merchants, and other sections of the capitalist class wanted to prevent their workers from taking any of the products that they were helping to move from one place to another, right? So this is where we begin to see a police force emerging in places like London. Similarly, on the other side of the Atlantic, we also see Britain's police forces or proto-police forces being more formalised in order to control Britain's colonised and, particularly, its enslaved populations. This became particularly important for Britain following a number of rebellions that took place across the British Caribbean, after the Haitian Revolution in the early 1800s. On both sides of the Atlantic we see the emergence of capitalism coupled with empire playing a crucial role in policing oppressed people, whether they be the working classes of Europe, but also the colonised and enslaved subjects in places across the Americas.³

Geo: Yeah, I agree with the way that Adam has described that history. To add a little bit of the US dimension, it's important to insist that this long history is a history, as Adam's described it, of property and imperial colonialism – the long prehistory of the police. We've got this story that police, in the northern part of the United States, emerged out of appropriation of the professional London police model; and it was more in the south that the police emerged from slave catchers, from those forces that were explicitly designed to control enslaved African people. It's a reproduction of a sort of American Black legend, in which the north is free of all sin, and the south is the home of the repressive racist prehistory of the police.

It's simply not true, right? The London model was derived through colonial and imperial intervention, it acquired its militarised characteristics in places like Haiti, Nicaragua, and in the Philippines. When military occupiers came back home, the so-called professionalised police were designed across the United States, doing so along military lines.

This is no accident because we've got a long pattern that persists today in which certain populations are coded as insurgent military foes, colonised populations internally or externally, Black Americans, Brown Americans, and others are always seen as subject to end of deserving military force. This intersection with the military in contemporary policing is no accident. The two parameters crucial to bear in mind are: white supremacy and property. When we're talking about contemporary policing, it's crucial to maintain a balance between the two because you can explain in the US context everything that contemporary police do – or the way that they operate or their overarching function – through either of those parameters. Police operate how they do not only as servants of capital, but because they also respond so often to white fear and anxiety expressed specifically around Black mobility. When slaves are ostensibly freed, all of a sudden the police became incredibly important to control the movement of these free people through the process of criminalisation and, ultimately, convict leasing and mass incarceration. Today, globally and almost uniformly, you see police in every corner of the earth upholding property and whiteness on some level, even in places where this seems incredibly counter-intuitive.

D-7: At first, were new police members recruited from common labourers?

Adam: Yes, historically, police officers have been drawn from the working classes, and if we continue on the comparison with slave overseers, we can see that very often these overseers, managers or state agents are taken from the oppressed classes and elevated, giving them certain privileges. This has been a consistent tactic of ruling classes throughout both feudalism and capitalism to establish and maintain order by affording certain privileges to people from oppressed classes,

in exchange for their loyalty. The police is perhaps one of the most salient and consistent examples of this: they receive far more privileges in relation to pay and pensions and other conditions, compared to people who join the military, for instance.

Geo: The question raises an interesting historical piece, particularly in the US, and relates to contemporary debates around whether the police are workers and whether we should organise them as workers. These arguments are out there. Cedric Johnson in particular has been arguing that we should understand the police as part of this broader working class. Many others on the left, quite rightly see that as a kind of farcical misunderstanding of the way the police operate in practice. But it's got a history, right, which is that US police were drawn from largely poor and working class communities, mostly recent immigrant communities.

In 1919-1920 in the US, police went on strike, and then there's a process whereby those in power are trying to decide: how do we manage this slightly unruly Achilles heel? One thing that's worth understanding is that becoming the police is part of becoming white in US history, because that means being incorporated into the power-structure to oppress, police, and oversee others. It's also part of becoming so-called middle class. There were real efforts by police to function as a unionised labour force willing to withhold their own labour, which was contradictory from the beginning. This is because police were simultaneously breaking strikes across the country, being used as a force to destroy other workers and movements. Yet, there was a revolt among police against their managers, against municipal officials, but it was a short-lived moment, and the result was that police were fully incorporated into the power-structure through a series of privileges.

They threatened to be a labour movement, and as a result were given all the benefits and privileges the system had to give them to prevent them from being a labour movement. So the police mobilised the threat of becoming labour to gain power between the 1920s and the 40s. In the period following that, they mobilised the threat of black resistance and rebellion as a way to solidify their position,

that is, they would say: listen, who is going to keep you safe from the black power movement and riots and rebellions that were breaking out in the mid 1960s? All of that contributes to this consolidation of the police as an essential part of a corporatist relationship with the state.

We know corporatism as a quasi-fascistic phenomenon where all of these pieces of government are incorporated into one broader structure and the police are the glue of that. In the US in particular, they can't go on strike; technically, they've sacrificed their rights as a short-lived labour movement to be enforcers of the status quo. As a compensation for that, they get essentially anything they want when it comes to negotiation with local municipal officials, and they still to this day act like blackmailers and bullies when it comes to these negotiations. Here you see the real difference because, as an employment mode, policing has diverged so radically from the labour movement: the wages and salaries have gone up consistently, they've got all these privileges, they're essentially allowed to kill other workers with impunity,⁴ and yet the labour movement itself has declined, wages have stagnated, and these things take very different trajectories from the 1940s onward.

D-7: While structurally the police are not a corporation, strictly speaking, a careful study of Australian Federal Police's website reveals a rhetoric that mimics business vernacular: inclusive culture, incentives for personal growth, pursuit of integrity and, naturally, friendly environment. The police presence has been expanding in Australia, and the new Melbourne CBD headquarters cost \$650M! With this in mind, the abolitionist politics appear particularly hard to communicate. Are the police and, relatedly, prisons obsolete today?

Adam: When Angela Davis wrote *Are Prisons Obsolete?*,⁵ I don't think she meant that we can close every prison tomorrow and sack every cop today and everything will immediately get a lot better. What she was actually saying is: look, we don't need police in prisons in order to be safe, what we really need, if we want to create a safe and healthy society, is erode, get rid of and replace the structures of power

and inequality and oppression, which lead to people harming others. So when Angela Davis says, prisons are obsolete, what she means is that it is possible for us to create a society which is based on care, rather than competition. A society which is based on mutual aid and solidarity, rather than growth, extraction and the profit motive. Additionally if we can begin to unlearn the forms of heteropatriarchy and racial hierarchy which make these forms of violence and exploitation possible, then we can create a world in which prisons are obsolete. But, unfortunately, it takes a very long time, a lot of work and a huge amount of organisation in order for us to be able to create a world, in which prisons are obsolete. Therefore, what she and other pioneers of abolitionist thinking propose, is that we instead start to build the kinds of alternatives to police and prisons that we can rely on today, that can erode our society's reliance on the police and prison system.

Geo: I think the idea of obsolescence operates as a kind of guide to action for someone like Angela Davis. How is it that we make police and prisons obsolete? This in and of itself is a reframing away from the simple tearing down, to the question of the building up. This global question acquires a certain salience in history from which – for better or worse – a lot of the abolitionist movement get its frames of reference. To give the briefest of overviews, W. E. B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) is an essential text, and it tells the story of the US Civil War, a story of black revolt against enslavement and of the ways enslaved Africans took history into their own hands and transformed it, changing the outcome and the meaning of the war. It was not Abraham Lincoln who decided to free American slaves – they freed themselves through their struggle.

However, this near-abolition of slavery in the letter of the law – and I say “near-abolition” because there's a massive loophole in the 13th Amendment for those convicted of crimes – was not matched by a process of social reconstruction. In fact, we refer to the period after the civil war as Reconstruction, but it was a period of intense struggle and massive opportunity – the closest the United States has ever been to multiracial democracy – that was ultimately destroyed by white terrorism. By the mid to late 1870s, Reconstruction was dismantled, and

so ultimately what the United States gets is abolition without reconstruction, the elimination of one institution (for the most part, slavery) without rebuilding society in a way that would make that institution obsolete. In other words, the way the social structure called new forms of slavery into being, whether it's sharecropping or the criminalisation of blackness through black codes, leading then to convict leasing, in which many people who had been formally freed, were arrested, convicted and leased out as quasi-slaves to their previous plantation owners and masters. If you don't rebuild society on different foundations, the same old institutions will continue to develop.

You could look at this very concretely today by saying: if we could with the snap of a finger and the stroke of a pen eliminate police tomorrow, there would be new kinds of police on the next day, because we have a world built around white supremacist fear, property inequalities, patriarchal violence, and there is a need for institutions to uphold these things. Rich people will hire police and people to protect their wealth. I don't think this means that we slow the pace of our demands. For me, Minneapolis was a great example of the opportunity and the possibility to tear the institution down very quickly through both popular action and municipal action. Those are opportunities that we should take and we should then build that new society around it, as people did on the ground: more than a thousand people establishing a liberated zone in the centre of Minneapolis, and building up those alternative institutions. This is the double work that we need to be doing in the present, and moving forward.

D-7: In the Australian context, I just can't see how we can create conditions that would enable us, collectively, to convert competition into care without the collapse of the current regime and economy, feeding off the habitual exploitation of the land by corporations and colonists. It's hard to imagine how at a personal level people would start thinking differently about organising themselves into societies of mutual care, rather than societies that are driven almost exclusively by personal interests and the comfort of their kin.

Adam: Although I can't speak for the Australian context, Britain is also a fairly neoliberal place, certainly by many accounts the most neoliberal economy in western Europe. However, I think there are still pockets of resistance which counter dominant neoliberal ideas, which extend networks of mutual aid and solidaristic support. Examples of such principles include the National Health Service, the idea that healthcare should be free as the point of access. We go to work, we should be taxed, and that tax should be redistributed for things like health care. It's a basic principle that we should care for each other within our society. We want to make social investments and live in a better society, where there are things like free healthcare, secondary education, subsidised transport, and things like that.

Crucially, we should also consider wider forms of care existing within many communities across places like Britain and Europe – and I'm sure even in Australia – where people engage in forms of mutual aid which is community-led. When people organise to help others in their local area, who might have forms of disability or mental health problems, who might not be part of their family, but their wider community. There are youth clubs all over cities like London and Birmingham and Manchester, where people work for very low wages to support young people in their local area to try to help them in relation to issues that might be linked to harm or violence or some other things, in which the police would otherwise be involved. Many people, who probably go to good universities and get good degrees and could become management consultants with lots of money, instead decide to go and work for a local community organisation, such as a domestic violence shelter. This shows that a lot of people would much rather do a job which doesn't involve maximising their income, being involved instead with helping other people not simply because they might have solidarity with them, but because there might be something which gives people an intrinsic sense of hope about the world when they wake up in the morning, or when they get home from work at night. Probably this wouldn't happen, had they ended up working for McKinsey or an investment bank or a hedge fund or a job in which their sole

purpose is profit maximisation.

Geo: We live in a world that I describe as a “world of police.”⁶ The world has been built around policing, around capitalism and white supremacy. It took capitalism a long time to build this world of individual interest, it was not a natural phenomenon, it’s not anchored in mythical understanding of human nature, and so it’s something that can be unbuilt and rebuilt in different ways, starting with the micro-understanding of the things that we already know when it comes to policing and these broader questions about care for one another. Which is to say that we don’t call the police on our family very often, right? If we have conflicts, we deescalate them, we have conversations, we look at one another as objects of care and as providers of care for ourselves. When we need it, we’re capable of asking strangers for help, or giving help when strangers need it. We’ve got these micro-understandings of what care should look like.

You can spend a great deal of time, depending on where you live, without encountering or calling or interacting with the police, and yet for whatever reason, we think as if they’re always there, we think that we always need them to be there. So making that leap is a very difficult one, and it’s a leap in terms of our imaginary horizon of possibility, but it’s also a material leap. The good thing is that when people do make these decisions – “I’m not going to work solely for individual profit, I’m going to work for something that will have a social benefit” – they’re putting themselves automatically into a space in which different alternatives might be visible. In so far as we can begin to make those alternatives more abolitionist, more radical, we’ve got the possibility of learning your way out of the policing and massive incarceration apparatus.

D-7: Let me use an Australian example exposing the local culture of policing. Introduced in the 1980s, *Neighbourhood Watch* is a community safety strategy, which conveys a simple message, illustrated on this ubiquitous road sign:



Should you take notice of any suspicious activity, as a conscientious citizen, make sure you let the police now! The issue is: what counts as a suspicious activity? Obviously, it is not limited to things like burglary or running a fentanyl lab, but literally anything that violates current norms and regulations. In philosophical criminology, crime is a notoriously elusive concept.⁷ I've heard many stories about neighbours reporting on one another because, say, their shed extension was not compliant with the council's regulations, or because their cat was outside of the house.

Geo: It's an absolute internalisation of the cop inside your head.

D-7: Such examples mark a collapse of social trust. Some examples are absurd to the point of hysterical laughter. Once I had Michael Balderstone on my erstwhile radio show. He's the unofficial mayor of Nimbin, the Australian anarchist hub, and one of the founders of the Legalise Cannabis Party. He told us about a case, which exploded in the local paper: two police officers paid a visit to a Nimbin resident and spotted a pot with a marijuana plant soaking the sun on the porch. Reportedly, one of them said, "don't worry about it – everyone smokes dope here," and their partner dobbed them in for that incompetence!

Geo: I make a particular effort to insist that we're not abolishing the police to

replace them with nothing. I don't think anyone believes that, although it's a rhetorical tendency within certain anarchist segments of the abolitionist community, built on an understanding that if we simply withdraw the police as an oppressive force, the community is prepared to govern itself. That's a conceptual philosophical and practical misunderstanding. Also it's a political non-starter.

I live in West Philadelphia, and if you speak to your neighbours about what would happen if the police were removed, they will laugh you out of the room. At the same time, I'm for the immediate withdrawal of the police. In the context in which we're constructing different alternatives for community protection that raises an incredibly complex difficulty. How does that new structure differ from the police on the one hand, but also how does it differ from the history of para-policing, like community watch programs in the US, on the one hand. Parapolicing being that they work directly with the police and in conjunction with the police, but the reason that they do so is because they also uphold whiteness and class privilege to the same degree. Neighbourhood watch has almost always been a middle-class policing of the community, to keep an eye out for undesirables that need to be then excluded. It's a permanent threat to community self-protection, which is how you prevent your community patrols, or whatever you've got in the absence of police, from reproducing this tendency.

There are good examples of inclusive, multi-racial and multi-class, self-defence community patrols. This was happening in Minneapolis. When the police were driven out of the city of Minneapolis, multi-racial patrols were going around and preventing certain kinds of harm from being perpetrated by young people, encouraging them not to burn community centres and spaces, encouraging them to go home, bringing them to their parents instead of bringing them to the police. These are very small examples of a complete opposition between a community watch logic and a real community self-defence logic.

Some say we want the police to be as integrated into communities as possible, we want them to be part of the communities, but what community policing has

always meant is fragmenting the power of the community, sapping that power, attempting to infiltrate it, break it up, turn people against each other, and create snitches. Ultimately, if in theory you push that far enough, what happens is that the police become community members. But here's the difference: the defining feature of the police for me is that it's a professional force from outside the community that stands above the community and against it. Insofar as we, as a community, are getting together and making more or less democratic decisions (ideally more democratic) about how to take care of one another, the question is not a formal question – are we to wear uniforms? do we call ourselves police? do we use the means of violence or practices that might be understood as coercive or violent? – the question is who is doing it and how?

Adam: While we do have the cop in our head who's telling us to snitch, we also do have a set of moral faculties that can tell us when something isn't right. Be it the police doing something wrong or anybody else. The voice may tell us, maybe this set of institutions aren't keeping us as safe because otherwise I wouldn't be living in the US, with the biggest prison system in the world, and the highest levels of violence in the overdeveloped world.

D-7: Thank you. There is a key correlation between the origins of policing and the protection of the property of privileged classes. To what degree the prominence of the police in our societies depends on embracing private property as a foundational norm regulating our daily lives and relations with one another?

Adam: I might talk about Great Britain but I think it's applicable in other places. We see the rise of policing as a crucial electoral tool in Britain by both major political parties. This process begins in the 1970s of the Labour Party, but Margaret Thatcher took it to a new level, where it became the top three election issue, above wages and housing. This comes alongside another project by Margaret Thatcher, a project which she called "the right to buy." In the 1970s in Britain, huge numbers of people lived in public housing blocks – it was seen highly respectable and paid for by the taxpayer. Public housing had plumbing, electricity, communal green

spaces, and was considered architecturally modern and progressive.

D-7: I must add that today in Australia, in contrast to Austria,⁸ Commission Houses – homes to refugees, the poor, and many of my friends – are not only ugly and scarce, but also are deemed contemptible by the public.

Adam: Right, Thatcher said, look: I'm going to enable you to buy public housing property for a very cheap rate so you can become a property owner. So what she was doing here was simultaneously escalating the power of the police and the fear of crime, particularly so-called immigrant crime, while also trying to create a nation of property owners even among the working classes. Often these two sets of policies are thought about quite separately, but we could think about them as serving mutually beneficial purposes for the Thatcher government's neoliberal project. On the one hand, you're escalating the fear of criminality – from so-called immigrants, particularly black communities – while at the same time creating a class of people who are now more likely to be concerned about their loss of property or about securing their property, understanding their home as not something which is owned collectively through public ownership, but something which is personal to them and their own family. The more the state is able to create a relationship with property which is personal, rather than collective, the greater they can create a reliance (or a perceived reliance) on the police and prison systems.

We can think about that in other parts of the world, particularly the United States, where there's very little public housing and, therefore, a greater focus on private property, which means that more people want private property and, therefore, need it to be protected. Therefore, the more we can collectivise things like housing and other kinds of public spaces, the more people will think about them in a collective manner, leading to a collective responsibility to look after them, rather than it being someone's personal property, which requires them to rely on a police force due to fear of it being taken away from them by another individual through theft or other means.

Geo: It's really interesting because it resonates with long-term patterns of colonisation. An explicit project of how indigenous communities were destroyed across the Americas was to turn indigenous people into peasants in Latin America, or the whitening and displacement process – the theft of children – in the United States. It also raises a bigger question of how the economic fits with the racial, and this construction of individual subjectivity is crucial and hits its crisis points during the 2008 housing crisis. Prior to that, there are all these junk loans being given primarily to communities of colour, which then they default and lose their homes, while huge amounts of money are sucked out of those very same communities. Of course, the profit had already been made by the banks, and so there's no loss to the system.

It also concerns the debates about the term “prison industrial complex.” As Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues,⁹ there's an implication that the economic question is solely about profit, about how prisons generate profit for private producers through so-called prison slavery. Part of her concern is that this is a narrow understanding of the economic because part of what's happening here is that entire countries and social structures are being reoriented and restructured. Mass incarceration was a geographical solution to an economic problem that involved not the withdrawal, but dramatic infusion of state money from the 50s and 60s into underdeveloped white areas of the U.S. in a way that creates its own constituency – creates its own economic motive and rationale in that prisons then provide jobs. It's a different side of the economic piece, which is not the profit question, but the employment and income question. While the state becomes racialised, handing out money to “undeserving” communities of colour, private capital and individualism become hyper-racialised as white. It's a way in which the two pieces operate hand in hand to incredibly destructive extremes.

D-7: The title of a private prison operator – Corrections Corporation of America – attests to this socio-political disaster.¹⁰ As we've demonstrated, racism constitutes part and parcel of policing – and, therefore, of police education.¹¹ A series of excruciating news recently emerged in the media. In Queensland, some officers

were recorded making obscene racist remarks and then, naturally, covered up.¹² In Victoria, the police have a training manual, which says that The Stolen Generations – an Australian rendition of fascist eugenics – is “the best thing that happened to them,” that is, Australian Aboriginals, representing the oldest surviving cultures on the face of the earth. As a result of negotiations between the enraged indigenous communities and the police, the latter have apologised and introduced a cultural sensitivity module, which runs for 3.5 hours.¹³

Still, a common citizen would perceive the police as a legitimate force against criminal activities, ranging from drug industries and domestic violence, to child pornography and serial killers. How can we envisage our communities emptied of the police units when we have to deal with such problems everyday?

Adam: The example of drugs is a useful one, partly because there are lots of real world examples of how drugs have been dealt with. One of the best examples is probably Portugal, but there are others as well. Portugal has relatively recently decriminalised all drugs regardless of what it might be, or how we perceive the effects that they have on our minds and bodies. They treat drug use as a public health issue, rather than a criminal justice issue, and this has led to a massive decrease in the harm and violence, which often takes place when drug use or distribution becomes a criminalised activity. People are able to have their drugs tested to see if they’ve been mixed with anything harmful; they can get clean needles to prevent the spread of infectious diseases and other forms of harm. There are mountains of evidence which prove pretty much without exception that the decriminalisation of drugs is better for everyone: it’s better for the drug user, it’s better for people who sell drugs in order for them to gain an income, but it’s also better for the rest of society as well. This is one way in which we can think about drugs, which of course is one of the key justifications for expansions in police, and it’s also one of the key reasons that people are incarcerated, particularly in countries like Britain and the United States.

Geo: Of course, decriminalisation is massively important. Prohibition in the U.S

has been so destructive, in terms of the transnational drug trade in the Americas, because over the course of 60 years border enforcement has led to major increases in the death count. In the past 30 years, we've seen something on the order of half a million dead in the so-called war on the cartels in Mexico, in which governments have tried to crack down on drug trafficking knowing at every step that it won't work. For example, when Reagan shuts down Miami as an entry point for drug flights directly from Colombia, those drugs will then transit through land routes in Mexico, which have created unprecedented levels of carnage. There's no way to stop the growth and the power of Mexican cartels, if that's our goal, without decriminalising and reconsidering the ways that the border is enforced. It's criminalisation in conjunction with the border that creates the massive profit potential of the drug trade: it is the border that makes these drugs worth what they're worth. Clear examples of small-level decriminalisation of marijuana in the United States leads to a collapse in the price, as well as the fact that many Mexican cartels, which hadn't already abandoned marijuana immediately, would cease to produce it and start to produce other things that are more profitable – more profitable because they're easy to smuggle across the border.

This raises an important point, which is that police abolition is also border abolition. This is a big project, a project that we need to understand. Border enforcement emerged in a sharp way in the mid-90s under the Clintonite turn of the Democratic Party. At the same time, we saw mass incarceration bills and the criminalisation of young black people as so-called “super predators,” in the same way as the border and police are both presented as solutions to the problems that they themselves create, by restructuring how our lives work, by injecting violence into communities – and then claiming they're the only things that can stop that violence. The violence of the border that we see in the American press would not exist if the border went back even to what it used to be 100 years ago: a line in the sand that people crossed all the time. It's only when you enforce the border that the value of crossing that border increases, exponentially.

In terms of the other pieces that you have brought in, it's important to point to

the extreme narratives that are used to justify policing, like sexual assault and domestic violence, and about what is to be done with people who are absolutely evil, like serial killers? Do you not imprison them? On the one hand, these arguments are a ruse, a bad faith attempt to justify systems because we know, for example, that policing does almost nothing to stop domestic violence. If anything, you know that huge numbers of police are themselves domestic abusers, inflicting more violence on women than they prevent.

D-7: Indeed, even the works of popular culture – e.g. *Unbelievable* (2019) – draw from journalistic research spotlighting domestic violence perpetrated by cops. We are not in a position to determine the actual numbers with a high degree of precision, alas, owing to the lawless subculture of whitewashing, but various sources suggest that the police and prison officers violate their own family members, physically and psychologically, at the rates substantially exceeding the general population – and get away with it.¹⁴ If that’s how some police and correction officers feel and act toward their own flesh and blood, one is aghast at imagining how the same people may feel toward alleged offenders.

Geo: We need to craft our understanding of abolition around a political narrative that really addresses these questions. In the medium term, we don’t know what these things look like, we don’t know how many people need to be ostracised, held, or surveilled in the short term, as we rebuild a society that we want to have. What we do know is that it’s not the vast majority of the people in prison. Up to 2 million people have been imprisoned at any given moment in the US, and the vast majority of so-called violent offenders had engaged in crimes they would never commit again, reflecting the outgrowth of a lifestyle and economic opportunities that were given to them. So, with regard to the extreme cases that justify policing and incarceration, we’re talking about dramatically shrinking the prison population and the presence of police on our streets, to then be able to think in a more clear-headed way about what our communities need in terms of protection. In the present, we’ve got this massive lie that says we need more police as our society is getting more violent, and it doesn’t ask why, with all the

growth in policing that's happened over the past 40 years, society is still not as safe as we would want it to be?

D-7: We can now move toward the concluding phase of our discussion. First, what would you propose to the members of a community sensing a nascent doubt about the role of police and the carceral system in their lives?

Adam: There's a great organisation in the U.S. who often get people to do a quick thought exercise: they ask participants to close their eyes and think about the most secure, relaxed and safe place that they've ever been to. Then, they ask everyone to open their eyes and say: what did you, guys, see? I was at my grandparents house, says someone; I was in my local church; I was with my friends at the beach; and so on. Then they say: okay, so who had cops and prisons in their safe, comfortable place? Generally, no one says "me," right? So, when we think about the safest places to be in, are they the communities that have cops in every corner, where people live under the greatest threat of imprisonment? Or are they the communities where most people have a relatively decent paying job, where they have access to education, if they want it, and where they have access to health care, including mental health support, where they have secure housing? And the answer is generally "yes" – they are the fundamental things that we need to live a dignified existence. We can see that what we need to live safely aren't cops in every corner, and living under the constant threat of imprisonment.

So, practically, how can we build those things around us? We can build more jobs, or strengthen our unions to help secure people's jobs and improve their pay and conditions. What about mental health? There are community mental health institutions that need support, and if there aren't – how can we build them and make them robust? What other things help with our mental health? Green spaces, youth clubs, music, arts and culture, supporting people who need child care – all of these things can improve our mental health. So, there are lots of ways in which people are already doing work, which erode society's reliance on the police and prison systems, because they are helping people to improve their mental

and emotional well-being. These are some of the examples of the community-led infrastructure, which can improve their likelihood of having a secure, stable and meaningful set of employment conditions, access to housing, healthcare, and well-being. It's about seeing what kind of work is already out there and being connected up to a wider project, which provides community-led forms of safety and care, but also to a wider vision that works towards making police and prisons, as we said at the top of this conversation, obsolete.

Geo: Absolutely. Abolition and reconstruction – the tearing down and the building up – are always happening in some ways in the form of community alternatives. In the US, we have many examples of community organisations that directly intervene to prevent violence, to deescalate and mediate conflicts, and these are the projects that need to be dramatically ramped up. At the same time, there's a question of working to tear down repressive and carceral institutions, which is something that's more periodic – you have waves of rebellion and resistance that give us opportunities to strike blows against these institutions. In 2020, particularly, the mass rebellions presented a golden opportunity to make some headway. The question is how do you do both of these things at once? How do you contribute to both of these tasks, even though everyone's going to be working in a different capacity?

It's important to emphasise, on the one hand, the distinction between “reformist reforms” and potentially abolitionist reforms, because we're not in a position where we can wait for the total and sudden abolition of these institutions. We need to talk about how to weaken them, and we need to be very careful because all of the reforms that the system offers uphold and even strengthen policing. Whether it's new technological questions, body cameras, whether it's training, which infuses huge amounts of money into police, whether it's more police, whether it's community policing. All these things are strengthening the police, giving them more resources, giving them more legitimacy. However, there are reforms that can point in a different direction, that withdraw police from communities, that reduce their funding, that curtail their powers in their impunity, and these are the

changes that we can support.

Here you've got a bridge in between in the form of defunding the police, which allows us to mobilise around the reduction of police budgets. We can then point to that defunding and say: listen, your lives have not gotten more dangerous as a result of these millions of dollars that have been withdrawn from the police budget, but the real key is that those resources are then being reinvested into community alternatives to policing, providing the opportunity for people to see on a local level how their lives have actually gotten better – not only safer, but also more community oriented. There's a sense that you've got someone else to call, the sense that you've got someone in your neighbourhood – a cohesion and community fabric that makes the police obsolete, less present, less relevant.

D-7: Finally, in the context of this special issue of *Parrhesia*, it's essential to point out that both of you take great risks by challenging the very power that authorities deploy to maintain the status quo. It's not another speculative struggle. May I ask you a personal question: for those willing to follow your steps, could you please share what keeps you going?

Adam: For me, even if certain institutions disagree with the political project we've been discussing today, there are many more ordinary people for whom these arguments resonate strongly. When I teach courses on activism or anti-racism, they are extremely popular among students, and the conversations we have in the classroom are a daily reminder of why working in education is so important to me. But of course, outside of academia, working with campaign groups, activists, and community organisations, also keeps me going a great deal. This isn't necessarily because I can see my educational work having a direct effect, but more because it is a powerful reminder that this work is part of a movement far bigger than myself or my individual research work.

Geo: Increasingly, I take solace in the long-term view, in stepping back and gauging just how much has shifted over even the past 30 years, and in seeing that at the

heart of all this change is mass struggle. So while I find inspiration in the young people who took to the streets in 2020 or occupied campuses to stand with Gaza and Palestinian liberation, I also take every opportunity to remind younger people that – even if it might seem like carceral power is unchanging – so much change has been set into motion even in our lifetimes. Ursula Le Guin once emphasised that while the power of capitalism seems eternal and inescapable, “so did the divine right of kings.” The same goes for the police.

ADAM ELLIOTT-COOPER is Senior Lecturer in Social and Public Policy, in the Department of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London. He is author of *Black Resistance to British Policing* (MUP 2021) and co-author of *Empires Endgame: Racism and the British State* (Pluto Press 2021).

GEO MAHER is founding Coordinator of the W.E.B. Du Bois Movement School for Abolition & Reconstruction in Philadelphia. He has taught previously at Vassar College, Drexel University, San Quentin State Prison, and the Venezuelan School of Planning in Caracas, and held distinguished and visiting positions at the CUNY Grad Center, NYU’s Hemispheric Institute, the Decolonizing Humanities Project at the College of William and Mary, and the Institute for Social Research at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). He is co-editor of the Duke University Press book series *Radical Américas* and author of *We Created Chávez* (2013), *Building the Commune* (2016), *Decolonizing Dialectics* (2017), *A World Without Police* (2021), and *Anticolonial Eruptions* (2022).

D-7 is a member of *mongrel matter* and stands for seven dimensions.

NOTES

1. Julian Go, *Policing Empires: Militarization, Race, and the Imperial Boomerang in Britain and the US*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023
2. See: Kristian Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue: Police Power in America*. Boston: South End Press, 2007, 105.
3. See: Adam Elliott-Cooper, *Black Resistance to British Policing*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021
4. See: Tom McCarthy, "Police Killed More than Twice as Many People as Reported by US Government." *The Guardian*, March 4, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/usnews/2015/mar/04/police-killed-people-fbi-data-justifiable-homicides?CMP=share_btn_fb
5. Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003.
6. See: Geo Maher, *A World Without Police: How Strong Communities Make Cops Obsolete*. New York: Verso, 2021.
7. See, for example, Andrew Millie, *Philosophical Criminology*. Bristol: Policy Press, 2016.
8. See: Aitor Hernández-Morales, "How Vienna Took the Stigma out of Social Housing." *Politico*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/vienna-social-housing-architecture-austria-stigma/>
9. E.g. in *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
10. Andy Kroll, "This Is How Private Prison Companies Make Millions Even When Crime Rates." *MOTHER JONES*, September 19, 2013, <http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2013/09/private-prisons-occupancy-quota-cca-crime>
11. Willa Frej, "U.S. Police: Education Levels and the Use of Force." *MSNBC*, December 19, 2014, AM), <http://www.msnbc.com/ronan-farrow-daily/us-police-education-levels-and-the-use-force>
12. Eden Gillespie, "Queensland Government Urged to Intervene After Police Staff in Racist Recordings Go Unpunished." *The Guardian*, September 12, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/sep/12/queensland-police-racist-recordings-punishment-government>
13. Adeshola Ore, "Victoria's Police Chief Apologises for Systemic Racism and Discrimination Against Indigenous Australians." *The Guardian*, May 8, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/may/08/victoria-police-force-apology-first-nations-chief-shane-patton-apologises-systemic-racism-discrimination-indigenous-australians>
14. US: Andrew Burmon, "Police and Violence at Home: What The Numbers Say." *Fatherly*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.fatherly.com/life/police-brutality-and-domestic-violence>; Australia: Hayley Gleeson, "Abusers in the Ranks." *ABC*, October 18, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-19/police-in-australia-are-failing-to-take-action-against-domestic/12757914>; UK: Vikram Dodd and Sarah Haque, "80% of UK Police Accused of Domestic Abuse Kept Jobs, Figures Show." *The Guardian*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/mar/17/80-percent-of-uk-police-accused-of-domestic-abuse-kept-jobs-figures-show>