

**The Class Politics
of Abolition:
Police, Property,
and the Racial
Politics of
Communism**

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Abstract: This paper explores the myriad ways in which we should think about abolition of police and prisons as anti-capitalist politics. In order to do so, I argue that it is vital to clarify how forms of oppression like white supremacy, coloniality, and heterosexism are central to the development and reproduction of capitalism, and how police in particular hold a crucial role in ensuring this reproduction. I thus argue that the cop-capital conjunction is a central terrain of contemporary class struggle, one that can open up new ways of engaging the promise of abolition. I thus argue that we must reconceive of what capitalism is and how it operates in order to see, how, in Ruth Wilson Gilmore's words, abolition is "small c communism without a party."¹

Keywords: capitalism, police, abolition, communism, class struggle, race, white supremacy

On May 28, 2020, a building on the corner of Lake and Minnehaha burned to the ground, and as it did, a previously ultraleft social movement was catapulted to the center of a national and international debate. The building was the Third Precinct of the Minneapolis Police Department and before the embers of the station were extinguished, the word 'abolition' buzzed around the United States and the world like never before.

This upsurge in political struggle did not occur at a workplace (or at least, the protesters weren't at *their* workplace). Their demands centered around racial justice rather than capitalism, impoverishment, jobs, or any explicitly 'economic' considerations. Nonetheless, this paper argues, the protesters in Minneapolis were engaging in anti-capitalist politics, precisely because abolition is an anti-capitalist demand.

This paper explores the myriad ways in which we should think about abolition of police and prisons as anti-capitalist politics. In order to do so, I argue that it is vital to clarify how forms of oppression like white supremacy, coloniality, and heterosexism are central to the development and reproduction of capitalism, and how police in particular hold a crucial role in ensuring this reproduction. I thus argue that the cop-capital conjunction is a central terrain of contemporary class struggle, one that can open up new ways of engaging the promise of abolition. I thus argue that we must reconceive of what capitalism is and how it operates in order to see, how, in Ruth Wilson Gilmore's words, abolition is "small c communism without a party."²

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1 Gilmore, "Abolition on Stolen Land."

2 Gilmore.

Section One: Capitalism in and beyond the Productive Realm

As I have argued elsewhere, a full analysis of capitalism requires more than an economic analysis. Capitalism is, after all, a living social system of diverse and heterogeneous social relations, one in which it is not only value that is produced, but also, fundamentally, life, violence, oppression, and death. While more functionalist analyses tend to reduce all production under capitalism to a neat and automatic output of the economic logic of valorization, sensitive understandings of the capitalist world as it really is have rejected this formalism for quite a long time.

The problem with such analyses is that they, in a certain sense, give capitalist ideology too much credit. While capitalist ideology tells us we are self-contained, autonomous, rational beings who make decisions to maximize our material possessions, actual human beings making actual decisions are rarely so straightforward. And even the capitalist class often makes decisions even an economist or neoliberal strategist would deem illogical. In short, while the logic of valorization is one of the central determinants of capitalist interest, capitalism as a historically unfolding set of social relations responds to several imperatives, often in “uneven and combined” rather than univocal and homogeneous ways.

For this reason, the most comprehensive and compelling analyses of capitalism are those that can render this complicated and contradictory web of social relations. Vibrant traditions of queer, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial Marxisms have precisely taken this insight as their point of departure, that capitalism has not only been involved in “the production of difference”³ (in addition to the production of surplus value), but that *all good class analysis must simultaneously include analyses of race, gender, sexuality, and geopolitics*. Capitalism is, to use a phrase from Jason Moore, involved in the production of “the web of life,”⁴ and five hundred years of capitalism have produced life as highly differentiated in its valuation. In order to produce and reproduce differential valuations of life, capitalism depends not only on exploitation, but on multiple, intersecting logics of oppression. In a real, material, and strategic sense, part of the reason that capitalism is reproducible has to do with the ways in which exploited people are disadvantaged or often barred altogether from the various institutions of social and political power that might otherwise serve the interests of the working classes. In this sense, it is because of decreasing access to institutions, resources, power, and modes of contestation that the capitalist class can continue to maintain and reproduce relations of exploitation over time. This is why, for example, exploited groups are systematically denied access

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3 Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History*.

4 Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

to healthcare, education, political power, influence over the media, and generally to decision-making power and authority over everything from legislative policy to decisions over the distribution of social resources to the production of academic knowledge. But these relations of exploitation and oppression feed off and play into one another as mutually reinforcing and co-constituting aspects of the organization of capitalist society. In this way, both oppression and exploitation are fundamentally material categories that refer to the ways in which resources, opportunities, and institutions structure the possibilities of life. As Cinzia Arruzza explains, “To try to explain what capitalist society is only in terms of surplus-value extraction is like trying to explain the anatomy of the human body by explaining only how the heart works.”⁵

I have argued that taking oppression seriously requires expanding our understanding of what capitalism is and how it functions. If we are to move beyond class reductionist (or even an exploitation-reductionist) account of capitalism, we need to take capitalist social relations, in all of their determinations, seriously. For that reason, I have argued that we must take *both* exploitation *and* oppression as equally (or ‘equi-primordially’) central to the unfolding of capitalism.⁶ In the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it.”⁷ What this implies for an analysis of capitalism is not only expanding our analytic lens of how we understand capitalism and class politics, but also what kinds of struggles we understand as anti-capitalist and working toward the total liberation we all deserve. Doing so means not jettisoning the workplace as a site of struggle, but being able to see a wide variety of non-production sites as organizing imperatives for anti-capitalism and to see a wide variety of political uprisings beyond the workplace as part and parcel of anti-capitalist resistance.

In what follows, I argue that part of the reason police abolition is so critical to anti-capitalist resistance is that it is an institution committed to the reproduction of both the exploitation and the oppression that ground capitalist societal reproduction. As such, policing has both ‘production side’ effects and non-production side effects. Throughout the vast literature on police abolition, it has often been Marxists who offer the most helpful, incisive critiques of ‘production side’ policing; by contrast, feminism, queer theory, Black studies, and decolonial analysis has explored the ways that police are involved in stabilizing more general relations of social dominations, relations that, as we have just seen above, are no less crucial for capitalism’s societal reproduction. Bringing

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5 Arruzza, “Remarks on Gender.”

6 Bohrer, *Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Class Gender, and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism*.

7 Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence.”

insights from these various threads together we can see how policing is structurally necessary to capitalism, and hence, why police abolition is a central element in the struggle against capitalist domination.

Section Two: The Dual Function of Police under Capitalism

The police are integral mechanism of class society, and Marxist critiques of the police have exposed, with clarity and richness, how capitalism depends on these armed agents of the state in order to extract the surplus value that propels the valorization of value.

One of the key functions of police in class society is the maintenance and defense of private property. Private property in the means of production is, of course, so central to the fundamental operations of capitalism that collective ownership and control of the means of production is one of the classical definitions of communism. It should thus come as no surprise that the defense and protection of private property *as private* is the main thread running through many if not most Marxist critiques of the police as an institution, of which there are several strands and variations. Of course, most obviously, the police respond to, or indeed coercively 'predict' property crimes in the interest of the ruling class.

Just as police must uphold the regime of private property, they must also therefore prevent and contain challenges to this order, especially in some of its most potent forms: strikes and social movements. Marxist histories of policing tend to specifically highlight the role of police as strike breakers⁸; since the power of strikes lay in their capacity to disrupt production/distribution and therefore the entire process of production and circulation, the capitalist class has an obvious interest in eliminating this threat. Moreover, the role of police in disrupting protests and radical social movements is also central to its function as one of the central 'means of repression'⁹ capitalism uses to stabilize the regime of accumulation. This is why we see movements disrupted, organizations infiltrated, and activists surveilled and harassed with such fervor – for capitalism to continue, there must be a concerted and coordinated attack on the possibility that the world could be constituted otherwise.

But as we know, a large part of contemporary policing happens well beyond the areas of production, private property, and criminalizing dissent. Police attempt to secure the order of material inequality produced in and through class society. In his astute analysis, Mark

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8 Maher, *A World Without Police*; Vitale, *The End of Policing*.

9 Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*.

Neocleous highlights that one of the key functions of police is the stabilization of social order.¹⁰ Here, we can see how the law and order elements of policing function to support capitalism. At its core, capitalism requires a stabilized hierarchy in which some prosper and some starve; it is this hierarchical order that police are called in to solidify. In this sense, when policing takes on so-called 'lifestyle crimes' as their target or 'broken windows' as their strategy, they are stabilizing the social relations of inequality necessary to maintain the illusion of capitalism's normalcy and naturalness.

Neocleous' analysis, as prescient as it is, focuses on the social order of class domination but does so within Europe and largely absent of any consideration of the racial and gendered constitution of the working class; in this sense, the specifics of his analysis are quite sharply limited for understanding how policing unfolded historically and how it continues to function inside contemporary capitalism. What I would like to highlight here is his understanding that policing is invested in the constitution of an *order* and the maintenance of that order through oppression; fundamentally, his analysis argues that capitalism is sustained through class-based exploitation in the workplace (without any mention of gender-based exploitation in the home!) and stabilized through class-based oppression everywhere else. We know, however, that the social hierarchy generated by capitalism is not only class-based; it is constitutively raced, gendered, and sexualized, as well as marked by dynamics of coloniality and ableism. A large part of both the history and the present of policing takes aim at stabilizing these elements of capitalist social relations as well. We can only understand the intensity of the racial violence perpetrated by policing or the pervasiveness of gendered police violence (like rape-by-cop) if we understand that the *order* of 'law and order' refers to a set of hierarchical social relations that designate some (white, straight, cis, male, able, bourgeois) life as worth defending, and all other forms of life as subordinate and therefore only selectively worthy of defense. Policing under capitalism is thus best conceptualized when we understand its dual character in protecting the property/production/exploitation triad and in reinforcing a broader social logic of oppression.

Section Three: Policing Beyond Production from Chattel Slavery to the Third Precinct

One of the most profound insights of the tradition of racial capitalism and settler colonial studies is the centrality of the reconfiguration of the Atlantic World to the rise of capitalism as the hegemonic global system. In particular, the rise of transatlantic chattel slavery and the

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¹⁰ Neocleous, *The Fabrication of Social Order: A Critical Theory of Police Power*.

dispossession of Indigenous peoples of the Americas were necessary historical movements to capitalism in more ways than one. To illustrate this, focusing only for one moment on the element of property so central to Marxist accounts of policing, we can see a very specific racial dynamic unfold. As Rinaldo Walcott contends, the racial politics of the rise of capitalism depended on turning human beings *into* property, as ‘goods’ traded on a commodities market, but also as *means of production directly*¹¹; if Black human beings are transmogrified into property, the dynamics of policing ‘private property’ relations take on very specific racialized dynamics. It is, of course, a racialized system of subordination, dehumanization, and reification that police are reproducing when they emerge in the context of racialized chattel slavery,¹² as they did in the United States.¹³

The racial dimension of policing has been consistent throughout the history of capitalism. As chattel slavery was abolished across the Americas, the racial character of capitalism was transformed rather than abolished. In some places, newly emancipated Black people become either exploited workers (through the wage or through unwaged social reproduction) or they became the ‘reserve army of labor’, policed heavily through the imposition of new vagrancy statutes, semi-bonded labor practices, and a variety of limitations of physical and social mobility that Saidiya Hartman has called “the afterlives of slavery.”¹⁴ Across the Americas, the racial dynamics of this afterlife are evident in every country; throughout the world, we see labor continue to be a highly racialized terrain under capitalism with Black people in particular and people of color more generally subjected to higher rates of exploitation,

11 Walcott, *On Property: Policing, Prisons, and the Call for Abolition*.

12 Kappeler, “A Brief History of Slavery and the Origins of American Policing”; Brucato, “Fabricating the Color Line in a White Democracy: From Slave Catchers to Petty Sovereigns.”

13 In exploring the historical weight of this argument, I have sometimes received pushback (usually from Brits and Europeans) about the America-centricity of this element of policing. The context of my own reading, writing, organizing, and thinking on this issue is doubtlessly influenced by my own embedded location in the United States, and I do agree that US-centricity in global academic knowledge production is an element to be critiqued and resisted. However, I disagree with critics that the analysis offered here *only* holds weight for the United States for several reasons. In the first place, the regime of transatlantic chattel slavery was not begun in the US, nor did the US monopolize it. It is important to remember that the earliest slave patrols in what is now the United States were organized in the early 1700s in the Carolinas and Virginia, when these were still British colonies. The practice of fugitive slave policing had spread to all Thirteen Colonies before the American Revolutionary War, and hence was the most widespread geographically when the US was British. This practice in the Thirteen Colonies was also imported from European colonies – British, French, and Spanish – in the West Indies. Thus, the emergence of police through slave patrols *is European history*, even if a disavowed European history, and it is a violent principle of disavowal to refuse to reckon with this element *as European*. Moreover, European police histories are themselves also distinctly racialized inside the boundaries of the metropole and in their non-American colonial holdings, especially in Ireland and India, where the circuits of colonial soldiers and police chiefs is blatant.

14 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

higher rates of unemployment, exploitative racial-gendered dynamics of social reproduction, labor market segmentations in racial/ethnic divisions of labor, discriminatory practices in every part of the labor market, and disproportionate concentration into precarity, informality, and black market industries. All of this occurs inside a system in which the ruling class is also quite racially distinct: a largely white bourgeoisie owns the means of production and inheritance (one key pillar in capitalist societal reproduction) is racially patterned. This is why Cheryl Harris refers to ‘whiteness as property’¹⁵ – a concrete set of advantages that, under capitalism, function like property.

The violences of slavery obviously are not nearly conceptualized, let alone exhausted, by the analytic of forced labor – nor are any of the other systems of oppression that are central to capitalist societal reproduction. The violence of being conceptualized as or treated as private property under capitalism is not a mere category error, and this is where many Black studies and Atlantic studies become skeptical of a Marxist analysis of racism that can only see and understand the violence of the productive relation, meaning the violence of exploitation (or superexploitation). Of course, slavery, for example, was in some ways very much about the theft of labor, but what all of these thinkers are trying to get at is that the regime of racial terror, attempted dehumanization, transnational dislocation, natal alienation, sexual violence, impressment into a regime committed to the death of oneself and one’s kin – none of this is really captured by the Orthodox Marxist reduction of slavery to the exploitation of labor. These aspects can only be captured by a sensitive, multi-level, differential analysis of oppression that goes hand in hand with, but is fundamentally irreducible to, exploitation. Thinking about the centrality of oppression to capitalism beyond the productive sphere can help us more deeply conceptualize capitalism, on the one hand, and to see the full extent of capitalism’s reliance on policing, on the other.

Jackie Wang is one theorist who looks at the racial elements of policing in just such a way. Taking her point of departure from the preeminent theorists of the Black Panther Party, Wang argues that in order to take adequate stock of the capital-carceral relation, we would need to think beyond production, beyond work, and beyond exploitation. For her, while in traditional Marxist analysis, the capital-labor relation is predominant, the increasing prominence of the lumpenproletariat opens up space to think about other important, even structural, commitments of capitalism. BPP theorists like George Jackson saw the rising tide of automation as potentially lumpenizing us all; Wang argues that this means that the revolutionary strategy of anti-capitalism should not be, as more traditional Marxists argue, that workers seize control of the

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¹⁵ Harris, “Whiteness as Property.”

means of production, but rather the “destruction of the protective and productive forces”¹⁶ – making an anti-work and anti-production argument for the shape of class struggle that centers the social location of Black people under mid-century capitalism. We can begin to see here how an analysis that sees capitalism not only in the labor/production/class triad, but beyond production, in the realms of a racialized lumpenproletariat whose predominant experience of capitalism is through oppression, can expand the terrain of anti-capitalist analysis and struggle.

In her own attempt to render the racial logics of policing under capitalism, Jackie Wang attempts to bring together racial capitalism and Afropessimism, two historically antagonistic frames of analysis, to recenter an analysis of capitalism beyond production. Speaking of the oft-presumed incompatibility of these frameworks, Wang comments: “Perhaps what is at stake in their disagreement is the question of whether black racialization proceeds by way of a logic of *disposability* or a logic of *exploitability*.”¹⁷ And the way that Wang combines these is that, simply, it’s both. While I am in general agreement with Wang’s suggestion here, she does not explore how or why disposability and exploitability might be combinable in such a way. We can, however, understand and give an account of this ‘both’ if we center an analysis of capitalism based in the dialectical relationship between exploitation and oppression; it is because disposability and exploitability are themselves not counterposed, but interarticulated. As explored above, exploitation necessarily entails other logics of oppression in order to both sustain and societally reproduce itself. One of these logics of oppression is disposability (and there are many others – rapeability, dispossession are some others). These logics of oppression are necessary in order to sustain a system in which some are seen as worthy of life, protection from violence, and access to basic necessities, and in which others are seen as unworthy of these elements; it is this unworthiness that provides the grammar of exploitation’s acceptability. Hence, oppression is not an after-effect or an epiphenomenon of a prior or undergirding logic of exploitation, but these two are rather dialectically related and mutually constituted.

Wang’s archive and Jackson’s analysis are just two examples of how class struggle and anti-capitalist theorizing could be transformed by centering the relationship between exploitation and oppression, not only in the realm of policing, but in all areas of anti-capitalist praxis. As Glen Sean Coulthard explains, decentering the productive realm can also help clarify the relationship between capitalism and settler colonialism: “the history and experience of dispossession, not proletarianization, has

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¹⁶ Wang, *Carceral Capitalism*, 61.

¹⁷ Wang, 87.

been the dominant” experience of capitalism for indigenous peoples in settler colonial states¹⁸; understanding capitalism’s wider operation can actually deepen our analysis of capitalism, invite previously marginalized populations into class struggle, and help orient activist praxis toward eliminating all instantiations of capitalism, not only the most obvious.

Part of what I want to highlight here is that thinking about the centrality of capitalism but the non-centrality of the productive relation has a long history in Black and Indigenous studies (as well as in feminist and queer theory) – a focus that I think Marxist class analysis should learn from rather than reject. Whether we are looking at scholarship or activism on enslavement, colonization, policing and prisons, Black Studies, as a tradition, continuously offers deep and trenchant critiques of capitalism that go beyond (and sometimes totally de-prioritize) the axis of exploitation/labor. And though we cannot reduce the contemporary operations of prisons and policing directly to racialized chattel slavery in a one-to-one equivalence, these systems of violence are historically and structurally related. In addition to the historical transformations that allowed policing to take on many of the plantation functions for racial capitalism, we can see the preservation of a similar bimodal structure, rooted simultaneously in exploitation and oppression.

Thus, when police infiltrate Black and brown neighborhoods as an occupying force, intent on causing harm and violence to its residents, it is part and parcel of how capitalism operates. When the police engage in extra-judicial murder, it is part and parcel of how capitalism operates. When the police harass and assault trans people, when they engage in ‘stop and frisk’, when euphemistically-termed school resource officers send kids to cages rather than to class – all of this part and parcel of how capitalism operates. And when communities and activists demand an end to these policies *because they are racist*, they are also making an anti-capitalist demand, because enforcing a white supremacist order of oppression is part and parcel of how capitalism operates.

To clarify, I am not arguing that we jettison analyses of the productive realm altogether; the wage-centered and property-centered analyses of policing under capitalism do helpfully thematize some important elements. However, I do not think these analyses furnish compelling explanations of the more spectacularized forms of police violence: How would we understand the pervasive, and severe cop harassment of transwomen of color under this schema, a harassment that we know is not only constant but frequently involves physical and sexual abuse? How do we understand the extent of pervasive extrajudicial racialized murder regimes that police continue to perpetuate? How can we analyze and respond to the fact that in the United States, 40% of police officers abuse their spouses, partners, and

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18 Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 13.

children? The sort of wage-centered, production-based or property-based analysis here can only give us archaic, partial answers at best.

Once we more adequately conceptualize capitalism as a relation constituted equally (equiprimordially) between oppression and exploitation, we can begin to see how the police function of stabilizing the subordination of oppressed people (women, children, trans and non-binary people, racialized populations) is absolutely central to the continued functioning of capitalism, even when there are no direct linkages to production, labor exploitation, or more traditionally ‘class-based’ analysis.

Section Four: The Dual Function of Policing on a Global Scale

We can see this same dynamic operative in the global arena. Policing has always been a transnational and global phenomenon, one that is replete with specifically colonial dimensions that continue to this day.¹⁹ In several accounts of the historical rise of policing institutions, the specificity of the colonial dimension is central to the rise of ‘domestic’ policing. Without delving into the specificities here, excellent research across disciplines reveals how the methods and structure of British policing, for example, was dependent on colonial violence in India, Ireland, and elsewhere. In the United States, veterans of frontier colonization were frequently tapped for positions in urban police departments. In what Jean-Paul Sartre once called ‘the boomerang’²⁰ of colonial violence, techniques of state violence developed in the colonial world are often unleashed on the metropole, tying together the experiences of colonized people and Euro-American working classes in a material network of forms of inflicted violence.

In the contemporary world, the global dimension of policing is a continuing, perhaps even accelerating, dimension of global class society. Transnational police cooperation is de rigueur in several areas of policing. As Andrés Fabián Henao Castro and I have written elsewhere, the global dimension of policing is not limited to the border regime.²¹ Since its very beginning, police forces embodied in a variety of institutions have worked together to share techniques, data, software, surveillance information, weapons, intelligence, and other material

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19 I would like to thank my research assistant Maryam Rokhideh, as well as many collaborators I have been working with on the global dimensions of policing: Andres Fabián Henao Castro, Kojo Koram, Sarah Balakrishnan, Jishnu Guha-Majumdar, and all of the participants in the 2022 Capitalism and Confinement Workshop.

20 Sartre, “Preface.”

21 Bohrer, Ashley J. and Henao Castro, “A People’s History of Police Exchanges: Settler Colonialism, Capitalism, and the Intersectionality of Struggles.”

elements of policing infrastructure. This happens both at a distance and at international policing conferences, as well as in formal police exchange programs. Especially with the rise of the global regime of borders and migration, the creation of new institutions of border police over the twentieth century mirror the development of ‘domestic’ forms of policing, but also exceed them in stabilizing transnational flows of labor, goods, and capital in ways that maintain a global coloniality of capitalism predicated on the concentration of immiseration, extractivism, and commodity production in the Global South. Border cops are, at the end of the day, just cops.

The stiffening of borders across the globe and the intensification of policing them is central to the era of global, neoliberal capital we currently inhabit. Since the 1980s, capitalists have been straddling a deep contradiction between the ‘globalization’ of capital (evidenced in, to name just a few, the rise of multi-national corporations, the acceleration of transnational resource extraction, supply chains of greater distances, and, overall, the lightning movement of goods, corporations, and capital across the globe, as well as the establishment of new transnational capitalist institutions like the WTO, NAFTA, and the World Bank) and a hardening of borders, mostly aimed at preventing working class human beings from escaping the immiseration globalization has wrought on the majority world. In the worlds of Tanya Golash-Boza, “Globalization, enhanced by neoliberal reforms, facilitates the movement of capital across borders while restricting the mobility of workers”²² and citizens of the Global South more generally.

The increased mobility of capital has seen an explosion in border policing. Border enforcement is one of the largest areas of police expansion at present. The annual budget of Frontex, the EU’s border and coast guard police agency, increased 194% in the 2021-2027 budget cycle over just the immediately previous one. Between 2003 and 2019, United States Border Patrol agents doubled, and Immigrations and Customs Enforcement personnel tripled; since 1993 when new energy was put into patrolling the United State’s southern land border, the annual budget of Border Patrol has increased ten-fold.

It is not just that border securitization is big business, responsible for billions of dollars annually in contracts, weapons, and surveillance technology; it is that, like domestic police, border agents are securing and reproducing a social order of hierarchy and inequality, but now on a global scale. The “hierarchical and unfree social relations”²³ of capitalist carcerality are themselves transnational, and just as institutions of domestic policing work at least in part to stabilize this regime of

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22 Golash-Boza, *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*, 4.

23 Le Baron and Roberts, “Toward a Feminist Political Economy of Capitalism and Carcerality.”

accumulation, border police have emerged and strengthened to defend the neocolonial order of capitalist extraction on a transnational scale. The fact that the international system of borders is committed to the global reproduction of a racist and colonial order is a phenomenon that Harsha Walia has called ‘border imperialism.’²⁴

We can see how migrant policing plays out the same dual character of other kinds of policing – simultaneously interested in the realm of production and in the social relations of inequality and heightened vulnerability. In one sense, the produced vulnerability of undocumented workers certainly bolsters the ability of capital to exploit social disempowerment to offer even lower pay, with higher productivity quotas, under worse conditions; it creates the conditions in which increased levels of exploitation are even less likely to be contested and fought against, as insecurity on the part of undocumented communities grows. But policing can sometimes have a chilling effect on labor exploitation itself. To take a recent example from my own home-state of California to illustrate this point: in the midst of the 2022 inflation spike that has made basic necessities like food more unaffordable than ever, farm owners and agricultural associations have been blaming a massive farmworker labor shortage. The cause of this shortage? Increased policing of undocumented immigrants. The fervor of immigrant policing has impeded capital accumulation so acutely that farm owners, traditionally a very conservative bunch on the whole, have been pushing for comprehensive immigration reform and a loosening of border policing. In this sense, the oppressive obsession with documentation, increased xenophobia, and racist hyper-policing have become in some cases so great as to undercut and prevent the exploitative labor relation. The oppression of undocumented immigrants both actively constructs their vulnerability to capitalist exploitation and in some cases prevents that very exploitation, inhibiting the accumulation of profit.

The only way to understand contradictions such as these is to recognize that the labor-capital relation does not have a monopoly on policing and its logic; rather, part of what policing migrants aims at is “the maintenance of global apartheid,”²⁵ a regime of racialized, neocolonial oppression that structures the global geopolitics of capitalism beyond production proper. In the realm of migration policing, then, we can see capitalism rely on the dual nature of policing. It is for this reason that Gracie Mae Bradley and Luke de Noronha argue that “border abolition and anti-capitalism are one and the same, and both must be global and internationalist.”²⁶

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24 Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*.

25 Golash-Boza, *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism*, 3.

26 Bradley and de Noronha, *Against Borders: The Case for Abolition*, 69.

Conclusion: Abolitionism as Communism

So – to return to the question I opened with – why might we, following Ruth Wilson Gilmore, think about abolitionism as communism with a small c?

Certainly communism and police abolitionism share the goal of the elimination of forms of private property. If this conjunction is true (capitalism is based in racialized property relations, and the function of police is to secure them), then, as Walcott argues, any project that is interested *either* in anti-capitalism *or* in abolishing the police, must actually be committed to *both* as two sides of the same coin or two grammars expressing the same project. That is to say, while there might be important differences between the abolitionist and Marxist traditions in regards to focus, conceptual tools, political history, vernacular, and organizing methods, ultimately these projects converge and are mutually dependent on one another. We cannot achieve communism with police and we cannot abolish policing without an elimination of the capitalist system that gives the police their orders.

Integrating an abolitionist analysis into class politics helps expand the terrain of anti-capitalist struggle. If we think about police as stabilizing not only the regime of exploitation, but also the oppressions necessary for capitalism's societal reproduction, then communism needs to be abolitionist in its commitment also to extirpating all 'unfree and unequal hierarchical social relations'²⁷ that are central to capitalism. Which is to say, if we want to get rid of capitalism, we have to also take aim at patriarchy, racism, colonialism, ableism, heterocompulsivity, Islamophobia and all other regimes invested with production of unequal life and exposure to violence. On the non-productive side, policing maintains and expands the differential live-ability of existence under capitalism. When we say, none of us is free until we all are, we are already saying that we need to abolish the function of policing whose aim is convincing us that our freedom is predicated on others' confinement, abjection, and subjection. That's the only communism worth the name.

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²⁷ Le Baron and Roberts, "Toward a Feminist Political Economy of Capitalism and Carcerality."

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