

# Editors' Introduction

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THE PRESENT ISSUE OF *SOCIAL JUSTICE* CONSTITUTES THE THIRD OF three issues on the topic of penal abolition, collected by us in an effort to bring a sense of the history and contemporary character of penal abolition research to readers both familiar with such work and new to it. The focus of this issue is “Penal Abolition: Challenging Boundaries,” and it is preceded by another two issues, themed on “Penal Abolition and the State: Colonial, Racial and Gender Violences” (*Contemporary Justice Review* 2018) and “Penal Abolition Praxis” (*Critical Criminology* 2018).

As the editors of the three volumes, we see our work as curatorial rather than prescriptive. We want to provide an intellectually capacious space for diverse epistemological, methodological, and disciplinary approaches to abolition. Taken together, the three issues contribute significantly to the abolitionist project through the cutting-edge work of the authors featured within them. Articles across the three issues problematize common sense discourses on the Left that unwittingly work against abolition; delineate what abolition could look like for particular classes of prisoners, including youth, people with mental illness, asylum seekers, and those convicted of sex offenses; explicate the relationships between the carceral state and abolition with racial capitalism, settler colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy; study and analyze abolitionist pedagogy; and consider abolition democracy at various scales of the carceral state's expression, including in places where it has heretofore been understudied.

Rose Braz, visionary abolitionist and cofounder of Critical Resistance, has argued that “abolition defines both the goal we seek and the way we do our work today” (Bennett 2008). For her, as for many of us, abolition is

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both the horizon toward which we work and a framework within which steps toward that horizon can be taken or discarded as expansionist reforms. When understood as such, we can begin to appreciate that abolitionist work is, in fact, occurring all around us. A cursory glance around academic, activist, and journalistic outlets for research reveals debates about and endorsements of abolition in major periodicals on the Left (Berger et al. 2017, Bernish 2016, Lancaster 2017, Washington 2018), academic conferences organized around abolition or else hosting significant sessions devoted to it (Society for the Study of Social Problems 2018, American Studies Association, American Society of Criminology), and organizations like the Black Youth Project 100, the Movement for Black Lives, We Charge Genocide, and others, whose work for reparations, Black freedom, and life itself is grounded in abolitionist theory and practice. This prevalence reveals that the foundational work of abolitionist scholars and activists to outline what the prison industrial complex is, and what a world without it might look like (Critical Resistance; Davis 2003, Davis & Rodriguez 2000, Gilmore 2007), has circulated and swelled, and is perhaps being realized as *a new common sense* for those fighting for a better world.

The present issue's focus reflects abolition's foundational questioning of the material boundaries of capitalist societies—borders, prisons, property—as well as the *matériel* of those boundaries—barbed wire, cages, fences, walls, and increasingly their electronic manifestations. Whereas some reform efforts aim to tweak the size of the boundaries, technologize them, or else adjust the scope and content of the spaces enclosed within them, abolition insists that the boundaries themselves must be dismantled. Abolitionists do this by historicizing and theorizing the origins of boundaries as well as questioning the ideological work of assigning meaning to them (for example, deconstructing the linguistic fabrication of categories such as “criminal”). In addition, abolitionists examine the destructive impacts of boundaries across scales of analysis from the local to the international.

As both an intellectual and a political project, abolition forces us to consider the boundaries for what they are not—a technology that provides safety—and to come to terms with what they are—physical borders that curtail movement and freedom and which, in the process, often decide whose lives are disposable and alright to end prematurely, a calculus that the abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines as racism (2007). Penal abolition also challenges the boundaries of language, urging us to abandon well entrenched, now commonsense concepts—such as “crime”—that define one's everyday sense of self, others, and social life (Coyle 2010, 2013,

2016; Hulsman 1986). In that regard, abolition also challenges boundaries of the personal, shattering utopian interpretations about our own self and the social world. In the process of demystifying walls and cages, abolition opens up new political spaces of possibility where freedom and safety are reimagined (Brown & Schept 2017, Colón 2017, McDowell 2019). These spaces can and do occur anywhere: street corners, classrooms, playgrounds, community buildings, kitchen tables, or cellblocks.

The articles in this special issue complete our three-issue examination of abolition. In that regard, they also push the boundaries of abolition itself, urging the analysis forward in the present conjuncture and pushing us to imagine abolition in more capacious and precise ways. As we see them, the present six articles fall into three categories of boundary-stretching or -transgressing: analytical, philosophical, and pedagogical. In the first section, the first article, by Brett Story and Judah Schept, queries the reliance on the politics of punishment by some scholars of the carceral state and argues for more trenchant attention to issues of work, wages, and uneven development. Grounded in their respective fieldwork examining prison growth in the coalfields of Central Appalachia, Story and Schept argue for an abolitionist politics that takes seriously the historical relationships and spatial patterns that have underdeveloped the region and produced the conditions of possibility for the prison in the first place.

In the second article, by Justin Piché and Nicholas Carrier, the authors continue their visionary work on abolition by turning toward what they call “undisciplined abolition” in Canada, that is, the abolitionist discourse that circulates outside of the academy. The authors examine the work of a variety of activists groups and argue that undisciplined abolition is a moral discourse unrestrained by the normative expectations and requirements of academic publishing. Taken together, the two articles begin our special issue by pushing readers to consider the ways that our analytical framing of imprisonment and abolition are themselves disciplined, at least at times, by our respective disciplines or the larger academy. These articles ask, implicitly, what vantages are produced, and what vantages are precluded, when we examine abolition from our disciplined positions in the academy? Story and Schept consider this question with respect to the limitations of analyses of the carceral state that rely on punishment as the guiding analytical logic, whereas Piché and Carrier do so with respect to the normative discourses of academic analysis.

In the second section, the third article, by Hal Pepinsky, contemplates the role of peacemaking in penal abolition. Pepinsky's invitation is for us

to cross the borders of punishment in search of territory that centers on the political and the cultural. He argues that the penal response consists of “responding to violence with violence,” and that better solutions could be achieved by directly talking through both the violence that the state inflicts on people (especially racialized and poor people) and the grievances that we have with each other. Pepinsky’s contribution to this special issue is itself a challenge to the normative approaches to academic writing. Part personal essay, part article, Pepinsky writes of his own intellectual and personal trajectory that carried him from the worldview of punishment to one that centers on communication, meeting humans’ needs, and peacemaking.

In the fourth article, Michael J. Coyle stretches abolition political theory into the terrain of utopia. Challenging the notion from critics that abolition is utopian, and hence unrealistic and even dangerous thinking, he turns the tables to argue that it is, in fact, criminal justice logic that rests on utopian foundations about humans, justice institutions, and society. His analysis distinguishes, and evinces, that the three main assumptions of “criminal justice” logic are thoroughly utopian: (1) that most people are “good” (“law-abiding”) and some are “bad” (“criminals”); (2) that our “criminal justice” institutions (law, police, courts, and prisons), by the threat and/or imposition of punishment, can be and are an effective social control mechanism to prevent “crime”; and (3) that by controlling “criminal” persons through “criminal justice” institutions we construct the good society (an ordered existence, justice and public safety, and a meaningful, shared, community life).

Pepinsky’s and Coyle’s contributions push us to think across scales about what abolition *is*. Pepinsky argues that peacemaking approaches can guide interactions between state entities or two individuals and everything in between. From within that paradigm, he argues, we practice abolition in everyday life. Coyle’s flipping of the utopian label, by showing that “criminal justice” logic is indeed utopian, defines abolition a call to end utopian thinking and utopist practices, and a engage instead in grounded thinking and practices toward the kind of relationships and communities we would like to build.

In the third and final section of the special issue, Denise Woodall as well as coauthors Ardath Whynacht, Emily Arsenault, and Rachael Cooney reflect on teaching practices to consider and advance abolitionist pedagogies. In the fifth article, Denise Woodall calls for an “abolitionist border pedagogy” to challenge the social constructions of “crime” and shrink the social distance between self and other. Based on a classroom exercise and subsequent survey research with undergraduate students, Woodall finds that

the majority of respondents had committed harms that could have resulted in imprisonment had they been processed through the “criminal” system. When presented with this finding, undergraduate support for punitive policy dropped and overall identification with “criminals” increased, results that Woodall considers politically significant for the abolitionist project. Whynacht, Arsenault, and Cooney continue the discussion of abolitionist pedagogy in the neoliberal university but shift the analytical register to a place that takes as foundation the students’ experiences of violence. By intentionally studying abolition from a position of trauma, the authors argue for the power of shifting important discussions of neoliberal state violence into an emotional register—one that sees emotion as a critical site of political and social engagement.

Taken together, these authors expand abolitionist discourse and politics, pointing out existing analytical limitations and exciting new directions. This penal abolition issue and the two that preceded it (*Contemporary Justice Review* 2018 and *Critical Criminology* 2018) are an invitation to engage in further conversation and action.

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