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Reviews

Abolition. Feminism. Now.

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Wednesday 8 March 2023

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In Abolition. Feminism. Now. Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth E. Richie make a compelling case for a feminism that is fundamentally inclusive, intersectional and abolitionist, and an abolitionist movement that is fundamentally feminist.

The four feminist authors have extensive experience with prison abolition and academic research on justice and liberation: Angela Y. Davis, Professor emerita of history of consciousness at the University of California Santa Cruz and prominent writer activist, and speaker; Gina Dent, associate professor of feminist studies, history of consciousness, and legal studies and longtime prison activist; and Erica R. Meiners, author and professor of education and women's studies at Northeastern Illinois University.

The book is divided into three main chapters following the introduction: "Abolition," "Feminism," and "Now." Each section delves into the importance of becoming comfortable with nuanced and complex ways of thinking about abolishing police, prisons and the overall justice system, in favor of life-affirming systems.

The authors challenge theories that examine feminism and abolition as separate, unrelated or even incompatible, and offer ways that the two movements are not only intertwined, but necessarily a part of each other — in order to radically transform society into one that neither perpetuates individual or systemic violence nor requires incarceration.

The authors describe feminist abolitionism as a "dialectic, a relationality, and a form of interruption: an insistence that abolitionist theories and practices are most compelling when they are also feminist, and conversely, a feminism that is also abolitionist is the most inclusive and persuasive version of feminism for these times." (2).

They use the term "abolition feminism" to show that the two concepts are inextricably linked, not just accessory to each other: "abolition is unthinkable without feminism and our feminism unimaginable without abolition." (168)

Providing Context

The authors provide thorough historical contextualization and blueprint for understanding and embodying abolitionist feminism and feminist abolition.

As calls to defund the police, to stop mass incarceration, and to replace these institutions with systems to remove conditions resulting in unmet social needs, global economic devastation, intimate and societal violence continue to get louder, this book is required reading to understand the interconnectivity of these issues.

At the same time, as calls to end sexual violence and intimate partner violence carry on, the necessity of an abolitionist framework that does not rely on the carceral state to correct the issue is made clear.

The authors concisely conceive what abolitionism should and can look like from a feminist framework while teaching readers a thing or two about what abolitionism actually is. Here are my top three takeaways from Abolition. Feminism. Now.

1) Feminist abolition requires solutions to gender-based violence not dependent upon the carceral state.

Mainstream anti-violence interventions and organizations, the authors argue, have relied too heavily on the carceral state to solve the problem, harming women and communities of color in the process. When feminism and anti-violence advocacy lacks an intersectional analysis of power, organizations tend to rely on incarceration and other forms of state punishment to solve the issue of gender-based violence.

For women and communities of color, contact with the system can produce irreparable harm “because systemic racism drives the criminal legal system.” BIPOC women have largely been left out of the survivor narrative; some survivor advocacy organizations have even come out to say that they do not support the defunding of the police because policing makes it safer for survivors of gender-based violence.

As the authors explain, when viewing these broad and uncritical claims from the perspectives of women and nonbinary people of color, the criminal system is “not only not protective for those survivors who are not part of the mainstream, it also endangers them.” (81).

2) Abolition feminism does not advocate for the use of policing or prisons to protect victims of gender-based violence. Instead, it recognizes intimate violence as a microcosm of macro-systems of violence rooted in capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression.

When these systems of oppression remain intact, interpersonal violence naturally results. The violence of policing and prisons are not an adequate solution to a problem that is much deeper than individuals behaving badly.

Recognizing that accountability for gender-based violence is still necessary, as is the abolition of prisons, the authors state that abolition feminism:

“demands for intentional movement and insightful responses to the violence of systemic oppression... We are clear that organizing to end gender violence must include work against the prison industrial complex — against border patrols, against the incarceration of disability, against the criminalization of radical democratic protest — and as centrally, for mutual aid, cop-free schools, reproductive justice, and dignity for trans lives.” (4)

Abolition is about more than just getting rid of prisons.

“Abolition, as a tradition, a philosophy, and a theory of change, moves away from a myopic focus on the distinct institution of the prison toward a more expansive version of the social, political, and economic processes that defined the process within which the imprisonment became viewed as the legitimate hand of justice.” (50)

The authors make clear that abolition is not just about getting rid of prisons or police. That’s a common misconception that has been perpetuated by politicians, including those who are socially liberal. Calls to defund the police are condemned by people across the political spectrum.

What’s important to understand is that abolition is not just about “tearing things down.” It’s also about rebuilding systems and institutions that provide safe, livable conditions while addressing community harm without the use of police or prisons. Rather than reactionary and punitive attempts to correct social ills with police and prisons, abolition focuses more on prevention (of poverty, systems that cause violence, lack of education and healthcare, basic needs not being met, etc.).

It's important to understand this, because when some people hear defund the police or stop mass incarceration, their minds go straight to a completely lawless society descending into chaos because nobody is there to "keep people in check."

But using funds that are currently spent on maintaining the highest incarceration rate in the world and militarizing the police, and redirecting them to high quality education, housing, healthcare and other programs that uplift a society and provide basic needs would reduce the need for policing and incarceration.

Abolition focuses on the root causes that result in contact with the criminal justice system instead of reactionary policies reforms that ultimately do not get to the root of social issues.

Beyond Reform

3) We must continuously reject reform as a satisfactory solution to systemic issues.

Reform will never be enough to end deeply embedded systems of violence. As the authors assert,

"Training police to do restorative justice work is not abolition. Hiring more women to be prison wardens is not feminist. Building a new transgender wing or pod at an immigration prison is not abolition . . . None of these reforms work to dismantle, or even address, the harms that are used to buttress the carceral state, including forms of gender and sexual violence." (154)

Too often, reforms within the criminal legal system are cloaked behind radical-sounding language, but this only makes state violence more palatable to more people. Organizations and movements have the potential to be co-opted or neutralized by the dangling carrot of reform.

The authors argue that reforming the system or persecuting individual wrongdoers has done little to end state violence, gender or sexual violence as a whole. And changing laws is important, but not enough. Radical transformation is needed to even begin to fathom a violence-free world — and the authors acknowledge that there is no readily available blueprint for that.

Just as changing legislation is necessary but not sufficient, meeting the urgent needs of survivors is necessary, but it must happen alongside organizing for structural solutions.

The authors advocate for an embrace of responses to meet immediate needs while maintaining a broader focus on systemic change. This sums it up:

"Abolition feminism does not shy away from contradictions, which are often the spark for change. Holding onto this both/and, we can and do support our collective immediate and everyday needs for safety, support, and resources while simultaneously working to dismantle carceral systems." (5)

Abolition. Feminism. Now. reminds us to be both urgent and focused, action-oriented and rigorous, and of course, abolitionist and feminist.

[Against the Current](#)

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