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The debate on policing

# Abolish the police?

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**The French "mainstream media" has not exactly relayed this, but a demand has made its way from across the Atlantic, thanks to historic mobilizations against racism and police violence: that of the abolition of the police. This slogan, which was the prerogative of some small groups who in general also advocated the abolition of prisons, is today discussed in increasingly broad circles and is now the subject of a national campaign: #8to-Abolition. This obviously remains a minority phenomenon, but it has taken on a scale that no one could have suspected a few weeks ago, and raises for public debate a question whose radicalism is only matched by its simplicity: should we abolish the police?**

## “Disempower, disarm, disband”

In the United States, the slogan of the abolition of the police is actually built around a triptych: “disempower, disarm, disband”. It is a thoughtful strategy, advocated in particular by the collective “A World Without Police”, a programme of actions and demands which tries to take into account the contradictions within the demand for the abolition of the police and the main objections which can be made against it. [1]

Disempowering the police means opposing the construction of new police stations, the creation of new units, the extension of prerogatives and areas of police intervention, recruitment campaigns and so on. The “offensive” slogan to “Defund the Police” is increasingly taken up in demonstrations, as is that of the exclusion of police unions from the AFL-CIO trade union federation, which would also participate in a dynamic of disempowering.

Disarming the police means addressing concretely, and correlatively with the slogan of disempowering, the question of police over-equipment, the processes of militarization of law enforcement and, beyond this, the responsibilities of the police in the extension of the violence of social relationships. It is to point out the fact that, contrary to the legend cleverly maintained by the guarantors of the established order, the weapons of the police are not used to pacify social relations but, on the contrary, contribute to generating ever more violence.

Disbanding the police, finally, means demanding the abolition of the police force because it oppresses the population it claims to “protect”. A claim that is not seen in the United States as the culmination of a process that would first pass through disempowering and disarming, but as being articulated with these two slogans. A demand that confronts “the” problematic question: get rid of the police, but what would you put in its place? Or, in another version: the police are certainly problematic, but wouldn’t there be more problems if they were removed?

## Doing without the police?

These questions, and the “classic” answers which are made to them (namely: a society cannot do without the police) are polluted by postulates well anchored in mentalities. We are talking here in particular about what Engels called “a superstitious reverence for the state and everything connected with it, which takes roots the more readily as people from their childhood are accustomed to imagine that the affairs and interests common to the whole of society could not be looked after otherwise than as they have been looked after in the past, that is, through the state and its well-paid officials”. [2] Any resemblance to the declarations of Jean-Luc Mélenchon before the demonstration of 13 June (“We have the right to dream of a society without police, it is a beautiful dream, but it is only a dream. We need

a police force, thoughtful, organized, obedient to the republican state and as disarmed as possible”) is purely coincidental...

One of these assumptions is that the police are irreplaceable in their (claimed) mission to “protect” the population and are an essential element in conflict management. Is it not the body to which we turn when we are attacked, robbed, threatened and so on? This state of affairs, if it seems indisputable, should not however be taken as a timeless social fact. In other times and/or under other skies, these functions could, and still can, be exerted by other structures, issued directly from the population and/or without subordination to the state. Due to the constraints of this article, we will not go into the details of these various experiences, and we will only insist on this point: it is necessary to focus and consider that “the police” as we know it (and experience it) in societies shaped by capitalism is a social construction which, like any construction, can be destroyed.

In short, it is important to get rid of the idea that problematic situations that may arise within a given society or community could only be resolved by the intervention of an autonomous and separate body . This is the meaning of the various initiatives (training in conflict management, support for victims of violence, constitution of neighbourhood or building collectives and so on) pursuing the objective of strengthening social ties so that people can collectively manage most problems without “needing” to call the police. We are obviously not talking here about “vigilante groups” and other militias who think of themselves as assisting the police and reproduce, often in a worse form, police behaviour, but rather of self-organized groups whose objective is the resolution of conflicts of low and medium intensity, which actually represent the bulk of police interventions.

## A strategic horizon

By posing the question of the abolition of the police, and therefore of their indispensable character or absence of it, we are thus tackling a certain confusion of genres, linked to its multiple attributions. The police are both the body that citizens have been used to turning to in many problematic situations, but also the body that the state uses to quell social protest. However, it is not from the latter function that the police obtain their legitimacy in the eyes of the greatest number, but indeed from the former. It is on this confusion of genres that the powers that be play, trying to conceal the fundamentally repressive role of the police behind its alleged role of “public service”.

Does this mean that we could dismantle the police, guarantor of an unjust order, without dismantling the order itself? In other words: can we get rid of the police without getting rid of capitalism? The answer is obviously no, as it plays a functional role in the maintenance of capitalism. It is in this sense that the demand for the abolition of the police should be seen as a strategic horizon, a compass, and not as a slogan that can be met here and now. In 2016, *Chicago Reader* journalist Maya Duksumova published an investigation of Chicago groups trying to put abolitionist slogans into practice, in which one witness said: “I think that you have to view it as a strategy and a goal rather than something that can be implemented tomorrow... When I listen to the abolitionists, what I hear is that it is possible to build a world without prisons or policing”. [\[3\]](#)

Campaigns against the police and the establishment of “counter-institutions” rendering their interventions useless come up against this major obstacle: the central place of the police in the system of capitalist domination gives them a position which remains essential for those who face, in particular, situations of serious violence. To advocate the disappearance “here and now” of the police is to ignore this difficulty, and it is one of the worst means of combating the illusions according to which one could build a global alternative to the police force without posing the question of the abolition of the state. In this sense, it is important to articulate immediate demands to weaken the police and fight against their violence, alternative practices tending to demonstrate that the police are not a “necessary evil”, and an overall political project of overthrowing capitalism.

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Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).

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[1] See [For A World Without Police](#).

[2] Karl Marx [Introduction to "The Civil War in France"](#).

[3] *Chicago Reader*, 25 August 2016 "[Abolish the police? Organizers say it's less crazy than it sounds.](#)".