

Everything Is Sanitised, But We Are Constantly Wringing Our Tired Hands

ASBO interview with London ABC

May 2020

[ed. – An interview taken from the website of the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) prisoner support group in London, along with their introductory note. This was conducted off the back of a text brought out after the 2019 debacle of many UK anarchists advocating voting for Labour (and even canvassing for them) under then-leader Jeremy Corbyn, fulfilling the tragic role that has dogged certain anarchist tendencies of drone for the Left that will later imprison them.

It touches on many topics related to the current pandemic, but first a word on the analogies with the prison system so richly enumerated below. Though the interviewee might object to a more thoughtless use of the term 'Prison Island' for the UK, not just here but across much of the world a shift has already been underway for decades in which the population (with various degrees of intensity, and certainly not as equivalent to actual prisoners) are subject to increasing control – taking over from discipline, Michel Foucault's "work begun elsewhere, which the whole of society pursues on each individual through innumerable mechanisms", as the paradigm for governance – that blurs the distinctions between 'inside' and 'outside' those walls despite our many (largely illusory) 'freedoms'. COVID-19 has shown rapidly how contingent those so-called freedoms were to the State that could decide to enforce their denial; tellingly, the UK government description of certain lockdown restrictions as 'enhanced' as opposed to 'basic' is language directly from UK prisoners' allocated status and 'privileges'.

Another of the themes excellently addressed below is that of 'abolition' of the prison system; a stance that is so ultimately un-radical that it has comfortably fit into the mouths even of prison directors themselves in recent years. It feels woefully ironic that the term (a triumphalist direct reference to the liberation struggle of African-descended slaves in North America, when their fight is clearly far from over) coexists in the United States, the largest exporter of abolitionist discourse, with the notorious exemption of prisoners from the ban on slavery: leading us to a present described in 'Learning from Ferguson' as pairing "precarious labor market on the outside and booming prison industries on the inside".

Here in Britain too the 'abolitionist' term has tainted history, without the sometimes-militancy (if otherwise problematic) of the movement of white abolitionists on the other side of the Atlantic: basically, it was adopted by statesmen concerned overall with how to keep chattel slaves in the Caribbean colonies working (under the same masters) once "emancipated", so as the continue along

*the supposed path of civilisation they had been prescribed before they could allegedly be seen as human. There was a large overlap with the utilitarian thinkers of the time (of whom, Jeremy Bentham is remembered more for his 'Panopticon' contribution to prison surveillance architecture than for his philanthropic projects; see **Return Fire vol.4 pg9**), who, like Benjamin Franklin had, complained of the terrible "inefficiency" of slavery as a productive system compared to wage labour that could compete better in the sugar plantations compared to the slaves in Cuba, Brazil, or the United States. In public statescrafters wore the benevolent and enlightened face of abolition; in confidential colonial office memos, those such as Sir James Stephen (architect of Britain's 1833 Slavery Abolition Act) assured elites that "the Planter [will incur] no other loss than that of finding his whips, stocks and manacles deprived of their use & value". Some of the same abolitionists were at the same time already praising Britain's surging complex of prisons, asylums and workhouses: for their morally 'civilising' lower-class influence, of course...*

Well before the current hellish US racial nightmare of imprisonment, the British Empire (which Stephen virtually ruled 1789 – 1847) shipped Indian convict-slaves to prison islands; today, recent UK governments have proposed jointly building prisons they could deport to with governments of Nigeria (where building a maximum security prison was one of the last programs of the colonial regime in the 1950s before independence – the first British-built prison being burned down in 1882 by anti-colonial rebels before being rebuilt) and Jamaica (which recently introduced the requirement of biometric driving licenses). Cynically, here in the UK the 'Track and Trace' scheme was initially managed by NHSX (the tech wing of the National Health Service that anarchists justified voting to 'save') precisely due to the public's trust in the institution, which from the start (before handing over the scheme to Google, Apple, et al.) linked it to the eventual creation of biometric immunity passports.

COVID-19 digital solutions marketed by a rising number of firms are also, as with Trust Stamp (a biometric digital identity program brought to "remote, low-income communities" in West Africa in a private-public partnership together with and Mastercard and the Bill Gates-backed vaccine cartel GAVI), offered explicitly to interested parties in prison administrations to provide probation with contactless identification "without making them pay for the expensive ankle bracelets that monitor their every move". Again, drawing together a nexus of remote (or even, via artificial intelligence, predictive) policing, bio-security and control over access, and the planned elimination of cash; in short, the impossible Panoptican fantasy of a totally controlled and transparent society.

*In such a context, abolition of the prison walls themselves loses its proclaimed meaning; especially when self-described abolitionists, such as those in Cleveland after unrest over police murder of young Tamir Rice, join the cops and Department of Justice at the table to gain legitimacy over those in the streets rioting. At the risk of sounding naïve, the atrocity of prison is not in itself the worst thing than can befall us (see **Notes on "The Criminal Child"**); Peter Gelderloos once observed after his time inside in different countries that if school is the prison for the submissive, "prison is the school for the defiant." Now, the prospect of time behind bars could in the future potentially be reserved for those most intractable or rebellious already, while the rest will be re-inserted into a docile and (self-)policed society where the bars blend with the barcodes. Our solidarity must be with any being contained by social mores, physical cages, concrete jungles or electronic leashes, subjected by what ASBO aptly describes below as "an extension of the logic that prison promotes and aggressively enforces". Let the abolitionists keep their place at the table; for our part, we'll be taking aim once again from the shadows. Thanks to prison demolitionist London ABC for proposing and conducting this interview.]*

London ABC was due to participate in the London Tattoo Circus 2020 [*ed. – an internationally-emerging tradition of tattoo events with all proceeds going to prisoner support/anti-prison projects*]. For obvious reasons, the tattoo circus didn't go ahead. Radio Outbreak (a 'sideshow' to the Tattoo Circus) is going online from 3pm-9pm on Saturday 23rd May instead. As our contribution, we will be reading from the text of an interview conducted earlier this month with ASBO, someone we greatly admire and whose writings have been inspiring, informative and thought provoking to us.

ASBO is the author of the seminal text *Bang-Up and Smash: Women's Prisons, Bail Hostels and Probation*, partly an account and analysis of systems she was held captive by. She is also part of the collective responsible for *The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions: Covid-19, Corbyn and 'Crisis'*, which addresses Corbyn, voting and Covid-19.

In early May, members of London ABC sent her some questions on these topics. Her answers are bold, generous, heartfelt and insightful, with a depth of personal reflections and a breadth of analysis grappling with the world we find ourselves in.

We hoped to bring about some encounters and discussions like this at London Tattoo Circus. In the absence of a physical space for connection we hope you enjoy this interview. We include the full text below pending the creation of a zine.

More info about Radio Outbreak: londontattoocircus.noblogs.org/radio-outbreak

DISCLAIMER: This is the first time I have ever done an interview like this, and I am definitely out of my comfort zone! Also, it is important to note that while I wrote 'Bang-Up and Smash: Women's Prisons, Bail Hostels and Probation' as an individual (supported by many patient friends), 'The Road to Hell Is Paved with Good Intentions: Covid-19, Corbyn and 'Crisis'' was a collective project. Any comments here on the text are entirely my own random thoughts, and not representative of our whole crew. Also, as I said in 'Bang-Up'; I am humbly aware that I only had a relatively short sentence with amazing support... so my experience of prison, bail hostels and probation, is very specific, from a (relatively) privileged position. I don't want my clumsy words to be read as being representative, or imply that I am making assumptions about other people engaging with the prison system.

London ABC: In Bang Up and Smash you talk about the drugs rehabilitation programme for state-hostages RAPT, you described it as:

"You are not allowed to talk to other prisoners outside the unit (and therefore also have significantly reduced time you are allowed outside). The first few weeks of life on the RAPT unit are called 'seeking safety' this establishes you on the wing and programme. Prisoners do not engage with group therapy during this time but do have to attend workshops, and 'emotional check-ins'. After four weeks, you then start your primary care; which consists of group 'meditation', and one and a half hours of group 'therapy' every morning, and workshops all together in the afternoon."

'Meditation', 'emotional check-ins', 'occasional exercise', it seems to me that this may seem all-too-familiar to those on the outside during these days. Do you think the techniques of control which the state employs on incarcerated populations has been employed on the general population of prison island UK? How, if at all, do you think the pandemic 'emergency measures' accelerated this tendency?

ASBO: This is a very good question. The first point I would like to make, relates to the term you use: "prison island UK". I must say, that I find this label problematic. It has been kicking around for a while, and has always made me bristle, but it seems especially prevalent in these

coronal times. I am not implying that the level of police repression and control is not full on. But the phrase “prison island” is problematic to me because it implies some kind of universal and generalised experience of prison (ie. that everyone in the UK is in a prison – which is not the case) and also is very disempowering (I think it enables people to feel defeated and give up in the face of unprecedented levels of repression).

I can see the logic in the phrase “prison island” but, personally, I think it does a massive disservice to all those incarcerated people who are not only dealing with the general restrictions of lockdown life and the Coronavirus Act, but also the added restrictions specifically related to prisons. Whilst screws “working” during lockdown are to get a £1,700 bonus on top of overtime, people in prison are facing a period of no visits, increased bang up, and no access to things that keep people sane, like exercise. Who knows when this will end. It is certainly not a priority of the Tory government to address this.

Your question highlights an important point, about how techniques and tools used in prisons (and their related institutions: ‘detention centres’/‘Immigration Removal Centres’, bail hostels, probation, social services etc) are then often rolled out into wider society (and, as we have seen time and time again, often tools developed within the UK are then copied in other places). This point I think is critical to remember; as many people have no lived experience, or connection to, incarcerated people, so they are often unaware of how many of these strategies of control are being refined behind closed doors.

“Prison, a microcosm inserted into our world but that is denied the possibility to speak” – Juan Jose Garfia, Adios Prison

As an ex-prisoner, what was particularly problematic to me last year was the lack of critical engagement that voting anarchists had in relation to Corbyn’s (and the Labour parties) policies and dogma around police and prisons. This is something that was very important for me to address in ‘The Road’. I think you could say that at times in the text we sounded judgmental (one dear comrade even said arrogant). That certainly wasn’t my intention, and it is a shame if that is the case. If it was spikey, it was from a specific place of rage and hurt, fuelled largely by my personal experiences with the state.

As we highlighted in ‘The Road’, in the run up to the 2019 election, Labour wanted to expand the police force (and the prison system) even more than the Tories. Various Labour members, including Corbyn, publicly called them out on this on numerous occasions. To have many close comrades supporting this implicitly, or willfully ignoring it (trying to blindside me with arguments about the NHS) was particularly challenging. As a side note, it is also interesting that when the ‘Coronavirus Act’ was bought in extending police powers (in the twilight period of Corbyn’s leadership and when Starmer was getting warmed up) the Labour party were calling for a kind of unity coalition with the Tories. I am mentioning this here because I think it relates to a kind of patronising attitude I have felt coming from several friends and comrades, who think that I am maybe too hung up on specifics; or that I am ‘nit picking’ in an unhelpful way in the face of such a catastrophe as Covid-19. I am not an uncaring person, but I am also critical.

To return to your question, it is interesting to reflect specifically on the RAPT (Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners Trust) programme that I outlined in ‘Bang-Up’ because, like many ‘recovery’ programmes that follow the ‘12 steps’, it used the language of “disease” (and “safety”) explicitly, (and extensively) as a way to divide the prison population where I was. In the current context of Covid-19 it is both terrifying and fascinating to see how quickly people adopt this dangerous rhetoric. In the mainstream press, when covering the pilot of the NHSX app on the Isle of

Wight, there were various anecdotes and quotes of people saying; “it’s ok, we have the app now”; breathing out a sigh of relief that they no longer have to think for themselves about how they relate to the virus... I think this is an extension of the logic that prison promotes and aggressively enforces... to get people to mindlessly comply; whilst simultaneously offering things like ‘group meditation’ and ‘therapeutic interventions’ as supposedly positive “options” (that are in reality compulsory) to reflect and grow, to become “safe” and “clean”.

“Caring for ourselves doesn’t mean pacifying ourselves. We should be suspicious of any understanding of self-care that identifies well-being with placidity or asks us to perform “health” for others. Can we imagine instead a form of care that would equip each of us to establish an intentional relationship to her dark side, enabling us to draw strength from the swirling chaos within? This kind of care cannot be described in platitudes. It is not a convenient agenda item to add to the program of the average non-profit organization. It demands measures that will interrupt our current roles, bringing us into conflict with society at large and even some of the people who profess to be trying to change it.” – ‘Don’t Tell Me to Calm down!’

Crimethinc, 2013 ‘Self Care’

I think this point is especially important today, when we are told constantly to “stay safe”, “do our duty” and the most obnoxious of all “we are all in this together”. It feels recently like people have been drowning in a toxic tide of data; greedily drinking the information fed to us by the government, forgetting that the concept of ‘health’ is just as political as ‘prison’. One pertinent example of the current situation is for example the suspension of the so-called ‘Care Act’ 2014 (and the related development of the ‘Coronavirus Act 2020’.) The combination of these two forms of repression mean that what is classed as a ‘mental health’ condition (and who can ‘diagnose’ it) has been massively broadened, whilst at the same time, people have no legal recourse to challenging these decisions. This is a new phenomenon to many people, but anyone who has spent time inside will know that within the prison system (and its related infrastructures), it is the psychologists who wield the ultimate power.

“‘Health’ is a cultural fact in the broadest sense of the word, a fact that is political, economic, and social as well, a fact that is tied to a certain state of individual and collective consciousness. Every era outlines a ‘normal’ profile of health.” – Michel Foucault

Fuck the new ‘normal’! This doesn’t mean that I want people to die. Nor does it mean that I don’t take Covid-19 seriously. But the state has been sharpening it’s teeth on prisoners (and many others) for quite some time in preparation for this, and now is the time to fight back...

London ABC: You also discuss the juridical-repressive apparatuses’ attempts to separate you from those inside after your probation;

“As a final note, it is interesting that as soon as my girlfriend disclosed our relationship to her offender manager in jail, she was then interviewed by external probation officers and the ‘Domestic Extremist/Counter Terrorism Unit’ about me and our relationship. As with all the aspects of social control and surveillance during my sentence, this has only made me hate the authorities more.”

You seem to identify a connection between fidelity to your relationship and holding fast to your ideas. More generally, what do you think the connection is today between loving and fighting? Do the practices of social control in prison reveal a wider conspiracy between the intensities of love and social war?

ASBO: This is a really difficult question to answer because my relationship in prison is beyond anything I have words for (both good and bad). It took me several years for me to recover from it, and I am painfully aware that many people are currently locked down with partners who are

abusive, or in relationships that are coercive, so in some ways my musings on this point may be unhelpful and irrelevant.

I absolutely do not want to imply that my relationship was inherently negative (this is how the state always positions sex in prison)... I wouldn't change it for the world. But it is interesting to reflect on in the context of Covid-19. The process of writing this interview has made me see that I have been unconsciously "triggered" a few times during the pandemic because of issues around "loving and fighting" in a controlled environment. In prison I was also 'locked down' (in a slightly different way) with an abusive partner, unable to touch or see my friends, or connect with the outside world.

As with most of my anecdotes, I included my relationship in 'Bang-Up' as an illustration of a particular point. In terms of the connection between loving and fighting, it's interesting to reflect on this in relation social distancing measures. Even when I was in prison, I had great sex, and also the comfort of a lot of physical contact with many different friends across the prison. While "women's prisons" can be rife with bitchiness, gossip and physical fights, at least they can be very tactile places. In my limited experience of visiting and supporting comrades in "men's prisons", and "Youth Offenders Institutions" this is not the case across the prison system.

Part of the reason why my relationship in prison fuels my hatred of the prison system and probation so much was that they poisoned her against me. I won't bore people with the details (see 'Bang-Up' for that) but after I was released we were not allowed to communicate with each other, and the state went to great lengths to ensure it was pretty much impossible. They threatened to give my ex extra time if they found out we were in contact, and brought in the 'Counter Terrorism Lead Senior Probation Officer' and 'Extremism Unit' to discredit me. Never has my heart been broken so completely. As this is a text for the tattoo circus, I will say this, I immediately used my JSA [*ed. – Job Seekers Allowance, state benefit*] to get a huge tattoo for her, so that I would never forget the repression I had experienced. It puts fire in my belly every time I look at it :) It is worth noting that they also attempted a similar strategy of alienation with my family. Finally, over three years after I have been released, (and after much tongue biting and hard work on my part), I finally feel like the relationship I have to them is more balanced. The reason why this might be interesting or relevant to others is that I (bitterly) feel like it illustrates the toxic farce that words such as "rehabilitation" hide... and why I get so grumpy about them!

In relation to the connection today between loving and fighting, I feel like maybe that is worthy of a thesis, but I think it's fair to say that separation is a key form of social control, and as I highlighted in 'Bang-Up'; the prison system employs a wide range of tools to monitor the development of any kinds of sexual activity or relationships. The language of the prison system positions relationships as a "distraction" from what people "should" be doing (reflecting on what a terrible human they are). The prison system uses a wide range of tools to do this: overtly (such as instantly separating, often by 'ghosting' someone to another prison unexpectedly) or snide, more subtle ways (such as denying people access to resources around sex, or encouraging other prisoners to snitch on people in relationships). Despite all this, in the prison environment, falling in love can happen fast, and hard... and it does feel like one of the most beautiful ways you can have to resist their sterile attempts at control.

Once again, the petri dish of prison has been used as a laboratory for wider social control. I don't have a smart phone and have never been on social media, so I am (blissfully) unaware of the extent of anxiety and snitching, but I am painfully aware of a few friends who have definitely followed the government "guidelines" to the letter without thinking about how it might impact

on other people, or thinking of creative ways to get around the very real dangers of corona virus while enabling people to see their partners etc. Trying to navigate things like consent and consensus in these lockdown times sometimes feels like you are in a poly [*ed. – polyamorous, see Comments on 'Polyamory?'*] relationship with everyone you know (from comrades to colleagues). Apart from when I was in prison I have never felt like I had so much communication about how to navigate physical contact with other humans, nor felt under such close scrutiny in terms of touching other people.

I feel lucky for my experiences in prison, to be prepared for, and used to, socially distant methods of engagement: finding ways to let comrades and loved ones know I care about them on the down-low, covert meet ups, etc. Touch has become a criminal act, to be avoided at all cost. I am trying to view it as some kind of kink; massively delayed gratification :) It feels important now more than ever, to remember that we are not alone... to revel in the joy of meeting someone's gaze while we are masked up... leaving hidden messages and silly things..... putting passion in to our rebellious actions. I am not alone or special in this, it warms my heart thinking of people all over the world I have never met but who are used to this.

"Each and every one of us has been turned into a ticking time bomb, a disgusting, diseased, infectious, monstrous, creature who should hate itself and others like it – and keep away from them as much as possible. For those of us already deemed disgusting by society (queers, trans, sexworkers, junkies, HIV positive people etc) this feeling may not be so new; but now the stigma of the 'diseased' is engulfing us all." – 'It's The End Of The World As We Know It.... (And people applaud, quarantined at their windows)' Down and Out distro

London ABC: *"The beast now turns on the zeks in its entrails... Having eliminated the communities of outsiders, the Technological Wonder proceeds to generate outsiders inside its own entrails, to expunge human zeks and replace them with machines, with things made of its own substance... The new outsiders are not radicals. They are people who happened to animate springs and gears which can now be automated, namely artificialized... It is also not known if the technological detritus that crowds and poisons the world leaves human beings any room to dance." Against His-story! Against Leviathan!*

What do you make of prison society in terms of the cadaverous process of civilisation which Fredy is describing? Do you believe that we can discover 'room to dance'?

ASBO: We quoted Perlman in 'The Road' because the leviathan is definitely lurching now. In my optimistic moments I imagine it is in its death throes..... but I doubt it!

Perlman said: *"As civilisation grows, the domain of death grows, while the individuals living within it die."* This definitely feels pertinent now. The domain of death has never felt more immediate, global, and also willfully embraced. People all too often unquestioningly cling to the Leviathan, desperately keeping it's mechanisms going in a tired dance of compliance, addicted to the poison that it excretes.

"And all but lust is turned to dust, in humanities machine" – Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*

It was really frustrating to me how much hope and authority people put on the Tories announcement about easing the lockdown, only to be met (unsurprisingly) with a garbled and contradictory mess of arbitrary allocated activities. 'Our Plan to Rebuild: The UK Government's Covid-19 Recovery Strategy' has left even the most ardent of Tory supporters confused about what is and isn't permitted under the guise of public health. The 60 page document said a lot, and nothing at all... This kind of puff piece will be all too familiar to anyone trying to make sense of

the many new ‘initiatives’ that the state trials in prisons. Anyone having trouble sleeping should try to make sense of the sea of acronyms I included at the end of ‘Bang-Up’ in the Glossary and Appendices to highlight this point.

In the disease of civilization we must find ‘room to dance’. As many others have highlighted, we are in a process of stagnation, of decomposition, and, like Covid-19, the rate at which this is being transmitted feels brutally fast. We may well all die, soon, but I hope we will go out dancing... (and not in a hippy way, but in a glorious, fierce and bloody mess).

“Domesticated humans are defined by their adornment with masks over their faces and armor over their bodies. These masks and armors are the ways in which the individual internalizes the constraint of Leviathan and acclimates themselves to life within it. These are necessary for surviving the everyday domination and humiliation which is life in this society. They protect individuals from their own emotions, perception and estrangement from being.” – Baeden ‘Against the Gendered Nightmare’.

Thinking about Perlman’s Leviathan and the context of Covid-19 made me revisit this quote from Baeden. Just to be clear, I am not saying that it is not important to be careful. Face masks are obviously important in the current climate. However, before corona, I always felt powerful when I masked up. It was a physical way of saying ‘fuck you’, and to prepare for battle. Now it all too often feels like people are scurrying away from each other, desperate to avoid contact, cowering behind various forms of PPE [*ed. – personal protective equipment*]... It can definitely feel like ‘everyday domination and humiliation’, however useful they are.

As Perlman outlined, Leviathan has no life of its own, and thus can only function by capturing living beings within itself. It is interesting to position snitching, mutual aid etc (and the NHSX app) within this context: We are all the Leviathan, we give it life: through the virus that is social media, when we comply with government dogma unquestioningly... when we judge others for resisting lockdown.

London ABC: As the world experiences another economic shock, likely to push municipal authorities to farm out contracts to tech-creeps on a large scale, coupled with the obvious repressive applications of ‘contact tracing’ – which in the UK is already contracted to infamous blood-sucker Peter Thiel’s company ‘Palantir’ – what do you think the dimensions of the new, ‘smart’, world are? What do you make of the fact that undeniable recognition of and resistance to these developments in the form of an extensive campaign of 5g sabotage [*ed. – see **The 5G Net***] has received such extensive media coverage but exclusively in the mode of alleged ‘conspiracy theory’?

ASBO: There is so much new language around Covid-19, and this phrase “contact tracing” is to me, one of the most deadly, as it neatly obscures a huge arsenal of surveillance measures and unprecedented levels of control in this country. We covered a lot of detail around social media in ‘The Road’, so I won’t go into that here, but it is interesting to relate these recent experiences back to life in prison. Every prisoner has a ‘security file’ and this is updated every day. Who you talked to, where, and when are just as important as what was said. Other prisoners are encouraged to provide screws with ‘data’ and conjecture and opinion becomes ‘fact’ in the stroke of a key board or pen. Does this sound familiar today?

One of Boris Johnson’s recent announcement was the creation of a ‘Biosecurity Centre’ using the ‘Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre’. This uses a five tier system of ‘ratings’, combined with the language/legislation around “terrorism” to create a strategy for “easing the lockdown”. It is interesting to note that the new message from the Tories is “stay alert”. This seems very fitting

in the context of mass scale snitching. It will be interesting also to see if the concept of a health status (or vaccine passport) becomes reality. Once again, this is reminiscent of methods of control in prison; for example, the ‘Incentives and Earned Privileges’ (IEP) scheme I discuss in ‘Bang-Up’, which controls by dividing the prison population into categories of “status” based on behaviour and compliance.

“Over the past month, the Coronavirus Act has been applied by police, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and magistrates disastrously... These Regulations, despite accounting for the greatest loss of liberty ever imposed on the British public, have not benefited from full parliamentary scrutiny, oversight, or approval... However, this wave of excessive policing is likely to have a lasting impact on policing practices and public attitudes.” – ‘Big Brother Watch: April 2020: Emergency Powers and Civil Liberties’

When I read this quote it really brought home to me what a strange (and terrifying) situation we are operating in. Of course, it is important to be aware of the myriad of ways in which the state is capitalising on corona to sharpen it’s teeth, and rapidly expand into new areas of tech (and the public psyche). But we have already lost of we get caught up in concepts such as “excessive policing” or calling for “parliamentary scrutiny”. This is of no interest to me... It is like logging which way the Leviathan lurches, and thinking that will bring it crashing down.

“This is an unprecedented public health emergency, with an unprecedented national effort to fight this virus. We’re all in this together and each and every one of us has a role to play by following the government advice.” – Chief Cons. Rhodes, Lancashire police

The ‘Coronavirus Act’, and related tech (such as Lancashire Police’s snitching website, outlined above) is an insidious extension of many methodologies that will be common to people who have served time in prison. For example, ‘MDT’s’ (Mandatory Drug Tests) are common in jail. As I outlined in ‘Bang-Up’ I was subjected to a high number of these, because everyone knew that I am ‘straight-edge’ (prisons frequently skew their data; normally ‘randomly’ selecting people they know are ‘clean’ to try and report low rates of drug use to HMIP – ‘Her Majesties Inspectorate of Prisons’.) For me, as I was always negative, the worst part of this process was pissing in front of a screw. But, those who test positive on an MDT (and there are many false-positives) are immediately locked behind their cell door, put on ‘basic’, and possibly have to face an adjudication (often resulting in extra time). A prison version of ‘contract tracing’ ensues, where their ‘security reports’ are scrutinised; and people who they may have come into contact with are questioned or highlighted as possibly contaminated; even if they have no connection to drug use.

In relation to tech here, as you have outlined, Palantir have made a big splash in the corona related tech world by only charging ‘NHSX’ (the branch of the NHS behind the app, as outlined in ‘The Road’) £1 for their involvement in the project (providing 45 engineers to NHS England’s technical teams, who are using Microsoft’s Azure cloud platform, Google’s G-Suite tools and G-cloud data processing contract). Nothing comes for free in this world... For anyone optimistically looking forward to a halcyon day when Fortress Europe might reopen in some limited way, it is worth noting that Palantir has it’s roots in ‘counter-terrorism’ and has contracts with both ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement in America) and the CIA.

Palantir have carefully emphasised that they are “data processors” not “data controllers”, stating that their tech behind the app (the ‘Foundry’ project): “enables disparate data to be integrated, cleaned, and harmonised in order to develop the single source of truth that will support decision-making”. Covid-19 enables tech giants to use concepts such as “truth”, “harmony” and “cleanliness” to create a monolithic structure which hides an invasive, and unprecedented level

of social control. As we argued in 'The Road', 'contact tracing' is a terrifying extension of the logic employed by social media and its users; the idea that if you are inherently suspicious (or indeed, in the case of Covid-19, actively want people to die) if you don't want to be transparent, or participate.

"As we have seen countless times in the last few weeks, a national effort is required to limit the impact of Covid-19, whether that means asking car manufacturers to build ventilators, private hospitals to aid the NHS, or technology firms to provide software to power the response... We believe that the support provided by these partners will enable the Government to respond more effectively to the crisis." – Matthew Gould, NHSX Chief Executive

What this quote outlines is that, like Covid-19, capitalism is both adaptable and quick to mutate. I am no expert, and I cannot begin to conceive the unfettered leaps that technology will make in this new world. Tech corporations have mutated; forging uneasy alliances to further themselves, spreading an invisible but far-reaching coronal smear behind the facade of "public good" or "health". Who knows where we will be by the time we get to the next ladder or snake in the game of the 'Five Tier Corona Virus Alert System'.

A final note on my tech tangent :) you asked about the 5G masts and conspiracy theories. I am painfully aware that I am no expert on this, and I also do not want to fall into the dangerous trap of condemning actions by people attacking the state when I do not fully understand the context. I will say that I think we need to find a middle ground: between apologising for our own existence and the possibility of being 'spreaders'; and the gun-toting 'Pro-Liberty' (anti-lockdown) protestors in America. Between a form of mutual-aid that is devoid of any form of 'politics' (afraid of it's own shadow in case it alienates the people that it is desperately trying to build a so-called 'movement' with); and the alleged crack-pot conspiracy theorists in the anti-5G movement.

In relation to 5G, I can think of many, many clear and valid reasons to hate it. Its possible links to corona virus do not really interest me. As many people have highlighted, the coronavirus pandemic is clearly caused by the fucked up nature of "normal" life today: destroying, consuming and exploiting other species, the systemic issues around class and race that have created conditions for the virus to kill thousands of people in the last few months. Speculation between Covid-19 and 5G is possibly a distraction from other more tangible aspects of the social war. However, I also do not trust the lens of the mainstream press, and can also see that these actions may well have been autonomous: done with a multitude of different motivations, conveniently tarred with the brush of 'corona' as a way for Facebook and other platforms to legitimise developing its tools and systems of control.

In April Facebook announced a new level of censorship, to "connect people who may have interacted with harmful misinformation about the virus with the truth from authoritative sources, in case they see or hear these claims again off of Facebook" .

Once again the language of "truth" is being used by tech corporations to create a monolithic, unarguable front fuelled by the concept of 'health'. For as long as people have been attacking the state, the state has attempted to discredit them, to encourage others to jeer, and to divide so-called public opinion on tired dichotomies such as "violence" and "non-violence" or "good" and "bad" actions. Covid-19 creates a whole new arena for this tedious and divisive discussion. Social media creates an endless distraction; simultaneously providing a wealth of information sources, whilst ensuring that people are only able to look at what is presented by Facebook as "the truth from authoritative sources".

We are living in a messy time. Everything is sanitised, but we are constantly wringing our tired hands. We are all confused. I am confused... but even in my most muddled moments I can see that the concept of “truth” is possibly more dangerous in this context than corona virus itself. Let’s see what is around the corner...

London ABC: You say in the conclusion to Bang Up and Smash:

“In the relentless power struggle between the state and those who refuse to conform to its violent logic and domination, there is no space for complacency or reform.

Abolition is not enough. We are all part of a social war.”

How has ‘prison abolition’ become co-opted into an ‘activist vocabulary’ bound up with ‘complacency and reform’? How, in your view, might we begin to wrest back an idea and practise of freedom which refuses capitulation and negotiation at every level?

ASBO: I have no intention of re-writing or updating ‘Bang-Up’ but if I was going to, I’d like to develop the section on abolition. It felt really important to critically engage with it as a concept, but I think I was too vague, and I pulled a few punches, as I was slightly nervous about how the critique would be received. So, thank you for this opportunity to expand on the topic :)

Firstly, I don’t think that ‘prison abolition’ has been co-opted into an ‘activist vocabulary’. I think it is inherently situated in this (and campaigns often explicitly self-identify with this sphere of activity.) In reflecting on this question, I picked up an overview of prison abolition created by the ‘CR10 Collective’. This is part of the abolitionist network ‘Critical Resistance’. They have published various “tool-kits”, media projects looking at the ‘PIC’ (prison industrial complex) and “dialogues”. I am going to use two sentences from them to highlight the tension between an abolitionist perspective, and my own...

“Abolition is both a practical organizing tool and a long-term goal.”

“Abolition Now! Reminds us that there was abolition, there is abolition, and there will be more abolition.”

The concept of ‘abolition’ is tied to the language of the state. As many more knowledgeable and gifted writers than me have shown, when slavery was “abolished”, it was only in name, and many, many slaves were forced to continue to work in order to pay off a variety of supposed ‘debts’.

In 1864, America “abolished” slavery (and involuntary servitude) except as “a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted”. This is still enshrined in law (the famous and controversial ‘Amendment XIII’ to the United States Constitution). The use of incarcerated workers and prison labour are just one example of how slavery has mutated in so-called ‘late-stage capitalism’, but is still very much prevalent within the prison system. Most prisons across the world are dependent on some form of prison labour, and I talk about this much more in ‘Bang-Up’.

“The most difficult and urgent challenge today is that of creatively exploring new terrains of justice, where the prison no longer serves as our major anchor.” – Angela Davis, ‘Are Prisons Obsolete’.

To me, this sentence encapsulates where my conception of struggle diverges from that of an abolitionist perspective. To put it bluntly, I am not interested in “creatively exploring new terrains of justice”. Don’t get me wrong, I think there is space (and a real need) for a diversity of tactics, and a multitude of approaches in attacking the prison system. But where abolitionism talks of tool-kits, I want an arsenal. The whole brutal and messy annihilation, right now, of the prison regime, not a discussion about “rights” and “justice”.

“Today, abolition is on the table, a goal that was not really on the agenda in 1998. A prerequisite to seeking any social change is the naming of it. In other words, even though the goal we seek may be far away, unless we name it and fight for it today, it will never come.” – Rose Braz, ‘Perspectives on Critical Resistance’.

I am not interested in eating at their table, or engaging with it in any way. I am not trying to sound super judgmental or arrogant. Many people I respect and call comrades are involved in projects broadly associated with ‘prison abolition’. But, for me, this ‘long term goal’ will never materialise, and what I am more interested in, now, is a messy attempt to attack the prison system and all the institutions that feed it. To use Perlman’s Leviathan analogy again, I think abolition relies on the idea that the people inside the Leviathan will somehow slow down, and become more aware of what they are doing. I don’t believe this will be the case, and I don’t think it’s possible to try and tinker within the worm while it is still flailing.

The language of abolition is one of hope, of long-term planning, of “community”... I think this idea of the future is the stumbling block to me in a lot of abolitionist theory. I view it as a sort of apologetic pacifier; one that tries to explain itself and legitimise its position (for example, often getting caught up in demonstrating community responses to sexual violence...). Prison is a violent system right now, that needs destroying today.

There is a time for talking, and I am not so head-strong that I cannot see the importance of having processes for dealing with accountability processes and community responses. But I do not believe we can dismantle capitalism. I am not interested in this as a project. I want to destroy it, and all the myriad of ways it will reinvent itself in its death throes. There are many practical examples of projects based around prison abolition which are quite interesting, but they are always open to co-option by the state. In his text ‘Punishment and Prisons: Power and the Carceral State’ Joe Sim situates prison abolition as “a radical policy solution”: *“Abolitionists have been deeply involved in activist interventions across the penal spectrum which attempted to make prison ‘more effective, responsive and accountable’.”* As with the concept of “voting anarchists” we outlined in ‘The Road’, I find any concept of abolition which can “make prison ‘more effective, responsive and accountable’” a hideous oxymoron.

Sim uses a Gramscian model to highlight project of abolition, arguing that it attempts to replace ‘common sense’ with ‘good sense’. To me, this will always be the failing and limitations of abolition, because it is still trying to make sense of a system which – for most people – makes no sense (and I mean this in the most brutal of all ways; with many people dying behind bars, or from the virus and related issues, as it relentlessly grinds on).

The concept of prison abolition was ground breaking because instead of looking inside prisons to reform them, it situated the prison in a much broader context of control, discrimination and division. However, as I outlined in ‘Bang-Up’; a lot of the language around abolition is about “building” (as in, that beloved phrase of activists “movement building”). CR10 (and many other abolitionist collectives) have 3 main aspects to their concept of abolition: “dismantle, change, build”. But the examples they give of “dismantling” are exactly the same as “changing” and “building”: those of discussion and collaboration. The task of “dismantling” implies (to me at least) a process that involves some level of care, and is slow (or takes at least time consuming and deliberate). I am not so arrogant to say I have all the answers, and I think (hope) this is a point that was made in both ‘Bang-Up’ and ‘The Road’. However, that doesn’t mean that I cannot be critical. There are some projects related to the goal of prison abolition that to me seem valid and important. But it is all too often explicitly tied to building alternatives as it grows, or looks forward to

(or works towards) a time when certain conditions will align (community resources, resilience, alternatives etc) to enable it. If we live in fear of “alienating people” (some patronising concept of “people” anyway), and always have our hands tied by the restraints of “movement building” then we are embarking on a hopeless endeavour. I think this is important to reflect on today with the various “mutual-aid” projects which have sprung up, which pertain to anarchist ideals like “solidarity” but are in essence basically charitable projects. This issue is explored more in ‘The Road’.

This final question relates to the first question you asked I think. As I tried to outline in ‘Bang-Up’, the concept of ‘rehabilitation’ is used as a bitter pill by the state in prisons (and their related institutions). All manner of interventions and methods of control are used in the name of this amorphous concept. Anyone who has spent time in prison (or even just visited) will be aware of the passive yet brutally controlling way a lot of “progressive” sounding language obscures a litany of pain. I won’t go into it in detail because I use several concrete examples in ‘Bang-Up’ of so-called “therapeutic environments” and “initiatives” that manipulate, re-traumatise and control prisoners (and encourage snitching). I think this language is why I often have a strong response to a lot of abolitionist texts; because so much of it sounds like jargon co-opted by the state. That doesn’t mean it isn’t potentially useful. But it is not my struggle.

I wonder what the UK’s ‘prison estate’ look like in the time of Covid-19, and how will abolitionist projects relate to it? There was much discussion early on in the lock down about releasing a lot of prisoners, to decrease the chances of transmission inside. The right wing press were beside themselves as they predicted 4,000 prisoners being released in mid-April. In reality, the ‘Ministry of Justice’ “paused” this initiative. Right now, all prison visits have been suspended, indefinitely. Many prisoners are currently banged up for 23 hours a day (this includes at least three young offender institutions holding children aged 15 to 17 – Cookham Wood, Wetherby and Parc).

Prisons are on a knife edge in the face of the pandemic, and prisoners (and those held in detention or without papers) are at the sharp end of it. There is no sign of when the situation might change, or what repressive measures might take place in the name of Covid-19. Will the government herald a new wave of prison expansion in order to make more socially distant prisons? Perhaps they will try to legitimise this as a way to boost the economy and construction industry in what is sure to be a crippling recession post-peak? When we say the virus has “peaked” who has it peaked for? What will happen to the huge number of people held without trial as part of the ‘Coronavirus Act’? Or locked in psychiatric institutions having been diagnosed and disappeared?

I finished ‘Bang-Up’ with a random quote from Roddy Doyle which I really like, and I am including it here: *“We cannot win, and winning is not our intention. We do what we have to do, all we can do, is keep at them until it becomes unbearable. To provoke them, and make them mad”* – Roddy Doyle, *A Star Called Henry*

I don’t want to win. I am not interested in truth, or facts. I want to poke (from a distance), to prod. To find cracks. To stare down. To keep on... And to provoke.

Always anti-social...

ASBO. 11/05/20 X

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ASBO interview with London ABC
Everything Is Sanitised, But We Are Constantly Wringing Our Tired Hands
May 2020

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