

Rejecting Carceral Ideology & Embracing Radical Compassion

Punishment

Human beings are meaning-seeking creatures. We long for narrative structure. As a response to the disempowering conditions of today's world, we often cling to a dichotomy of Good versus Evil. Filled with righteous indignation, burdened by economic stress, haunted by existential uncertainty, and emboldened by cognitive biases and social conditioning, we react by searching for somewhere to place the blame for these feelings. The only power that seems within reach comes from inflicting pain on those we think deserve it. "Being alive in a knife-edge moment like this, being forced to be complicit in it while our so-called leaders fail so miserably to act, unavoidably generates all kinds of morbid symptoms. Inevitably, people reach for narratives to make sense of this reality."⁶

Modern conditions create moral panic and foster a social dynamic that blames systemic social problems on individual moral failings. This path leads us towards a belief that other people are a threat; that cooperation is impossible and we must therefore seek out and punish some existential threat or enemy. This general blaming structure is a phenomenon prevalent all along the socio-political spectrum: identifying a target for our discontentedness and deriving a sense of identity, purpose, and superiority by punishing these scapegoats.

Basic functioning requires a constant cognitive dissonance, particularly for politically conscious people who are aware of the implicit violence of our society. Directing a pent up tension towards some external enemy becomes a source of validation for the precarious self - a reinforcement of punitive models dressed up as virtue and "good politics." Too often, though, we take out our frustrations on members of our own class and community. This is simply a matter of proximity. We can't get our hands around Elon Musk's throat, so we instead search for reflections of oppressors as they appear in the behavior and attitudes of the people in our lives. In doing so, we feel as if we are attacking and dismantling oppressive structures, when in reality we are tearing down the people whose wellbeing is enmeshed in our own.

When we engage in acts of punishment against people with whom we could potentially have solidarity, we are being irresponsible with our righteous outrage. Taking out disgust at systemic violence and social injustice on people who are also victims of those oppressive forces (particularly those who are in our same oppressed class and with whom we have some political affinity) is a "reproduction of the dominator within the dominated."¹⁷

How we relate to members of our communities and the people who occupy our lives is how we put our values into practice. If those values are punitive, the affects will be felt in the ways we treat each other. Our material survival requires collaboration, and our social health requires connection. The relationships we must foster to meet these needs should be founded on good-will, dignity, and friendship, **not** suspicion, judgment, or revenge fantasies. This is not to suggest we sit around singing kumbaya with our oppressors or their ideological defendants. However, the demand for moral purity and the impulse to punish when that demand is inevitably unattainable is a threat to the resiliency of our relationships as well as collective political aspirations towards liberation.

**"Punishment is not something
that happens to bad people,
it happens to those who
cannot stop it from happening.
It is laundered pain
not a balancing of scales."**

—Porpentine Charity Heartscape

Intro to Abolition

The subject of this work is not abolition *per se*, but applying an abolitionist framework – a recognition that policing, surveillance, incarceration, and coercion are not adequate responses to “bad” behavior and perpetuate an unjust system of colonial violence and capitalist exploitation – to a broader analysis of punishment as a social practice. Therefore, a basic understanding of abolition as a frame of reference is essential to this work.

Prisons, mass surveillance, and policing are structures of control and punishment which shape our reality. The general belief that “justice is served” when people who break laws or disobey social norms are imprisoned or punished is referred to as “carceral ideology.” This pervasive outlook relies on a system of *deservingness*, the idea that imprisonment, criminalization, or punishment are *justified* by the choices people make. Carceral ideology dominates throughout the hegemonic culture but also inserts itself into our personal interactions and subcultural spaces. Abolitionists not only reject policing and incarceration as a way to confront social problems but also attempt to demystify and dismantle the flawed logic of carceral ideology which is so deeply embedded into our social structure.

Criminality, in our society, is not based on any moral value system or ethical framework. What is legal or illegal is dictated by the interests of power. For a clear example: in the United States, chattel slavery was *legal* for 250 years. For an enslaved person, resistance to that enslavement was *illegal*. The police in the US were, in fact, founded as an extension of the slave trade. The police and the prison system are social institutions whose primary task is the maintenance of the social order – to serve the interests of the ruling class – not public safety or collective well-being.

The unequal distribution of wealth and resources in a class society creates vast numbers of people living in poverty, and that poverty is, in turn, criminalized. The reasons people “commit crimes” is very often rooted in their impoverishment. Poor people, in turn, are subject to harshest judicial penalty, while those with wealth and power are virtually exempt from any legal consequences for all manner of morally heinous actions. In a fundamentally racist and classist society such as the U.S. poverty affects social minorities at a disproportionate rate. In her book *Becoming Abolitionists* Derecka Purnell explains,

Most of the criminals are actually just poor people. Because of capitalism, racism, and ableism, the darkest and poorest people in the United States are relegated to live precarious lives where they do what they can to survive – sometimes including breaking the law. Police do not and cannot address the society that creates racial and economic exploitation, only punish people who steal, fight, burglarize, and trespass because of it. Rather than eliminating the unjust conditions, cities and the federal government send in police to manage inequality.¹

Simply put, abolitionists claim that the way to “solve crime” is to address the underlying conditions that create crime. Purnell answers the inevitable rhetorical question posed to anyone making abolitionist claims: “What about the murderers?” She argues that such a question cannot have a single answer, because murders do not have a singular cause. Therefore a more useful question to ask might be “Why do people kill people?”¹ She answers with examples ranging from accessibility to guns to domestic conflicts; from mental health stressors to accidents. This general line of questioning can be expanded to all forms of violent or “illegal” activity. Purnell insists that by breaking down the causes for violence into “digestible social problems, we could brainstorm various solutions,” for preventing and responding that harm in the here and now as we collectively eradicate the root causes.¹

On the subject of violence, abolitionists inquire: what violence is sanctified and normalized in our society, and what kinds of violence are deemed criminal and worthy of punishment? Incredible displays of violence are understood as acceptable when carried out under the banner of war and empire. The thought of holding political or military officials legally accountable for war crimes and killing civilians is rarely a consideration in our culture, while the discrete “illegal” actions of a poor person are routinely punishable

by law. We have no problem locking a person in a cage for doing what they must to survive conditions of poverty, while those responsible for systemic violence – from genocide to healthcare denial – will live out their old age playing golf and enjoying steak dinners. Any act of violence or harm carried out by an individual (while not always justifiable or defensible) must be placed within a context of the thoroughly violent society we are all subjected to. As long as the structural injustices of that uphold capitalism fundamentally shape our reality, violence and interpersonal harm are inevitable on a massive scale.

We cannot rely on the “law” to provide justice, or to make the world a more just place, because the law is fundamentally formed in the interest of the ruling class. Even the demand to “hold the police accountable” by “jailing killer cops” relies on carceral ideology. We cannot repeat the logics of policing in our critiques of that logic. When we promote anyone’s incarceration, says Pilar Maschi, “we legitimize the prison industrial complex. And who is it that gets impacted by that? ... Who has to pay the price? Always our people, always poor people, people of color, black people.”³

Imprisonment, for anyone, is not justice. Justice relies on the collective creation of conditions which allow everyone to thrive, and cooperative decision making under those conditions, not retribution imposed on those deemed deserving. Abolitionists argue that we cannot make minor reforms or tweaks to an inherently oppressive structure and expect radically different outcomes. We cannot rely on carceral ideology and individualized punishment to bring about revolutionary change. In bringing to light the root causes of harmful behavior and the role punishment plays in our social relationships, it is in the interest of abolitionists to reject these logics outright and work towards their dismantling.

Beyond “law enforcement,” the police, as a social institution, mediate our *social relationships*. David Graeber articulates this idea as follows: the law and how it is enforced shape our collective reasoning for why it is we do or do not do certain things. One is taught that one should avoid reckless driving, for a simple example, not because it puts fellow people on the road in danger, but rather to avoid punishment in the form of a fine or potential jail time. One ceases to consider the consequences of their actions in terms of the wellbeing of the people around them, but rather in terms of legality and their susceptibility to punishment.²

In healthy social relationships people know each other well enough that resolving conflict does not require a heavily armed mediator. As a way of making this point, Stephen West paints a relatable picture: imagine the neighbors are hosting a loud party while you are trying to put your kids to bed.

How common is it for someone in this situation to be more willing to call the police on their neighbor, who then knock on the neighbor’s door and tell them to turn their music down, than just go over, talk to the neighbor, and resolve the situations themselves?²⁸

Imagine this neighbor, someone living in close proximity to you, is, instead of a stranger, a friend - someone you know, someone who you have a relationship with that you both care about. Calling the police in that situation would seem absurd. In fact, West continues, in most periods of human history, you would be invited to the party your neighbor is hosting! But in an alienated society where, “social bonds are so hard to achieve...talking to your neighbor is something that has to be outsourced to the police.”²⁸

Not only does carceral ideology structure our world, it poisons our relationships, communities, and movements. Of course, the pervasiveness of violence and coercion enforced by militarized policing and the prison industrial complex does not compare, in terms of scale and scope, to the ways punishment is leveraged in our communities and subcultures. However, when we choose to abandon, dehumanize, or scapegoat our friends, members of our community, or working class people in general, we perpetuate a logic of punishment rather than subverting it. We have to unveil the ways that carceral ideology crops up

in our interpersonal lives, and reject these logics in our attempts to create healthy communities and build liberatory movements.

Abolition calls for a radical reorienting of how our world is structured, and in whose interest. This is an abolitionism as “not so much the abolition of prisons, but the abolition of a society that could have prisons...abolition as the founding of a new society.”⁴ Abolitionist movements must simultaneously reject the oppressive institutions of incarceration and policing while offering new visions of a world where these institutions are obsolete. The project of abolitionists requires a substantive critique of capitalism, colonialism, and class society while articulating how those structures are tied to the violence of prisons and policing.

Many will claim that the abolition of prisons and police are unrealistic and utopian, but there was a time in history when the abolition of slavery seemed just as ridiculous – it was viewed as an undeniable and natural part of our world. **Just because something is normalized doesn't make it morally justifiable or socially inevitable.** Just because an ambition is wildly different from our current reality doesn't make it unattainable. We do not have to accept the occupation of our neighborhoods by armed hostile forces. We should not naturalize the caging of human beings.

Abolitionists reject the claim that people are greedy and violent by nature, and that the police and carceral institutions are the only thing that keep us from widespread chaos and unadulterated violence. People are cooperative, social, and interested in connection. Abolitionist politics recognizes the need for a revolutionary rearrangement of how our society is structured to incentivize these natural tendencies. We must identify and overcome the puritanical ideologies that are adopted from corrupted, outdated, and oppressive judicial and theological systems which rely on a fixed, formulaic morality. We must reject rules or laws based on coercion or violence, whether they are enforced by the state, or the social mobility of people in our communities.

**“Abolitionism, as an ethical stance,
is the rejection of the cop in our heads & hearts
...which is also a call for personal transformation
to become more principled, loving, & effective
revolutionaries.”**

— Pinko Collective

Why Do We Do What We Do?

How we think, feel, and behave is the result of a wide variety of material and social conditions, many of which are completely beyond individual control or conscious awareness. The highly dysfunctional social conditions of modernity, particularly in a culture so thoroughly propagandized as ours, remain invisible to most. It is the duty of critical analysis to demystify these conditions, make them knowable and comprehensible to people, and reject their naturalization.

One of the founding myths of our society is meritocracy: that our social positioning and personal wellbeing are a matter of individual decision, the result of work ethic and discipline. "In meritocracy, everyone has to buy into the idea that winners are winners because they deserve it, and losers are losers because they deserve it." This framework is what "makes the whole system run," it legitimizes a deeply unjust status quo.⁵ When experiencing poverty, isolation, loneliness, or lack of meaning, we are told in a scolding tone that this must be the result of our own lack of will power or weakness of character. But our precarious livelihoods and ideological conditioning depend almost entirely on the choices of the politically powerful and the whims of global economic forces – we have very little say in the matter.

When thinking critically about human behavior in the context of dominating and oppressive structures of modern capitalism, we find that while people may have some choice, they are operating within the strict confines of our particular social conditions which severely limit their autonomy. If one is not "free" in their actions, unable to act from a place of total agency, then punishment as a response to those actions is an absurd notion. It doesn't make sense to hold someone responsible for something beyond their control. A belief that each person acts as a free moral agent, rather than being fundamentally shaped by their environment and circumstances depoliticizes human behavior and renders punishment appropriate.

Discussions of free will have occupied philosophers and thinkers for millennia, and I don't claim to have anything new to add. However, for a discussion of punishment, it is worth briefly mentioning. The basic debate revolves around nature vs nurture: is it the biological and genetic makeup of a person, or their upbringing, social environment, and material opportunities that make an individual who they are, and to what degree? Consider, though: we don't make a conscious decision about either of these! A lifetime's worth of interaction and experiences along with the biological particularities of any given individual is a complex web which is impossible to untangle – an unending chain of determining factors that lead a person to any particular decision.

From what your upbringing was like, how your species evolved, whether you got enough sleep last night, what your diet is like, and your economic status - where do we draw the line of blame, of responsibility for behavior? Where in that network is your will actually your own? This is not to provide a scaffolding for abdication of personal decision or accountability to our harmful thoughts or behaviors, but rather to provide a context for ourselves and others, to build a foundation of compassion, rather than blame, understanding rather than guilt.²⁷

Beyond individual circumstance, our character is shaped through ideology - the cultural stories we tell to explain our collective reality, which form our belief and behavior in subtle yet pervasive ways. The established norms of a given social order function as the limitations of behavior and action, and defiance of these norms can result in physical or social punishment.

Fully exploring the ways ideology influences our behavior is beyond the scope of this zine, but it is worth establishing that what we take for granted as normal in a class society is part of an apparatus that

reinforces capitalist ideology, not only through incarceration or criminalization but also by implicitly threatening social ostracization or an inability to gain access to basic needs like food and shelter. In this way, we can recognize the mere *threat* of punishment as a kind of coercion, a powerful if subconscious form dictating what behavior is acceptable. A capitalist society incentivizes behavior that is possessive, domineering, dehumanizing, and self-interested. People are forced to behave accordingly to get by. Social norms are shaped by social production which is influenced by power structures and material conditions of a given society. “Individuals want to be normal, so they act in accordance with these norms.”⁸

Living in constant emotional misery or material precarity makes a person more likely to inflict harm on the people around them. When we attempt to punish the individual behaviors of people shaped by these conditions, rather than the conditions themselves, we misdirect our anger and outrage. We are too quick to reduce people to their worst behavior, to essentialize the ever changing character of a human being into one particular action or tendency. Punishment does not reduce suffering or adequately address the root causes of suffering, nor does it actually have an impact on shaping people’s behavior for the better. Aaron Rabinowitz claims that rather than punishing someone for a transgression, we ought to ask what needs are not met for that person and what psychological damage might they be dealing with and doing whatever we can do to address those problems and their causes.

“How do we prevent future such events? What are the causal influences?” If they're internal to the individual, then we work on mechanisms that address the internal features. If it's external, we work on addressing the external features. At no point do we need to point at any piece of the causal chain and say “you there, you're bad because you did this.”³⁰

Rejecting punishment means accepting that “there are no bad people. People do bad things.”³ Individual acts cannot be removed from a lifetime of context. Demonizing people renders them irredeemable, which frees *them* of social responsibility and frees *us* of having to deal with their complexity. We cannot expect to hold people responsible for things fundamentally out of their control, the result of biological and social circumstances they were only passively shaped by. We cannot continue to measure people and their action against an idealized standard which is not grounded in the reality of their actual lives. Principled critique must be “historical and affectionate, situating the person or action being criticized between the current context of oppression and the emancipatory horizon we are building.”²³ Establishing some “other” as deserving of punishment - disposable and irredeemable - is the ideology of our political enemies, and we should abandon it.

“Eventually nothing remains which can be ascribed to the responsible self, and we are left with nothing but a portrait of the larger sequence of events, which can be deplored or celebrated, but not blamed or praised.”

— Thomas Nagel

Rigid Radicalism & The Evil “Other”

Humans make sense of reality and attempt to understand the world around them through storytelling, and stories need protagonists and villains. Removing human behavior from social, political, and interpersonal context paves the way for strict moral binaries and a belief that people are somehow born fundamentally good or bad. We project moral dichotomies onto people when we are not adequately thinking about the structures that shape them. This psychological shortcut, taken to its logical conclusion, assumes that the world must be so bad because of *bad people* rather than *bad systems*,²⁸ and therefore feel justified in the punishment of those “bad” people.

The “hard boring” analysis of economic, social, and historical complexities don’t satisfy our desire for sensational narratives. Because we lack the political power to meaningfully confront structural crises, we establish existential “others” – bad guys – as stand-ins for systemic problems. We identify individuals or types of people to represent all we fear and despise, to act as symbols for what is wrong with the world. Zizek explains,

You have a multitude of fears, and this multiplicity of fears confuses you. You simply don’t know what’s the meaning of all this confusion and you replace this confused multitude with one clear figure, and everything becomes clear.⁹

This takes place along the political spectrum. While reactionaries villainize immigrants or “DEI,” the cultural left is just as guilty of this simplistic othering; blaming Trump supporters or “cis white men” for the state of things. Trump himself is a perfect embodiment of this phenomenon. For his working class supporters (who have experienced a decades-long decline in quality of life as a result of austerity and exploitative economic policy) Trump’s fascist scapegoating provides cultural targets for their impotent rage. For liberal “#resistance” types, Trump serves as an easy way to avoid confrontation with the heightening contradictions of a capitalist global order (convincing themselves that things would be fine if it weren’t for the Bad Orange Man). Grotesque, corrupt, and incredibly powerful as he is, Trump is himself a product of, and symbol for, the structural injustices we so desperately oppose.

Given this, even the fetishization of the guillotine and the revenge fantasies directed at billionaires might be ultimately misguided (even if they are a little fun). I sympathize with the compulsive craving for violent retribution, especially against the ultra-powerful who benefit from structural inequality. Ultimately, though, decapitating Bezos does not address the social conditions or economic structures which allow for the existence of billionaires. Just as jailing killer cops validates the prison industrial complex, revenge fantasies about beheading billionaires end up spilling out onto the everyday people in our lives because those fantasies can never be actualized against their intended target.¹

This is not a call for political pacifism or even a stance against violence, per se. A violent overthrow of the dominant power structure could be ethically justified and socially beneficial. It might be rightfully argued, for example, that the killing of United Healthcare’s CEO brought to light the atrocious policies of that particular company and the cruelty of the American healthcare system more broadly. That cruelty continues, however. The point here is that we ought to avoid the “type of violence that is in fact merely an impotent, impulsive acting out,”⁹ particularly when that punitive impulse is directed towards members of our own class, movements, and communities. The desire for retribution is separate from the real work of building resilient relationships and engaging in collective struggle.

¹ Similarly, projecting a kind of other-worldly evil onto billionaires is simply the flipside of the coin which worships them as uniquely “innovative” or “intelligent.” In actuality, billionaires are mostly the beneficiaries of dumb luck and opportunism, symbols of an unjust structure which incentivizes exploitation and cutthroat competition, and nothing more.

Radical structural change and basic survival in the ongoing crises we face requires we turn away from the bloodthirsty satisfaction of individual punishment and instead strengthen our communities' capacity to meet each others' needs and organize effectively. We don't want to destroy billionaires because of apolitical bloodlust or blind desire for vengeance, but because we want to make it "impossible for anyone to systematically wield coercive power over anyone else."¹⁰ The zine *Against the Logic of the Guillotine* makes this argument:

I don't judge other people for wanting revenge, especially if they have been through worse than me, but I also don't confuse that desire with a proposal for liberation ... We need to develop the ability to wield force without ever mistaking power over others for our true objective, which is to collectively create the conditions for the freedom of all.¹⁰

Punishment is a replacement for a real political orientation. In the absence of effective organizing, empowering social movements, or meaningful communal relationships, engagement in politics is reduced to petty performances of self-righteousness "rather than a serious effort to create a more just world."¹¹ The focus becomes less about confronting social conditions, and more about nit-picking how people behave. Time and energy are wasted on proving personal virtues and judging the virtuosity of those around you rather than building meaningful confrontations with power. Individual behavior becomes the main focus rather than structures of injustice. When our struggle is oriented against specific people rather than social structures, logics, and material conditions, we fail to see how those phenomena take shape in us; how we participate in and perpetuate punitive ideologies rather than subverting them.

The pleasure derived from condemnation and the sense of moral superiority for having the "right take" feels more attainable than the genuine transformation of social conditions. In their book *Joyful Militancy*, carla bergman and Nick Montgomery name this phenomenon, the "anxious posturing, the vigilant search for mistakes and limitations" so prevalent on the left, as "Rigid Radicalism."

To act as if using the correct language and being the most up to date on discourse is the litmus test for radical political validity is to **mistake performance for substance**. Rigid Radicalism judges people not by their actions or values but their "ability to stake out a position."³¹ Politics becomes not about wresting power from the ruling class but taking a rhetorical stand and putting on a moral performance. Yotam Marom writes of phenomena such as rigid radicalism to be,

marked by navel-gazing, endless process, posturing, and the internal power struggles and call-outs that weaken our organizations and movements. When we don't believe we can win, we reach instead for the comfort of being surrounded by people who think and talk and look like us, the thrill of being part of the in-group, the small pleasures of being right and pure. In despair there is no need for good strategy, no need for healthy group culture.¹⁶

The spaces where we might hope to find a prioritization of solidarity and effective organizing efforts are often occupied by judgmental snobs who conflate interpersonal conflict for political difference while failing to articulate any tangible strategy for helping working class people. "Abolitionists" start acting like cops all too easily when they engage in modern forms of public executions and spectacles of punishment – online call outs, campaigns of public humiliation, and social exiling. The insular preservation of personal comfort is defended as "safety," while smug moral superiority is presented as "good politics." Finding that nothing is ever good enough, or searching vigilantly for something to problematize "absolves you of the responsibility of trying to do anything."²⁹

It is clear to see how social media plays into these phenomena. We all need a sense of communal belonging to be socially healthy. That need is exploited and perverted when people feel a sense of satisfaction in exposing people's flaws or "calling out" the "problematic" behavior of their peers. Social media platforms are constantly weaponized for public shaming and moral outrage which perpetuate spectacles of punishment. The algorithms which dictate the most heavily trafficked online spaces run on negativity bias, "that which enrages

you engages you.” For example, a social media post detailing a pleasant exchange you had with your neighbor over tea simply does not *perform* as well as a post accusing your neighbor of being a detestable asshole. When one publicly announces the transgressions of a community member and invites the judgment and scrutiny of an entire online world, our movements are fractured (people may even be driven to social abandonment and self-harm) all while systems of power go unphased. The impulse behind this performance may be sincere - coming from an authentic desire for justice, accountability, and safety - but usually fails to go beyond vindictive theater. Johann Hari writes in his book *Stolen Focus*,

Today, this attitude – condemn more, understand less – has become the default response of almost everyone, from the right to the left, as we spend our lives dancing to the tune of algorithms that reward fury and penalize mercy.¹²

New forms of human communication change how people interact, receive information, at what rate and to what ends. The incentive structure and social reward systems of social media platforms shape our shared conceptions of social obligation, political engagement, ethical values. Even if you “log off,” you still live in a world fundamentally shaped by this social economy. The threat of punishment looms, not only when we are confronted with the violence of the state authorities, but increasingly in our social relationships, community events, workplaces, and activist circles.

Our social lives are increasingly dependent on forces surveilling our every data point. Being online means one must always assume one is being monitored and evaluated by the social gaze, gaining or losing social currency in the unceasing stare of the all-seeing eye-phone. We all carry our own personal pocket panopticons. This psycho-social matrix encourages a relationship to politics that is centered on optics and spectatorship – building a personal moral “brand,” which becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from our true selves.

This trap is easy to slip into - one moment you might be “sick of all these hobbyists talking shit online,” and the next moment you find yourself right there in the comment section with them. Criticism becomes a politics unto itself, a negation of what is without any articulation of something better. Rather than tear ourselves and each other to shreds in the tension of contradiction and imperfection, we must instead grapple with the complex, dynamic, and uncertain nature of human relationships in an era wrought with confusion and alienation. “We must separate our need to act politically from the desire to create a ‘political identity,’ an avatar we build in adherence to a consumption model of political engagement.”¹⁴

Our attempts to purify ourselves from the dominant ideology or structures of oppression are futile because we are all subjected to and shaped by those structures. Attempts to rid yourself of this contradiction will only lead you down a path of neurosis expressed in a performance which bounces between moral indignation and punishment of the “other.” That is because, it is important to note, **material conditions cannot be overthrown through ideological purity**. We don’t need people to act better, or for more enlightened or virtuous people to take positions of power, we need to dismantle the exploitative and oppressive power structures which make us all so alienated, so disconnected, so full of justified rage.

We cannot expect to gain momentum in our movements or build resilient communities through rituals of guilt and performances of virtue. We are going to make mistakes, hurt each other, do and say harmful things. Political struggle is most effective when built around common material interests rather than

“There is no singular alternative to the police that does not risk replicating the forms of oppression that we currently face.”

— Derecka Purnell

rhetorical appeals to morality. Framing our political aspirations around universally improving material and social conditions is more likely to resonate with people. If the ultimate goal is to replace capitalist dystopia with a vision of an abolitionist future, we must abandon the desire for punitive retribution.

The Twin Neurosis of Guilt & Resentment

The suffering imposed on the poorest and most disempowered people in our world is a material suffering; a struggle defined by the difficulty of acquiring the basic material needs for survival, which are denied them by the exploitative conditions of global capitalism. For the modern western consumer, there is a psychological suffering; an existential recompense, a spiritual penalty. The US is a cursed culture, burdened with the karmic debt of genocide, slavery, and imperialism. There's nothing metaphysical about it – these horrors quite literally shaped the current status quo. These are not historical relics, but the noxious foundations on which our social order is built. The shadow of our nation's violence weighs upon our collective psyche as we navigate the opulent dystopia of unbridled consumption and unprecedented alienation. We are haunted by the ghosts of profit motive, forced to navigate social conditions and material circumstances completely unnatural to our species' evolutionary expectations - antagonistic to what it means to be human. We are spiritually and psychologically tormented. "There is a price to be paid for fabricating around us a society which is as artificial and as mechanized as our own, and this is that. We can exist in it only on the condition that we adapt ourselves to it. This is our punishment." ¹³

Constant exposure, either visceral or at a distance, to the horrors of the world create a sort of *psychic tension* which must be released. If your daily commute requires you literally step over the starving bodies of other human beings, you will experience psychological and spiritual disturbance. We *have to do something* with this tension, but without the political agency to do anything *productive or meaningful*, we freak out! Because the scope of the systematic problems we face are so overwhelming, we instead turn to highly individual and personalized ways to *feel* as though we are doing something. We either bury these emotions in the unconscious, numb them with substances (from drugs to candy crush), or search for a scapegoat. To paraphrase Matt Christman:

You can live in this empire comfortably, but you have to watch the immiseration of others all around you. Consciously or not, you have to reconcile with the exploitation and degradation that comes with the food you eat, the car you drive, the job you work. You feel compelled to retain virtue despite these things – you want to be assured that you are a good person despite seeing the objective violence that occupies your world. This is crazy making. It leaves you with a feeling of either guilt or resentment - a redirection of the misery and self-loathing we experience under exploitative and alienating social conditions.¹⁴

People are increasingly unable to articulate their authentic self, secure meaningful communal relationships, find purpose in an increasingly commodified social landscape, or meet their basic needs under economic stress. In a society as alienated as ours, these are experienced as personal failures rather than the result of capitalism's tightening grip. Guilt is a kind of self-punishment, the neurosis of this alienation turned inward.

When material and social conditions deny us the ability to be the virtuous self we would like to be, we are emotionally damaged, burdened with guilt for not living in line with our values. The rigorous work of educating, organizing, or participating in meaningful confrontations with structures of power is relatively "unflashy" while rituals of guilt provide an easy way to acknowledge the injustices at hand without having to actually do anything about them. "It's the old Protestant logic of 'do whatever you want, just feel guilty for it.'"⁹

Guilt is a highly individuating phenomenon. The market offers countless ways to personally absolve ourselves of guilt through more "ethical" consumer choices, which are ultimately meaningless. An affectation of guilt for the "socially conscious" progressive can sometimes be articulated through a relentless self-criticism, an egoic examination of the self which shows up in fetishization of therapeutic language, self-help influencers, and pseudo-spiritual grifters. These are just as narrow-minded as the scapegoating of an existential "other", but process guilt through a neurotic desire to "do better."

Resentment is the flip side of this coin: processing psychic tension by directing our misery onto some external enemy which is wholly differentiated from ourselves. This serves as a symbolic cleansing of our own guilt, it “attributes to others what [we] cannot attribute to [ourselves].”⁷ Anselm Jappe defines resentment as a sort of displacement; a feeling of rage directed towards a *substitution*. “In other words, the feeling is true; it is the target which is false.”⁷ As Wendy Brown explains in *Wounded Attachments*, the symptoms of structural failure and psychological distress must,

find a reason within itself or a sight of external blame on which to avenge its hurt and redistribute its pain ... Resentment in this context is a triple achievement: It produces an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt, it produces a culprit responsible for the hurt, and it produces a site of revenge to displace the hurt. Together, these operations both ameliorate and externalize what is otherwise “unendurable.”¹⁵

Resentment is punishment of the external other, guilt is punishment of the self. Both can provide a neurotic sense of relief – even thrill. Without properly processing our guilt, we end up projecting it in a variety of ways which cause suffering for ourselves and others. “There is a close connection between our feelings about ourselves and our feelings about others. Guilt and indignation, shame and contempt, pride and admiration are internal and external sides of the same moral attitudes.”²⁶ Inflicting suffering (either on the other or the self) is easier to attain than a healthy processing of our psychic tension, and more libidinally satisfying. These psychic mechanisms have profound effects on our social reality, broadly and within our cultural bubbles, yet both paths are dead ends which perpetuate a cycle of resentment, guilt, and punishment without ever meaningfully identifying or confronting structural problems.

Punishing ourselves, members of our community, or some perceived enemy is ultimately an attempt to stave off the alienation and moral injury we collectively experience. If we are fixated purely on our own suffering, or the injustices of the world, we will be miserable and therefore less able to connect and more likely to lash out at ourselves and others. To do away with the dehumanizing logic of punishment, we must first dispel our own guilt and shame and find healthy outlets for these emotions which do not rely on punitive logic. We must forgive ourselves before we can productively challenge the systems that threaten us all. Otherwise, our politics become not about solving problems in cooperation with other people, but rather about assuaging our own guilt, making ourselves feel better.

We have every right to be afraid and pissed off, but engaging with the world with fear and anger as our driving motivation is ultimately a barrier to building the loving relationships and meaningful connections which not only make life worth living but are the quintessential building blocks of revolutionary transformation. Despair is understandable, but we cannot create a better world for ourselves and the people we love without a radical hope that fundamental change is possible, indeed inevitable. Rather than understanding ourselves and each other as worthy of punishment (because of our complicity in an unjust and violent reality) we have to practice radical compassion – acting from a place of love rather than judgement. ¹⁴

**“It is not only our hatred
of others that is dangerous
but also and above all
our hatred of ourselves
which is too deep
and too powerful to be
consciously faced.”**
— Thomas Merton

Radical Compassion

For our political ambitions to be meaningful and effective, rather than performative and egoic, we must respect the humanity and dignity of the opposition while subverting the logics they uphold. Our political struggles require we remain disciplined and principled. We cannot compromise our basic values to assuage our guilt or misdirect our rage by tearing each other down. Rather than spinning our wheels in futile attempts at moral purity, we must work together to dismantle the structures that oppress us all, delegitimize carceral logic, and commit to engaging the humanity of all people. In *Radical Dharma*, Rev. angel kyodo Williams says of ideological opponents,

We must bear witness to their suffering as our own, challenge what is unjust, invest in their basic goodness always moving toward integration. Without this commitment and practice, we merely mirror the destructive forces of polarization and power.¹⁸

People who are suffering are more likely to inflict suffering on others. Instead of being quick to cast judgment, what might we gain from investigating further the stories, circumstances, and conditions of those we want to punish? This kind of thoughtful curiosity isn't a replacement for action but strengthens our political strategies and social bonds. A compassionate approach to politics is critical of the systems that incentivize people to be cruel or harmful, rather than attacking the individuals who act according to that incentive structure in order to survive. Under this framework, "the idea of an enemy vanishes and is replaced by the notion of someone who is suffering and needs your compassion."¹⁹ This is no easy task! But, as La Marr Jurelle Bruce states in *How to Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind*,

Remember that radical compassion ... endures even and especially in the face of deeds that disturb. If radical compassion were easy, it would not need to be radical at all. Remember, also, that radical compassion is a mode of care - not celebration, not romanticization, not endorsement, not enjoyment.²⁰

In a lefty subculture which seems to view punishment and exile as effective ways of creating "safer spaces" or pursuing social justice, I contend that radical compassion is actually a more effective way to create less exploitative social relationships and build resilient communities. Discarding, dehumanizing, or punishing other human beings is only sure to generate more resentment and perpetuate suffering. Anger may be justifiable, but dehumanization is the territory of fascists.

Tolerance for shitty behavior, invitations for support, and practices of compassion must consider social conditioning and a sober analysis of power. For example, a highly influential media figure or a member of congress has a level of power that cannot be compared to the folks who run the infoshop in your city, or your neighbor with a trump flag. This is not a demand for passivity or to say we should throw all moral discretion to the wind - hateful ideologies and violent policies deserve our contempt and must be resisted. We certainly have political enemies, particularly those who hold disproportionate amounts of power, but it's important to remember those enemies are "not only people but logics."²⁵ Bruce continues,

Radical compassion is a will to care for, a commitment to feel with, a striving to learn from, and an openness to be vulnerable before a precarious other, though they may be drastically dissimilar to yourself ... Radical compassion is an exhortation to ethically walk and sit and fight and build alongside another whose condition may be utterly unlike your own.²⁰

We share class interests with those we consider cultural opposition. This is not to suggest that we might pitch a tent big enough to welcome Zionists, white supremacists, or transphobes into our movements or spaces. If you're an ICE agent, you can get bent. However, we have to develop the maturity to distinguish between people who make us angry and our actual political enemies. James Baldwin writes, "To love all

is to fight relentlessly to end exploitation and oppression everywhere, even on behalf of those who think they hate us.”²²

Radical compassion for a cultural “other” deepens our capacity to extend that same compassion to ourselves and members of our community. Collective struggle for liberation depends on our ability to imagine, create, build, and collaborate with others, which in turn depends on our ability to forgive ourselves, to love ourselves despite our flaws, embarrassments, mistakes, and traumas. The personal relationships and community belonging we desperately need to be healthy requires a willingness to confront conflict with an underlying foundation of love and mutual respect. The ability to forgive and be forgiven are essential in long lasting, loving relationships. Compassion and forgiveness build a bridge to the realities of complexity and interconnection, inviting us to take the world as it comes without wishcasting ourselves and others into fantastical roles of heroes and villains in some grand moral narrative. By letting go of our guilt and refusing the impulse to cast blame, we can refocus on *collective* visions and goals.

We should measure the strength of our communities and the integrity of our political aspirations by the extent to which we can reject judgement, turn away from suspicion, offer unconditional support for people to get their needs met. Compassion and forgiveness offer the potential for connection, whereas judgement and shame foster division and lack of trust. Instead of occupying a mental state of hypervigilance in our search for something to problematize, what if we gave people the benefit of the doubt – that they are trying their best, the best that they know how? In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Paulo Freire says of this faith that it is not naïve, but understands that,

although it is within the power of humans to create and transform, in a concrete situation of alienation, individuals may be impaired in the use of that power. Far from destroying [one’s] faith in the people, however, this possibility strikes [one] as a challenge to which [one] must respond.²¹

The best thing would be to fight without hatred, out of an optimistic belief in the tremendous potential of humanity.¹⁰ This faith works to our political advantage as we cultivate the potential for solidarity. Following this thread, Peter Gelderloos writes “We need to risk ourselves. We need to drop our guard.”²³ He argues that the revolution is not an expansion of autonomous bubbles or groups of friends or safe spaces where everyone has perfect politics but a “change in everything” where imperfect people collaborate for their basic survival and wellbeing.

The supreme act of optimism, then, is not the belief that everyone (everyone *else*) will somehow become better, but that *we* will dare to lower our shields and approach life in a way that constantly beckons towards a shared community of needs and desires.²³

Beyond grandiose political imaginings, being compassionate is simply a better way to live. Connections and relationships are more trusting and fulfilling when we can hold compassion for each other, and these connections are ultimately the building blocks of our politics. “The values required for social repair are the same values required for personal repair.”²⁴ The connections we hold dear are more than casual friendships, but lives that are intertwined, worth sacrificing for. Spending all of our time imprisoned by the suspicion of rigid radicalism or the one-up-manship of moral performativity is unlikely to build a fulfilling personal life or effective political movements. Radical compassion offers us a bridge to connection, purpose and meaning through the personal and social relationships which are, quite literally, what life is about. “Ultimately, nourishing these kinds of intimacies means putting relationships before abstract political commitments and ideologies.”³¹

The fight for liberation happens in embodied community where alienating ideologies of capitalist individualism are confronted and subverted through shared experience and communal trust, not through patronizing rhetorical lecturing or judgmental exclusion. Instead of reacting with punishment and dehumanization to ideas we disagree with, people we are in conflict with, or behavior we find reprehensible, our goal should be to co-create a world where everyone's needs are met, where social conditions are less destructive for us all. These needs range from basic material necessities such as nutritious food, stable housing, and decent healthcare to the social needs of fulfilling relationships, belonging in community, and connection with the natural world. People require these things to be healthy, and they are increasingly difficult to secure under collapsing social, material and ecological conditions. It is both politically ineffective and morally juvenile to punish the people who are denied these needs, and our collective energy should instead be invested in doing everything in our power to provide them for each other.

Compassion is a more useful tool than punishment as we navigate a deeply unjust world and interact with the people shaped by that injustice, because **compassion requires that we recognize ourselves in the other**. We cannot define people by their worst actions or beliefs and punish them accordingly if we recognize the truly dynamic and contingent nature of human behavior. Embracing this ethos requires we shed the ideological myth that people are inherently bad – that the crises we are confronted with are the result of our flawed nature – and commit to transforming the social structures to better align with a faith in humanity's potential. Abandoning the moral binary and leading with compassion subverts systems of oppression and domination, pointing us toward the outright rejection of punishment.

**“Everything terrible
is really something helpless
that wants help from us.”**

— bell hooks

Kill The Spiteful God In Your Head

Our society remains fixated on the idea that we will someday experience some final judgement and ultimate punishment or reward. Whether we extrapolate this belief through religion or culture, the general principle remains: there will be a reckoning, an accounting of our personal good deeds and bad conduct. While many leftists reject the church as an oppressive institution, they seem to maintain its puritanical obsession with shame, repentance, and moral hygiene. “This secular subject hates the church but loves its poison.”³¹ What if we internalize, instead, that there will be no judgment day? Could we relinquish our need to punish or be punished? Could we realize that there is no *need* for punishment?¹⁴ The impulse to punish rests on the assumption that everyone has “accrued some sort of cosmic debt that can be set right by making them suffer a certain amount.”⁵ This is simply untrue. The heavenly reward of our righteousness will never come, nor will the purifying fire of eternal damnation. We do, however, create for ourselves experiences, lives, worlds of either torturous alienation or reverent collectivity. Punishment and dehumanization are how we create for ourselves a hell of judgment and exile. Moments of compassionate connection are heaven on earth. Regardless of what humanity faces, no matter what tragedies our communities are subjected to, if we confront them collectively, rather than in isolation, we experience them not as hellish agony but as opportunities for solidarity, social connection, and mutual care.

A faith in people (including yourself!) is required to reject punishment; a trust in people’s ability to figure things out together if given the proper support and conditions, and a willingness to participate in that process collectively. Faith, in this context, requires sustained focus, critical thinking, and principled commitment. It recognizes that hope for a better world requires extending a helping hand rather than turning away in judgment. Radical transformation of our social conditions requires us to reject atomized identities in favor of mutual responsibility and communal engagement. Rejecting punishment calls us to actually live according to our values, discarding the dominating ideologies instead of rehashing them under a new subcultural banner. We have to embrace messiness, failure, uncertainty, and contradiction. We have to believe that compassion and rage can coexist and empower each other. Let’s divest from a dualistic worldview and moral binary in favor of the infinite grey. Let’s embrace collective responsibility and radical compassion. Let’s abolish punishment.

**“We can’t know what actions will matter and when.
We can only act in accordance with our values.
This means we have to release ourselves
from pointless guilt, of the
the neurotic need to be righteous.
We have to fundamentally have faith
in our own good intentions.”**

— Matt Christman

Addendum: Recovery Spaces

In my experience, radical compassion is best embodied in “recovery” spaces – be they large scale reproducible models like AA or localized “harm reduction” model peer support groups. Regardless of their particular orientation, format, or explicit politics, these spaces have a built in, fundamental understanding of people’s capacity for transformation. Punishment, shame, and judgment are put aside in favor of vulnerability, compassion and support.

When gathering in support groups with people who have experiences with substance use, one comes to quickly understand that everyone in attendance has known their own version of “rock bottom.” Though what may seem “extreme” is certainly subjective, one thing is clear: nobody who occupies these spaces is there to cast judgement. Rather, people in recovery gather to be honest with one another, create a container for openness and vulnerability in a collective effort to move forward in a process of healing and transformation. There is no room for self-righteousness, because it is clear that moral rigidity is unhelpful and creates a barrier for real support. Instead, groups of people gather in a space free from shame, *because that is a requirement for the steps that follow*: making amends, changing behavior, and helping others to do the same.

Recovery spaces demonstrate people’s incredible capacity for deep and meaningful change. Often, despite having regularly explored the very darkest realms of human experience, the folks who gather in recovery spaces have come out of that darkness with the support of others to live stable happy lives. Carceral ideology would deny them humanity and essentialize them according to their behavior when they were at their worst, offering no opportunity to recuperate and do better. This lays bare the futility and ineffectiveness of punishment and shame. Instead of denying someone’s humanity because of their worst actions, providing them radical compassion and community support is what allows people to transform their behavior, mend broken relationships, and salvage a life. In turn, participants learn to offer that same support to others who are struggling and suffering – even if they are acting in ways they might find reprehensible in the moment. Meaningful change takes place only when people are afforded communal acceptance and loving support. Without them, we are doomed to cycles of suffering and pain, judgment and punishment.

Recovery and support take patience, curiosity, and capacity – rare qualities in the frantic world of modern capitalism. At their best, recovery spaces also curate an awareness of the conditions which make people behave in ways that are out of alignment with their values. People often fall into addiction in attempts to soothe some internal pain that is unmanageable. In the highly alienating social environment of modernity, we all suffer a sort of societal trauma that (consciously or not) creates a pain and tension which needs soothing. The power of addiction is a sort of reflection of the cognitive dissonance and that pervades our society. You don’t want to keep using, you know it is hurting you and those around you, and you still feel compelled to do it. This is not a moral failing, but the result of a series of events and conditions out of one’s control.

Attempting to understand, without judgment, why someone is in such pain - what has driven someone to escape reality to such an extent - we are better equipped to offer the necessary and proper support. Whether we attempt to find comfort in substances or consumer goods - twitter or tequila – a diagnosis of the underlying source of the pain and placing addiction in a wider context is essential for healing. If we replace that understanding with moral condemnation, people will continue to retreat into more escape, more pain, more shitty behavior. If we seek easy explanations and quick solutions (which include punishment and judgment) we fail to provide what is actually needed to help people: thoughtful

compassion and unconditional support. Recovery groups, in their encouraging, supportive environment, allow for us to figure out and work through these conditions without prescribing moral judgment or social punishments.

Recovery groups can provide people with community, the likes of which are increasingly hard to find and maintain in our hyper-individualized world. Further, these are groups of people with whom we might share some affinity – a recognition of our own unhealthy patterns and a desire to reconnect to our values and heal ourselves and our relationships. The opportunity to check in with a consistent group of people, week in and week out, builds a level of trust and companionship which is a necessity for human wellbeing. These are often diverse spaces which might connect us to those outside of our usual social bubbles and allow us to bear witness to experience that, while different in so many ways, we can relate to fundamentally. This is how we build compassion and trust while reinforcing resilient supportive communities of care.

Relationships, both personal and communal, are how we access this support. Recovery spaces foster and build these relationships with commitment and dedication which are increasingly hard to come by in contemporary society. These dedicated, principled, supportive relationships are the building blocks for a radically different social reality. With compassion rather than judgment we are afforded the space and grace needed to become the kinds of people we hope to be. People engaged in recovery also understand that there is no perfection to be attained. Rather, we have to take things one day at a time, trying the best we know how, moment to moment.

“Becoming otherwise is never a linear passage from one way of being to another, but instead a slow, uneven, messy process.”³¹ With the support of people who care about us, and for whom we care, we can find some stability, acquire tools for living in line with our values, and strengthen our own agency as we navigate our lives together. It is through connection rather than caging, through support rather than condemnation, through compassion rather than punishment, that our larger goals might be achieved. Recovery spaces provide an embodied model for those values. If we want to co-create a better world, it is compassion that will forge the path, not punishment.

**“People do not transform through
threats, coercion,
demands, or domination
They transform when it is
safe and empowering
to do so.”**

— Clementine Morgan

Citations:

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2. David Graeber – “The Gun Has No Trigger” Lecture
3. Pilar Maschi - After Accountability
4. Stefano Harney and Fred Morton – Creating Abolitionist Worlds
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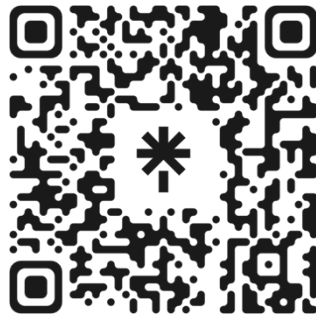
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**The society we want to come into being
won't come into being through a better
system of punishment**

**It's punishment that leads people
to the conclusion that
the way you deal with a problem is by
killing it**

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