

Non-reformist reforms towards abolition

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Non-reformist reforms towards abolition

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Abstract

This commentary focuses on the concept of non-reformist reform and prefigurative practice. It argues that prefigurative activities require active discernment to check whether efforts to address some of the worst excesses of suffering are not in fact reinforcing existing violent structures. This is the tricky territory of reform, co-option, counterinsurgency and revolution raised in the original article. Where the author of this article has dismissed the concept of ‘non-reformist reforms’ as inevitably part of a counterinsurgent reformist logic, this commentary points to other abolitionist works that have embraced it as a tool that supports the discernment work that prefigurative practice relies on. Examples from U.K. abolitionists Sisters Uncut illustrate how abolitionist movements try to navigate reform without reinforcing oppressive systems. The following commentary asks whether these efforts may also be worth considering as a legitimate abolitionist practice.

Keywords

Abolition, anarchism, discernment, non-reformist reforms, prefiguration

This piece makes it powerfully clear that abolition is a revolutionary challenge to the whole current global system of intersecting violent structures. The social justice it aims for demands a fundamental, revolutionary, reorganising of class relations, state, wealth, and power. Drawing on grounded research into the rebellions that followed the police murder of George Floyd in 2020, it seeks to consider the counterinsurgency efforts faced by those anti-racist movements. The authors argue that especially considering those counterinsurgency tactics, *‘the destruction and transformation of property remains essential to creating new social relationships and, for some, institutions’*. They use their data and wider analysis to deny the possibility that system-generated reforms or concessions granted by state or corporate bodies (such as

reducing the proportion of public spending funnelled into policing) can contribute to the neutralisation of violent racialised infrastructures. Indeed, no establishment committed to protecting its own power will strip itself of the infrastructure it needs to survive. In one older example from a different context, the 1965 Race Relations Act in the United Kingdom was one of the first pieces of legislation that criminalised racism, and, in the words of Ambalavaner Sivanandan, a prominent activist and intellectual of the time, legislation like this ‘took

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up the Black cause and killed it' (1991: 20). The authors of this article argue that reformist proposals to defund the police reinforce militarist counterinsurgent logic of co-option and covert carceral intensification. Further consideration of this point from a U.K. perspective, where police have already been defunded through decades of austerity cuts to public services, would reinforce the point. Cuts to public service budgets alongside hostile immigration and prevent anti-terrorism legislation have channelled increased coercive state powers through civil society and welfare institutions, drawing citizens in schools and hospitals into the enforcement of policing and bordering: 'By 2015, a third of referrals to Prevent were made not by police, but by teachers' (Day and McBean, 2022: 164).

Alongside their anti-reformist case, the authors also acknowledge the role of non-directly combative autonomist and anarchist prefigurative practices in the world-making in which abolitionist actors are hoping to engage. Prefiguration is an attempt to reconcile radical structural goals (anti-capitalist, anti-militarist, etc.) with more immediate pragmatic attempts to meet unmet needs as they are lived in the present and construct alternatives. Doing what is possible in the here and now to care for the minds, bodies, and relationships of over-policed people is also an important part of abolition practice, in line with the abolitionist instinct that there are real solutions to social problems, away from criminalisation and punishment. Harm reduction practices like needle exchange, safe injection sites, and emergency overdose strategies demonstrate a prefigurative approach by combining a focus on care for drug-addicted people with a critical understanding of the structural and historical contexts of individual choices like drug use. Reducing harm in the present can involve attempts to roll back mandatory minimum sentences, decriminalise drug use and sex work, pursue reforms to parole practices, and other efforts to shorten people's time in prison or stop them from going to prison in the first place. It can also involve transformative justice capacity building to create structures and support for addressing conflict and harm within the communities in which they happen. As the authors of this article

state '*we believe autonomist and anarchist theories of prefiguration and attack remain essential for expanding an ungovernable abolition geography and practice*'.

Prefiguration rests on an anti-determinist approach (that no present or future is already fated, determined, necessary or inevitable), a logic of immanence (that the values we seek can be found, at least in embryonic form, in what already exists) and a strict resistance to vanguardist hierarchies (which require powerful leaders to create change from outside or above grassroots movements). Prefigurative politics are so-called because they work on the understanding that present actions shape, prefigure, or even define future outcomes. They represent attempts to build practical alternatives in the present with an eye on making sure that those alternative experiments reflect what revolutionaries would like the future to look like. This work involves initiating, experimenting, testing, and revising models of community and safety outside of familiar established default patterns of thought and action that tend to (albeit unwittingly) reproduce violent norms. This work is creative, it involves trial, error, and discernment. Discernment is the ongoing assessment of available data, resources, and information about short- and long-term effects of choices in order to align them as strongly as possible with purposes and values. Prefigurative activities require active discernment to check whether efforts to address some of the worst excesses of suffering are not in fact reinforcing existing violent structures. This is the tricky territory of reform, co-option, counterinsurgency, and revolution raised in this article when the authors ask how prefigurative practice might '*work in tandem with insurrectionary and autonomous tactics and strategies, and support rather than pacify them?*' Where the authors of this article have dismissed the concept of 'non-reformist reforms' as inevitably part of a counterinsurgent reformist logic, other abolitionist works have embraced it as a tool that supports the discernment work that prefigurative practice relies on to answer these very questions.

The term ‘non-reformist reforms’ draws on a discussion offered by the twentieth-century French social philosopher and journalist André Gorz. In his book *Strategy for Labour*, Gorz asked, ‘Is it possible from within – that is to say, without having previously destroyed capitalism – to impose anti-capitalist solutions which will not immediately be incorporated into and subordinated to the system?’ He concluded that it was. He argued that whereas a ‘reformist’ reform is one which has subordinated its objectives to the criteria of rationality and practicability of a given system, a ‘not necessarily reformist reform’ is ‘one which is conceived not in terms of what is possible within the framework of a given system and administration, but in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands’. A structural reform is ‘by definition a reform implemented or controlled by those who demand it’. Non-reformist reformism thus aims to capture possibilities for political change through reforms that aim to make concrete gains within capitalism whilst also building a further movement against capitalism (Gorz, 1968). This is a visionary pragmatism that does not stabilise or support current power structures (reformist reform) but politicises them (non-reformist reform). For example, the No One Is Illegal migrant support network strategically navigates the state apparatus in a careful balancing of radical and reformist strategies in order to win tangible victories for those facing detention and deportation. At the same time, the name ‘No One Is Illegal’ emphasises that all humans are inherently worthy and valuable and that policies that illegalise human beings are legal and moral fictions. Activists attempt to challenge existing regimes of legality while prefiguring social relations and forms of leadership they want to invoke. These movements are trying to ‘seek another way of being from the state while having to navigate our way through it’ (King, 2016: 25). According to U.K. abolitionist academic and organiser Sarah Lamb, non-reformist reforms can push for change that ‘challenges the assumptions that underpin and sustain the system’, thus bringing us closer to abolition (2022).

Sisters Uncut is a British feminist direct action group that is opposed to cuts to U.K. government

services for domestic violence victims. It also uses the concept of non-reformist reform as a tool to engage with the difficult task of distinguishing (or discerning) between reforms that strengthen the system and reforms that don’t. For them too, non-reformist reformism opens up strategies for system-negating action. ‘When we win non-reformist reforms – that is reforms that reduce police and carceral power, so taking us closer to abolition – we also win the case against criminalisation, making police and criminal-justice approaches obsolete ... [which] can produce meaningful victories needed to sustain and build an abolitionist movement’ (Day and McBean, 2022: 14). But they are clear that these victories do not come from ‘appealing to the conscience of our jail masters’, ‘asking to be let out’ or ‘asking to be put in a slightly nicer cage’ (Day and McBean, 2022: 14). Non-reformist reformism can be understood as a tool that supports their efforts at discernment: ‘Our abolition is to be judged by the extent to which it weakens the state’s monopoly on violence and coercion against the global working and under classes’ (Day and McBean, 2022: 15). One example of their efforts, which illustrates the potential of this tool to support careful abolitionist strategy, is their part in wider campaigns for the British public to withdraw their consent from policing. In 2021, Sisters Uncut set off 1000 rape alarms outside Charing Cross Police Station, after an Independent Office for Police Conduct investigation found that – alongside racism, sexism and homophobia – multiple officers from this station joked about domestic violence, child abuse, and rape. Alongside this event, they launched the national CopWatch network, a series of police intervention groups that provide an organising vehicle for the idea of withdrawing consent to policing. The focus on withdrawing consent to policing is an example of non-reformist reform, bridging reformist and abolition demands. As Day and McBean argue ‘The nature of carcerality in the UK, and the way it is increasingly embedded in everyday life, provides ample opportunity to organise people who may not see themselves as abolitionists into campaigns organised around abolitionist politics and principles’ (2022: 67). This particularly applies to the phenomena of

‘zero-tolerance’ behavioural contracts used in schools to include police in student behavioural management. This is the policy that led to the case in 2022 of a teenage girl being strip-searched at her school. Abolitionist activists in Hackney are asking parents to withdraw their consent from carcerality in schools, quite literally, by refusing to sign new behavioural contracts and tearing up existing ones. As they argue, ‘The act of withdrawing consent at the community level is an empowering act of collective resistance that can be leveraged towards a revolutionary vision of withdrawing consent from police in more far-reaching ways’ (Day and McBean, 2022: 68). At the same time, these activists are clear that system-led reformism such as the use of ‘environmental’ and ‘transgender’ sensitive language in new multi-billion-pound prison building, expansion and refurbishment schemes is counterinsurgent ‘whitewashing’. As they argue in this case: ‘Making a cage out of gold doesn’t stop it from being a cage’ (Day and McBean, 2022: 68). Engaging with the support for discernment offered by the concept, a non-reformist reform version of the campaign to defund the police (similarly derided as ‘whitewashing’ by abolitionists in its mainstream ‘system-approved’ version) would demand the democratisation of public funding allocation at the community level, the redefinition of the parameters and definitions of crime, the design of institutions that exist solely to respond to the needs of ordinary people and redistribute funds not just at the level of public services,

but from the wealthy to the global poor in order to tackle the root causes of harm (Day and McBean, 2022:17). This may also be worth considering as legitimate abolitionist practice.

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