**Notes for Lecture on Abolitionism (2020)**

**Introduction**

In this lecture, we will consider the proposition of prison, or penal, abolitionism. We will structure the lecture around two guiding questions, in relation to a set of core readings. The two questions are:

1. In what ways is abolition “a theory of change, a theory of social life”? and
2. Is racism so deeply entrenched in the institution of the prison that it is not possible to eliminate one without eliminating the other?

The readings which we will navigate in order to offer insights into these questions include two very influential books: first, Angela Davis’s 2002 contemporary classic text, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*; and second, Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s 2007 critically-acclaimed, *Golden Gulag. Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. In addition, we will engage with three important articles, ranging from Liat Ben-Moshe’s chapter in a 2013 volume edited by Nagel and Nocella on *The End of Prisons: Reflections from the Decarceration Movement*, titled “The Tension between Abolition and Reform;” to Dylan Rodriguez’s 2018 article published in the *Harvard Law Review*, titled “Abolition as Praxis of Human Being: A Foreword;” to Brendan McQuade’s 2018 article in the journal *Social Justice*, titled “Histories of Abolition, Critiques of Security.”

At the outset, it is worth noting that the literature and debate about abolitionism is very much U.S. centric. Nevertheless, there are some important contributions included among the additional readings on the syllabus that allow for a somewhat broader, if not yet global perspective. To that end, I highly recommend following the work of the Global Prison Abolitionist Coalition, whose webpage, [World without Prisons](https://www.worldwithoutprisons.org/?fbclid=IwAR2MSsW6AwVIQ8Boy6NEbid5bo_cZUHz4FdMCP-Q4Dn4SRbDDMtIts_JxB8), contains a lot of very valuable information about ongoing global campaigns.

**Are Prisons Obsolete?**

Let us, however, begin with a diagnosis of the problem of prisons as advanced by the iconic African-American political activist and black feminist political theorist, Angela Davis, whose own incarceration before her eventual acquittal in a highly publicized trial in the early seventies was itself a spectacular demonstration of the criminalization and persecution of the Black Power movement by the U.S. coercive state apparatus, to invoke Althusser’s once-influential structural-Marxist terminology.

Davis begins her 2002 book, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, with an astute observation: namely, that ““the prison is considered an inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives” (p.9). Indeed, she rightly remarks that “[m]ost people are quite surprised to hear that the prison abolition movement … has a long history – one that dates back to the historical appearance of the prison as the main form of punishment.” And this because, “[i]n most circles prison abolition is simply unthinkable and implausible” (p.9). The thoroughgoing naturalization of the prison renders it “extremely hard to imagine life without” (p.10) this peculiar institution – one which, in the U.S., “relegates ever larger numbers of people from racially oppressed communities to an isolated existence marked by authoritarian regimes, violence, disease, and technologies of seclusion that produce severe mental instability” (p.10).

One of Davis’s main aims in her rather remarkable book is to denaturalize, by historicizing, the prison as an institution. She depicts what she terms “mass incarceration” – a disputed term, about which we will have more to say – as a phenomenon that ranks, alongside major wars, as among “the most thoroughly implemented government social programs of our time” (p.11). This phenomenon of mass incarceration, Davis insists, can in no way be explained by reference to “crime” – and indeed, “it had little or no effect on official crime rates.” To the contrary, Davis contends, “larger prison populations led not to safer communities, but, rather, to even larger prison populations” (p.12).

Alongside the term mass incarceration, Davis introduces as well the notion of the “prison industrial complex,” a play on President Eisenhower’s warning about the “military industrial complex,” by which she means to highlight “the extent to which prison building and operation [has] attract[ed] vast amounts of capital – from the construction industry to food and health care provision – in a way that recall[s] the emergence of the military industrial complex” (p.12).

Davis emphasizes, too, the racial composition of the U.S.’s vast prison population, an emphasis with which other authors and analysts converge. Dylan Rodríguez, for example, in his 2018 essay on “Abolition as Praxis of Human Being,” which we will discuss in some depth later on, cites the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ figure of over 2,000,000 incarcerated people in the United States since the early 2000s, and labels the growth of the “carceral regime” since the 1970s as “astronomical,” despite the fact that so-called “crime rates” “have actually declined over the period in question” (p.1585). To put these figures into racialised perspective, Rodriguez further cites the Sentencing Project’s recent summary of “the vast asymmetries in the lifetime likelihood of imprisonment for U.S. residents born in 2001: 1 out of 17 for white men, 1 out of 6 for Latino men, and 1 out of 3 for Black men; 1 out of 111 for white women, 1 out of 45 for Latina women, and 1 out of 18 for Black women” (p.1585). Moreover, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore further emphasizes, one thing that the overwhelming majority of imprisoned people of all races and genders have in common is the fact that they are poor.

Davis includes in her discussion a brief overview of the process of “prisonization of the California landscape,” which Gilmore’s 2007 book *Golden Gulag* documents in great detail. Davis emphasizes here “how easy it was to produce a massive system of incarceration with the implicit consent of the public,” and proceeds to pose the question: “Why were people so quick to assume that locking away an increasingly large proportion of the U.S. population would help those who live in the free world feel safer and more secure?” (p.14).

Davis quotes Gilmore’s argument that incarceration constitutes “a geographical solution to socio-economic problems,” – “a response to surpluses of capital, land, labor, and state capacity” (p.14). This argument we will consider at some length below – for Gilmore’s Gramscian account of the organic crisis and conjuncture which witnessed the astronomical increase in incarceration provides a very apt complement to Davis’s more *long durée* focus and deeper historical approach.

The popularity of prisonization, Davis contends, can be attributed in part to two types of widespread but ultimately misleading beliefs: first, “[p]eople want to believe that prisons … reduce crime;” and second, they also want to believe that prisons “provide jobs and stimulate economic development in out-of-the-way places” (p.15).

But this response in turn leads Davis to return to her original question: “Why do we take prison for granted?” (p.15). To which, this time, she replies: “We … think about imprisonment as a fate reserved for others, a fate reserved for the ‘evildoers’,” which, “in the collective imagination, [is] fantasized as people of color” (p.16). Here we get to the crux of the problem, according to Davis: “[T]he ideological work that the prison performs” is to relieve people “of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism” (p.16).

Though Davis gestures to the “real and often quite complicated connections between the deindustrialization of the economy – a process that reached its peak during the 1980s – and the rise of mass imprisonment” (p.17), her account of the political economy of incarceration remains much more cursory than the one provided by Gilmore, as we shall see.

Instead, Davis, who was herself a student of the Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse, emphasizes the impact of the culture industry and the info-tainment model of the mass media on the contours and content of popular consciousness. The ubiquity with which “we consume media images of the prison” (p.17), indeed, the extent to which “the prison is wedded to our experience of visuality” (p.18), the fact that “[i]t is virtually impossible to avoid consuming images of prison” (p.18) – all of this, Davis contends, works to forge the hegemony of the carceral regime, that is, to convert the prison into “a key ingredient of our common sense. It is there, all around us” (p.18).

Having thus posed the problem of our inability to imagine a social order without the institution of the prison, Davis turns to construct a narrative about the continuities between the prison as an institution and other racist institutions over the course of American history. Institutions that, like prison, people once “could not conceive of society without” (p.22), of which she highlights three: namely, slavery, lynching, and segregation (p.23). In her words: “it should be remembered that the ancestors of many of today’s most ardent liberals could not have imagined life without slavery, life without lynching, or life without segregation … Slavery, lynching, and segregation are certainly compelling examples of social institutions that, like the prison, were once considered to be as everlasting as the sun” (p.24).

But what once was unthinkable – the end of slavery, the end of lynching, the end of segregation – later came to pass. “Social circumstances,” Davis insists, can “transform and popular attitudes [can] shift,” she adds, “in part in response to organized social movements” (p.25). And thus, she throws down the gauntlet: “If we are already persuaded that racism should not be allowed to define the planet’s future and if we can successfully argue that prisons are racist institutions, this may lead us to take seriously the prospect of declaring prisons obsolete” (p.25). Though she is, at the same time, careful to caution that such a prospect, for now, at least, remains clearly utopian. And she does so by posing another hard question, by asking: “Is racism so deeply entrenched in the institution of the prison that it is not possible to eliminate one without eliminating the other?” (p.26).

Davis goes on to trace the history of “[t]he penitentiary as an institution that [alleged to] simultaneously punish and rehabilitate its inhabitants, a new system of punishment that first made its appearance in the United States around the time of the American Revolution” (p.26). She emphasises the “significant similarities between slavery and the penitentiary prison” (p.27), and highlights as well how “[t]he ideologies governing slavery and those governing punishment were profoundly linked during the earliest period of U.S. history” (p.28). This, in turn, leads her to point out that, “[p]articularly in the United States race has always played a central role in constructing presumptions of criminality” (p.28).

In such a vein, Davis notes, with the development of a convict lease system – a system “referred to by many as [nothing less than] a reincarnation of slavery” – “black people [soon] became prime targets.” And by 1883, “Frederick Douglass had already written about the South's tendency to ‘impute crime to color’” (p.30), while, “[a]ccording to descriptions by contemporaries, the conditions under which leased convicts and county chain gangs lived were far worse than those under which black people had lived as slaves” (p.32). In sum, Davis surmises, “the post-Civil War evolution of the punishment system was in very literal ways the continuation of a slave system, which was no longer legal in the ‘free’ world” (p.33).

What’s even worse, according to Davis, “the work of the criminal justice system was intimately related to the extralegal work of lynching,” while “the convict lease system [played a crucial role] in forging a new labor force for the South,” so much so, that “the lease system, along with the new Jim Crow laws, [could be considered] the central institution in the development of a racial state” (p.34).

Davis further cautions against calls for “prison reform,” in contrast to calls for abolition, on the grounds that “‘prison’ and ‘reform’ have been inextricably linked since the beginning of the use of imprisonment as the main means of punishing those who violate social norms” (p.40). The tension between the logic of reform and the logic of abolition is a subject to which we shall return.

In relation to the link between ‘prison’ and ‘reform’, Davis recalls that, “[p]rior to the appearance of punitive incarceration, punishment was designed to have its most profound effect not so much on the person punished as on the crowd of spectators. Punishment was, in essence,” she contends, “public spectacle” (p.41). She also notes that there were “other modes of punishment that predated the rise of the prison,” including “banishment, forced labor in galleys, transportation, and appropriation of the accused's property” (p.42). Indeed, she recounts: “Imprisonment was not employed as a principal mode of punishment until the eighteenth century in Europe and the nineteenth century in the United States. And European prison systems were instituted in Asia and Africa as an important component of colonial rule” (p.42).

Crucially, she connects the rise of the prison to the birth of capitalism. In her words: “The process through which imprisonment developed into the primary mode of state inflicted punishment was very much related to the rise of capitalism and to the appearance of a new set of ideological conditions” (p.43).

What was this new set of ideological conditions to which she refers? According to Davis, the emergence of the notion of “the sanctity of individual rights” was an important part of the story, without which “imprisonment could not have been understood as punishment.” In her words: “[i]f the individual was not perceived as possessing inalienable rights and liberties, then the alienation of those rights and liberties by removal from society to a space tyrannically governed by the state would not have made sense” (p.44).

At an even more fundamental level, Davis contends, the rationale for imprisonment came to congeal alongside the emergence of the commodity form, with the corresponding ascendance of what Walter Benjamin once referred to as ***homogenous empty time***. As Davis explains: “[T]he prison sentence, which is always computed in terms of time, is related to abstract quantification, evoking the rise of science and what is often referred to as the Age of Reason. We should keep in mind that this was precisely the historical period when the value of labor began to be calculated in terms of time and therefore compensated in another quantifiable way, by money. The computability of state punishment in terms of time – days, months, years – resonates with the role of labor-time as the basis for computing the value of capitalist commodities. Marxist theorists of punishment have noted that precisely the historical period during which the commodity form arose is the era during which penitentiary sentences emerged as the primary form of punishment” (p.44). Conversely, she goes on to link the rise of a new resistance to global capitalism to the crystallization, percolation, and gradual diffusion of newfound abolitionist aspirations and ideas.

Along Foucaultian lines, Davis makes an implicit connection between the rise of the prison system and the birth of bio-politics, though she refrains from using much in the way of Foucault’s terminology, opting instead to stick to a more explicitly Marxist vocabulary and frame of reference to make her case. In her words: “The conditions of possibility for this new form of punishment were strongly anchored in a historical era during which the working class needed to be constituted as an army of self-disciplined individuals capable of performing the requisite industrial labor for a developing capitalist system” (p.46). She, furthermore, references the work of Bender to emphasise the reformist dimension and even progressive, though Christian, ideological project and goals towards which the new penitentiaries were oriented: namely, “the maintenance of order within a largely urban labor force, [the] salvation of the soul, and [the] rationalization of personality” (p.54).

Davis also makes an intriguing historical argument about gender and punishment, in particular relation to “imprisonment in [the] emergent penitentiary systems.” That convicts were primarily male, she claims, can be attributed to the fact that “women were largely denied public status as rights-bearing individuals,” and as such, “they could not be easily punished by the deprivation of such rights through imprisonment.” Indeed, Davis contends: “This was especially true of married women, who had no standing before the law. According to English common law, marriage resulted in a state of ‘civil death’, as symbolized by the wife’s assumption of the husband’s name. Consequently, she tended to be punished for revolting against her domestic duties rather than for failure in her meagre public responsibilities.” Furthermore, she continues: “The relegation of white women to domestic economies prevented them from playing a significant role in the emergent commodity realm. This was especially true since wage labor was typically gendered as male and racialized as white.” From this, she concludes: “It is not fortuitous that domestic corporal punishment for women survived long after these modes of punishment had become obsolete for (white) men.” In fact, she insists: “The persistence of domestic violence painfully attests to these historical modes of gendered punishment” (p.45).

Davis goes on to make more important points about the gendered dimension of the phenomenon of so-called “mass incarceration.” In fact, she dedicates an entire chapter to the explication of “how gender structures the prison system,” in which she emphasises “the centrality of gender to an understanding of state punishment” (p.64). She distinguishes between jails and mental institutions as two major institutions whose purpose is social control, and argues that whereas the former have been dominant for men, the latter “have served a similar purpose for women.” As she puts it: “deviant men have been constructed as criminal, while deviant women have been constructed as insane” (p.66).

She, furthermore, highlights the hegemony of “[t]he notion that female deviance always has a sexual dimension” (p.68), an association which persists to this day, and she argues that “persisting images of hypersexuality … serve to justify sexual assaults against them both in and outside of prison” (p.80). She notes as well how “this intersection of criminality and sexuality continues to be racialized,” so much so that “white women labeled as ‘criminals’ are more closely associated with blackness than their ‘normal’ counterparts” (p.68).

Davis also details the invasive searches, the sexual harassment and abuse, the brutal violations, that are ubiquitously inflicted upon women in the prison system, and highlights the “generally [un]recognized … connection between state-inflicted corporal punishment and the physical assaults on women in domestic spaces.”. She contends: “This form of bodily discipline has continued to be routinely meted out to women in the context of intimate relationships, but it is rarely understood to be related to state punishment” (p.68).

Davis then poses a crucial question. She asks: “[W]hy is an understanding of the pervasiveness of sexual abuse in women's prisons an important element of a radical analysis of the prison system, and especially of those forward-looking analyses that lead us in the direction of abolition?” To which she responds: “Because the call to abolish the prison as the dominant form of punishment cannot ignore the extent to which the institution of the prison has stockpiled ideas and practices that are hopefully approaching obsolescence in the larger society, but that retain all their ghastly vitality behind prison walls.” She continues: “The destructive combination of racism and misogyny, however much it has been challenged by social movements, scholarship, and art over the last three decades, retains all its awful consequences within women's prisons. The relatively uncontested presence of sexual abuse in women's prisons is one of many such examples.” And she adds, by way of conclusion: “The increasing evidence of a U.S. prison industrial complex with global resonances leads us to think about the extent to which the many corporations that have acquired an investment in the expansion of the prison system are, like the state, directly implicated in an institution that perpetuates violence against women” (p.83).

This, in turn, leads Davis to reflect more on the theme, the concept, of “the prison industrial complex.” The term, she contends, “was introduced by activists and scholars to contest prevailing beliefs that increased levels of crime were the root cause of mounting prison populations.” It was thus intended to “conceptually sever … [the] seemingly indissoluble link” between punishment and crime. Davis (inaccurately) attributes the first published use of the term to the social historian Mike Davis, who worked closely with Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and who “used the term in relation to California's penal system, which, he observed, already had begun in the 1990s to rival agribusiness and land development as a major economic and political force” (pp.84-85). According to Davis, among the advantages of “[t]he notion of a prison industrial complex” is that it directs our attention towards “economic and political structures and ideologies … rather than focusing myopically on individual criminal conduct and efforts to ‘curb crime’,” when it comes to understanding “the punishment process” (p.85).

As I have already mentioned, like Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who elaborates the argument in more painstaking detail, Davis emphasises the link between “the massive surge of capital into the punishment economy” that began in the 1980s, on the one hand, and “the deindustrialization processes that resulted in plant shutdowns throughout” the U.S. and that “created a huge pool of vulnerable human beings, a pool of people for whom no further jobs were available” (p.90). A surplus population, to invoke Gilmore’s term. In Davis’s words: “In the context of an economy that was driven by an unprecedented pursuit of profit, no matter what the human cost, and the concomitant dismantling of the welfare state, poor people's abilities to survive became increasingly constrained by the looming presence of the prison. The massive prison-building project that began in the 1980s created the means of concentrating and managing what the capitalist system had implicitly declared to be a human surplus. In the meantime, elected officials and the dominant media justified the new draconian sentencing practices, sending more and more people to prison in the frenzied drive to build more and more prisons by arguing that this was the only way to make our communities safe from murderers, rapists, and robbers” (p.91). As a result, even as “crime rates were declining, prison populations” began to “soar” (p.92).

Davis refers as well to “the spread of U.S.-style prisons throughout the world … in the era of the prison-industrial complex” (p.100). She pays particular attention in this regard to the introduction by the Turkish government of “‘F-Type’, or U.S.-style, prisons” (p.101), inspired by “the super-maximum security – or supermax prison – in the United States, which presumes to control otherwise unmanageable prisoners by holding them in permanent solitary confinement and by subjecting them to varying degrees of sensory deprivation” (p.101). Such introduction led to significant protest among the imprisoned population in Turkey, who denounced “the regimes of isolation [thereby] facilitate[d],” on the grounds that “mistreatment and torture are far more likely in isolation” (p.101). So too does she mention post-apartheid South Africa’s “participation in the prison industrial complex,” which she deems “a major impediment to the creation of a democratic society” (p.102).

Likewise, Davis highlights the disturbing trend of “detention of increasing numbers of undocumented immigrants from the global South,” which, she contends, “has been aided considerably by the structures and ideologies associated with the prison industrial complex.” To this end, she adds, presciently, as if predicting the rise of Trump and Trumpism: “We can hardly move in the direction of justice and equality in the twenty-first century if we are unwilling to recognize the enormous role played by this system in extending the power of racism and xenophobia” (p.103).

Davis concludes her short but incisive book with another parsimonious sketch, this one a vision of an abolitionist future. “[T]he antiprison movement,” she contends, again in prophetic mode, will be “a vital means of expanding the terrain on which the quest for democracy [is bound to] unfold” (p.103) in the 21st Century. The major tension which the movement must face, she continues, has to do with the contradiction between the logic of reform and the logic of abolition. This is an argument to which we shall return, in relation to Liat Ben-Moshe’s suggestive chapter, “The Tension between Abolition and Reform.” But the way that Davis frames the tension, or contradiction, is to ask how the movement can “do the work that will create more humane, habitable environments for people in prison without bolstering the permanence of the prison system.” She further specifies the types of reforms she has in mind, by posing a second question: “How, then, do we accomplish this balancing act of passionately attending to the needs of prisoners-calling for less violent conditions, an end to state sexual assault, improved physical and mental health care, greater access to drug programs, better educational work opportunities, unionization of prison labor, more connections with families and communities, shorter or alternative sentencing and at the same time call for alternatives to sentencing altogether, no more prison construction, and abolitionist strategies that question the place of the prison in our future?,” (pp.103-104).

Davis’ abolitionist strategy is embedded in a holistic understanding of what exactly needs to be deconstructed in order to reconstruct a society without prisons. She argues for a conception of “the prison industrial complex” as consisting in “much more than the sum of all the jails and prisons in this country.” Rather, she insists, “[i]t is a set of symbiotic relationships among correctional communities, transnational corporations, media conglomerates, guards' unions, and legislative and court agendas.” For this reason, she contends, “[i]f it is true that the contemporary meaning of punishment is fashioned through these relationships, then the most effective abolitionist strategies will contest these relationships and propose alternatives that pull them apart” (p.107). Just how these symbiotic relations can effectively be pulled apart, however, admittedly remains an open question.

Davis further sketches “a continuum of alternatives to imprisonment” which should be pursued as part of an “overarching strategy of decarceration.” These alternatives include “demilitarization of schools, revitalization of education at all levels, a health system that provides free physical and mental care to all, and a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance” (p.107). Again, her position remains perhaps too parsimonious in terms of spelling out how each of these alternatives should be conceptualised, much less how they can be effectively pursued.

Alongside the construction of such alternatives, Davis advocates decriminalization as a crucial plank of her decarceration agenda: for starters, “the decriminalization of drug use,” which she considers “a significant component of a larger strategy to simultaneously oppose structures of racism within the criminal justice system and further” (p.109) the goal of abolitionism. Along similar lines, so too does she advocate the decriminalization of undocumented immigrants. In her words: “Current campaigns that call for the decriminalization of undocumented immigrants are making important contributions to the overall struggle against the prison industrial complex and are challenging the expansive reach of racism.” Davis adds, as well, that they are simultaneously challenging the expansive reach of “male dominance.” For, as she explains: “When women from countries in the southern region are imprisoned because they have entered this country to escape sexual violence, instead of being granted refugee status, this reinforces the generalized tendency to punish people who are persecuted in their intimate lives as a direct consequence of pandemics of violence that continue to be legitimized by ideological and legal structures” (pp.110-111).

In terms of the tough question of what should be done with those who commit violence against women, Davis gestures towards what she considers to be “a vast range of alternative strategies of minimizing violence against women – within intimate relationships and within relationships to the state,” including the pursuit of “job and living wage programs, alternatives to the disestablished welfare program, community-based recreation” (p.111). Such programs are, of course, framed in terms of prevention. In addition to these, in dealing with the aftermath of acts of violence, Davis advocates experiments with restorative and reparative modes of justice – though again, her discussion of the nature of such alternatives remains perhaps too cursory. She does, however, urge people to orient themselves both empathetically and systemically, by asking: “‘Why do these terrible things happen?’ instead of simply reacting” (p.115).

Nevertheless, by all means, Davis adds and ends, in a nod of recognition to the revolutionary presuppositions and implications of the abolitionist agenda, that “[a]lternatives that fail to address racism, male dominance, homophobia, class bias, and other structures of domination will not, in the final analysis, lead to decarceration and will not advance the goal of abolition” (p.108). In a nutshell, then, at the end of the day, for Davis, abolition requires nothing less than a radical transformation of material and social power relations, a transcendence of systemic, intersecting, oppressive hierarchies of race, of gender and of sexual orientation, and just as crucially, of class.

**Californication**

In Davis’s account of the prison industrial complex, she makes mention of the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore on developments in California. But Davis’s book came out in 2002, and five years would pass before Gilmore would publish her tour de force on the subject. *Golden Gulag. Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* is just that, a tour de force. It provides a more focused, Gramscian account of the conjuncture, including a depiction of the organic crisis, and the response of the ruling class, leading to the “phenomenal growth of California’s state prison system since 1982,” but also to the resistance of subaltern classes. Gilmore’s book goes into painstaking detail to explain how in the neoliberal period in California prisons have come to provide “catchall solutions to social problems” (p.5), with the state’s “prisoner population [growing] nearly 500 percent between 1982 and 2000, even though the crime rate peaked in 1980 and declined, unevenly but decisively, thereafter” (p.7). In Gilmore’s words, her book “asks how, why, where, and to what effect one of the planet’s richest and most diverse political economies has organized and executed a prison-building and -filling plan that government analysts have called ‘the biggest . . . in the history of the world’ (p.5).

Gilmore’s answer, in a nutshell, has to do with political economy, and more specifically with what Gramsci called an organic crisis. Gilmore contends: “In my view, prisons are partial geographical solutions to political economic crises, organized by the state, which is itself in crisis. Crisis means instability that can be fixed only through radical measures, which include developing new relationships and new or renovated institutions out of what already exists. The instability that characterized the end of the golden age of American capitalism provides a key.” In the midst of such instability, “certain kinds of people, land, capital, and state capacity became idle,” that is, they were rendered “surplus,” which led to particular outcomes that “are logically explicable but were by no means inevitable” (pp.26-27).

Gilmore paints a portrait of a “new state” that emerged as a result of the crisis of the military-Keynesian model of the so-called “golden age” of American capitalism – a “new state [that] built itself in part by building prisons.” According to Gilmore, this state “used the ideological and material means at hand to” remake itself, “renovating its welfare-warfare capacities into something different by molding surplus finance capital, land, and labor into the workfare-warfare state. The result,” Gilmore contends, “was an emerging apparatus that, in an echo of the Cold War Pentagon’s stance on communism, presented its social necessity in terms of an impossible goal—containment of crime, understood as an elastic category spanning a dynamic alleged continuum of dependency and depravation.” For Gilmore, then, “[t]he crisis of state capacity … became, peculiarly, its own solution, as the welfare-warfare state began the transformation, bit by bit, to the permanent crisis workfare-warfare state, whose domestic militarism,” she insists, “is concretely recapitulated in the landscapes of depopulated urban communities and rural prison towns” (pp.85-86).

Gilmore’s account of the organic crisis of the military-Keynesian model commences with “the world recession of 1973–75,” when the California economy “began to come apart.” In Gilmore’s words: “After a false boom in the late 1970s, fueled by federal outlays that created jobs in both the military and aerospace industries and at the community level, California entered a new phase of political and economic restructuring in the early 1980s, during which time the bifurcation between rich and poor deepened and widened.” She continues: “While profits rose, capital’s need for new infusions of investment dollars was increasingly met out of retained earnings. Deep reductions in well-waged urban jobs that had employed modestly educated men of color—especially African Americans and Chicanos—overlapped with changes in rural industrial processes and a long drought. These forces,” she contends, “produced surpluses of capital, labor, and land, which the state, suffering a prolonged period of delegitimation, manifested in the taxpayers’ revolts, could not put back to work under its declining military Keynesian aegis. However,” and here she invokes Gramsci, “by renovating and making ‘critical already-existing activities’, power blocs in Sacramento and elsewhere throughout California did recombine these surpluses — and mixed them with the state’s aggressive capacity to act — by embarking on the biggest prison construction program in the history of the world” (pp.125-126).

Gilmore’s explication of the economic logic and class dynamics underlying prison expansion in California in response to the organic crisis of military Keynesian order is certainly insightful. She argues: “Finance capitalists achieved what they were after by issuing $5 billion in bonds for new prison construction, with more issues in the wings; while they did not make any more money than if they had raised the funds by precisely the same means to build schools or parks or anything else, state capacity to issue debt was circumscribed by defensible categories as (and through which) the role of government changed.” Likewise, she continues: “Landowners concentrated in the agricultural counties have divested themselves of surplus acreage and brought in the state as local employer and local government subsidizer.” Meanwhile, in relation to the popular classes, Gilmore contends: “Labor remained divided, by race, region, and income— while [so-called] ‘taxpayers’, who themselves are mostly working people, used polling booth power inconsistently—sometimes but not always against ‘stranded communities’ of under- and unemployed people of color and white people who have the highest risk of spending time in prison.” She concludes: “Voter vagaries suggest that even politician- and media-fueled fear embodies contradictions, especially as prison and felony expansion touch more and more households that once might have believed themselves immune” (pp.126-127).

In sum, according to Gilmore: “the series of crises … separated urban and rural communities from their industrial, cultural, and political moorings and produced surpluses of land, labor, finance capital, and state capacity.” In response, “power blocs partially resolved these crises of surplus through prison expansion.” As a result, “Thirteen new prisons (plus five old facilities) light the night sky along the Central Valley’s ‘prison alley’—a 375-mile stretch from Tehachapi to Folsom. The towns where the new prisons are located sought publicly capitalized development projects to ‘fix’ the trends relentlessly surplusing significant segments of labor and land” (p.129). Even so, Gilmore later notes, “accumulating evidence shows that [prisons] are not [actually] good for the towns where they go” (p.180).

Gilmore also stress the demagoguery of the so-called “war on crime,” its ability to manufacture fear among the general public. Indeed, according to Gilmore, “[p]oliticians of all races and ethnicities merged gang membership, drug use, and habitual criminal activity into a single social scourge, which was then used to explain everything from unruly youth to inner-city homicides to the need for more prisons to isolate wrongdoers.” Moreover, she stresses, the infotainment model of the mass media has been thoroughly complicit. In her words: “The media amplified the message by giving crime reporting top billing.” Overall, she continues, such fearmongering proved effective not only in the suburbs, but also, to a significant extent, in the inner city as well. She contends: “Inner-city residents were, indeed, seeking relief from fearful disorders in their communities, and they, like their suburban counterparts, tended to accept the primary definitions of what crime was and what should be done about it—until direct experience of the law’s unevenness raised questions about the actual intent of the legislation in the first place” (p.109).

Yet, Gilmore’s book concludes with a powerful portrait of grass roots resistance that emerged in the inner city. More specifically, Gilmore tells the story of Mothers Reclaiming Our Children, or Mothers ROC, an “organization [which] was neither spontaneous and naive nor vanguard and dogmatic, but rather, mixing methods and concepts, it exemplified the type of grassroots organization that,” to again invoke Gramsci, “‘renovates and makes critical already-existing activities’ of both action and analysis to build a movement” (p.184). Gilmore traces the development of Mothers ROC, as it “evolved from a self-help group that formed in response to a crisis of place—a police murder in South Central Los Angeles—into a pair of political organizations trying to build a powerful movement across the spaces of domestic militarism” (p.239). Gilmore’s narrative about grass roots resistance is intended to “both personalize and generalize the morally intolerable to highlight objective and subjective dimensions of the expansion of punishment and prisons, the demise of the weak welfare state, and the capacity of everyday people to organize and lead themselves” (p.185). Gilmore thus centers the agency of “working women who refuse the state’s criminalization and sacrifice of their loved ones dispossessed by deindustrialization” (p.185).

Gilmore’s depiction of such grass roots resistance leads her, in turn, to pose similar questions to those raised by Davis. With respect to the tension between abolition and reform, Gilmore asks: “What are the possibilities of nonreformist reform—of changes that, at the end of the day, unravel rather than widen the net of social control through criminalization?” (p.242).

Like Davis, Gilmore highlights the centrality of class dynamics, and crucially, their intersection with racism, in identifying the forces that the resistance movement is up against. In Gilmore’s words: “we ought to prioritize coming to grips with dehumanization.” She continues: “Dehumanization is also a necessary factor in the acceptance that millions of people (sometimes including oneself ) should spend part or all of their lives in cages.” And she adds: “racism is the ordinary means through which dehumanization achieves ideological normality, while, at the same time, the practice of dehumanizing people produces racial categories” (p.243).

Alongside dehumanization and racism, Gilmore also identifies as a central ideological problem in U.S. society the widespread acceptance of militarism. She argues: “A sign of militarism’s ideological embrace is the fact that all kinds of U.S.-based people believe without pause that, in a general way, ‘the key to safety is aggression’” (p.244).

The result has been the hegemony of reactionary formulas for framing and addressing social problems. Again, in her words: “Voters and legislators decided to lock immigrants out of social services, to lock more people into prison for part or all of their lives, and to put a personal lock on opportunities in public sector education, employment, and contracts.” And yet, Gilmore gleans a strategic insight for a counterhegemonic response to this reactionary formula. She contends: “This triple pronged attack on working people demonstrates the potential for identifying linkages between immigrant, labor, and antiprison activism” (p.246).

She draws inspiration from Mothers ROC for their ability to use “the ideological power of motherhood … to reach across social and spatial divides … [and] to challenge the legitimacy of the changing state” (p.246). The story of Mothers ROC, she concludes, is the story of resistance to racism, which she defines as “the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death,” with “prison expansion” being but “a new iteration of this theme” (p.247).

**Between Abolition and Reform**

Gilmore’s notion of “nonreformist reform—of changes that, at the end of the day, unravel rather than widen the net of social control” (p.242) – raises starkly the possibility that the contradiction between the logics of abolition and of reform can be transcended, dialectically synthesised or reconciled. In her 2013 chapter on “The Tension between Abolition and Reform,” Liat Ben-Moshe articulates a similar hope. Ben-Moshe interrogates “whether it is possible to work for prison reform without being co-opted, and whether working toward abolition means that prisoners will be left in intolerable conditions in the meantime. This tension,” she contends, “is a key characteristic of the penal/prison abolitionist stance” (p.86). Nevertheless, she insists, despite the “seeming chasm between pragmatism and vision for the future of a non-carceral society,” the two options “are not necessarily binary opposites” (p.86).

Along these lines, Ben-Moshe draws upon the 1974 classic, *Politics of Abolition*, written by the Norwegian sociologist Thomas Mathiesen, which “plac[ed] reform and abolition on a continuum.” In so doing, Ben-Moshe (and Mathiesen) follow Andre Gorz, who, very much like Gilmore, distinguishes “between reformist and ‘non-reformist’ reforms.” According to Ben-Moshe, “Reformist reforms are situated in the discursive formation of the system as is, so that any changes are made within or against this existing framework.” By contrast, Ben-Moshe adds: “[n]on-reformist reforms imagine a different horizon that should be realizable for the improvement of humanity, and are not limited by a discussion of what is possible at present” (p.87).

In the chapter, Ben-Moshe sketches “the connections between two main sites in which abolition of oppressive institutions is in effect. One is activism around the abolition of the prison-industrial-complex, and the other is the move to close down institutions for people labeled ‘mentally retarded’ or ‘mentally ill’, known as deinstitutionalization” (p.83). Ben Moshe notes that ““[i]n contrast to the constant expansion of prisons in the United States, the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric hospitals has been a major policy trend in most states since the 1950s,” and she therefore “contend[s] that the deinstitutionalization movements in mental health and developmental disabilities could be construed as historical models to guide us through the transition to decarceration and prison abolition” (p.83).

As we have seen in the work of both Davis and Gilmore, Ben-Moshe emphasizes that “prison abolition is a broader critique of society.” In this regard, she points out the parallel with “[t]he resistance to incarceration in mental institutions and psychiatric hospitals,” which “also arose from a broader social critique, that of medicalization and medical authority” (p.84).

Closure of such institutions, she stresses, must be “part of a larger project of creating a more just society” (p.83). Indeed, according to Ben-Moshe, “[c]losure of repressive institutions, such as mental hospitals and prisons, can be conceptualized as a necessary but not sufficient action on the road to abolition” (p.84).

Abolition, therefore, is not the same as mere closure – since “[t]he mere closure of prisons and large state psychiatric institutions does not necessarily entail a radical change in policy, attitudes, or the lived experiences of those incarcerated” (p.84). Indeed, for Ben-Moshe, “closure in itself is still embedded within the same circuits of power that created such institutions, unless there is an epistemic shift in the way community, punishment, dis/ability and segregation are conceptualized” (p.85).

Abolition, by contrast, entails a positive program. In Ben-Moshe’s words, ““[i]t is about creating a society free of systems of inequity that produce hatred, violence, desperation and suffering. In such a society the idea of caging people for wrong doings will be seen as absurd” (p.85). In this regard, she again invokes Thomas Mathiesen, who “conceptualizes abolition as an alternative in the making: ‘The alternative lies in the ‘unfinished’, in the sketch, in what is not yet fully existing’. The alternative, according to Mathiesen, needs to both contradict and compete with the old system it is trying to change or replace” (p.84).

Ben-Moshe warns the reformist reforms can and have led to the expansion of the prison industry. Indeed, she cautions that “[s]ome factors leading to the growth of the prison industry were the direct result of attempts to reform the system” (p.87). To this end, she refers to the work of Marie Gottschalk, who has “demonstrate[d] how various seemingly progressive social movements in the penal arena inadvertently brought forth changes that concluded in more draconian punishments and increased incarceration. For example,” she notes, “opposition to the death penalty brought forth life sentences without parole, and helped strengthen the deterrence argument in crime control discourse. Similarly,” she points out, “LGBT activists fighting against homophobic and transphobic violence helped in creating hate crime legislation that incarcerated people for longer timeframes; and” likewise, she refers to “Moms against Gun Violence,” who “ushered in gun control measures that also increased the net effect of the penal system, including surveillance measures on communities of color, who sought the legislation originally” (p.88).

For Ben-Moshe, the lesson to be learned from such examples is that “not reaching far enough, not engaging enough in coalitional and revolutionary politics that will address the root causes of harm” runs the “risk of … co-opt[ation] by the state and its apparatuses” (p.88).

Like Davis, Ben-Moshe sketches a series of abolitionist measures proper. Among these, she speaks of a strategy of “abolition by attrition,” the first component of which is ***decarceration***, that is, the “release from current carceral spaces and mechanisms as many prisoners as possible by such strategies as abolishing parole; releasing prisoners perceived as requiring supervision into community peer groups; substituting prison time with restitution to victims; pushing for release of prisoners convicted for victimless crimes” (p.89). The second component of abolition by attrition, she continues, is ***excarceration***, that is, to “avoid incarceration to begin with and [to] examine all alternatives to incarceration by such steps as abolishing jail for those who cannot make bail and preventive detention, creating community conflict resolution centers, establishing community probation programs, and decriminalizing whole categories such as prostitution, sex related crimes, marijuana, public intoxication and other crimes without victims” (p.89).

Ben-Moshe goes on to address what she considers the most difficult cases, for example, sex offenders and those who commit acts of violence against people from vulnerable groups. She acknowledges that “[p]enal abolitionists seem split on this question.” According to Ben-Moshe, “some advocate for transformative justice and healing practices in which no one will be restrained or segregated, while others believe that there will always be a small percentage of those whose behavior is so unacceptable or harmful that they will need to be exiled or restrained, when done humanely and not in a prison-like setting” (p.91).

Like Davis and Gilmore, Ben-Moshe sees abolition as part of a broader agenda of social transformation, which includes a “multiplicity of approaches” all convergent with the goal of abolition, such as, for example, “demilitarization of schools, physical and mental health care for all, a justice system based on reconciliation, not vengeance, decriminalization of drug and sex work, and the defense of immigrant rights” (p.90).

Ultimately, Ben-Moshe insists, like Davis and Gilmore again, that abolition will require nothing short of a radical reorientation of deep-rooted and oppressive, hierarchical social relations. The pursuit of abolition, she contends, requires “supporting community living for all, developing affordable and accessible housing, and countering capitalism, ableism, racism, transphobia, and ageism in order to achieve a world in which carceral spaces are meaningless and unnecessary” (p.92).

**Abolition as Praxis**

As we have seen, then, according to Davis, Gilmore, and Ben-Moshe, the espousal of the goal of prison abolition ultimately requires a commitment to radical, revolutionary transformation of social relations. The three pursue, nevertheless, somewhat different argumentative lines. Whereas Davis sketches a more synoptic account, including a longer durée depiction of the U.S.’s historical trajectory, with special emphasis on the legacy of slavery, Gilmore’s focus is more presentist, or conjunctural, she goes into more detail about the astronomical expansion of the prison system in relation to the organic crisis of the military Keynesian order and the assent of neoliberalism. Ben-Moshe, for her part, pays perhaps less attention to matters of history and causation; instead, she traces a comparison with the movement to deinstitutionalise people labelled as “mentally ill,” and makes use of this comparison to help map out strategies for decarceration and excarceration.

Despite these different approaches, the three authors all agree not only on the ultimately revolutionary implications of the abolitionist agenda; they also agree on Gilmore’s (and Gorz’s) idea that the way to consummate such a revolution is through the tactical pursuit of “non-reformist reforms.” By contrast, Dylan Rodriguez, in his 2018 article on “Abolition as Praxis of Human Being,” flirts openly with a more ***insurgent*** mode of abolitionist theory and praxis.

According to Rodriguez, abolition is best conceived as “a dream toward futurity vested in insurgent, counter-Civilizational histories — genealogies of collective genius that perform liberation under conditions of duress” (p.1575). Like Davis, Rodriguez situates this dream as emerging from a “long historical praxis,” one “grounded in a Black radical genealogy of revolt and transformative insurgency against racial chattel enslavement and the transatlantic trafficking of captive Africans” (p.1576). Fundamentally, for Rodriguez abolitionism is constituted by militant resistance to “*carceral* state violence” in all of its manifestations, “including but not limited to imprisonment, jailing, detention, and policing” (p.1576).

At the same time, Rodriguez contends, like Davis and Ben-Moshe, that “abolition is not merely a practice of negation — a collective attempt to eliminate institutionalized dominance over targeted peoples and populations — but also a radically imaginative, generative, and socially productive communal (and community-building) practice.” Indeed, he insists, “[a]bolition seeks (as it performs) a radical reconfiguration of justice, subjectivity, and social formation that does not depend on the existence of either the carceral state (a statecraft that institutionalizes various forms of targeted human capture) or carceral power as such (a totality of state-sanctioned and extrastate relations of gendered racial-colonial dominance)” (p.1576).

Palpably moreso than Davis, Gilmore, or Ben-Moshe, Rodriguez is of the opinion that the logic of abolitionism is in contradiction to the logic of reform. Rodriguez argues that “[c]ontemporary reformist approaches to addressing the apparent overreach and scandalous excesses of the carceral state — characterized by calls to end ‘police brutality’ and ‘mass incarceration’ — fail to recognize that the very logics of the overlapping criminal justice and policing regimes systemically perpetuate racial, sexual, gender, colonial, and class violence through carceral power” (p.1576). Indeed, what’s worse, for Rodriguez, “reformist approaches ultimately reinforce a violent system that is fundamentally asymmetrical in its production and organization of normalized misery, social surveillance, vulnerability to state terror, and incarceration” (pp.1576-1577).

Rodriguez’s account of abolitionism differs from Davis and Gilmore in his explicit distancing of his conception of revolutionary insurgency from reliance upon a Marxist theoretical underpinning. To this end, Rodriguez claims inspiration instead in, among other traditions, queer theory and the decolonial turn. He seeks to “significantly complicate (and productively disarticulate) teleological or formulaic notions of classical Marxist social transformation, while intervening in patriarchal and masculinist constructions of freedom/self-determination.” At the same time, he would at least implicitly distance himself from the notion of “non-reformist reform” (even though he explicitly refers to the notion approvingly in passing, in a footnote), when he claims to aspire to “obliterate[e] liberal-optimistic paradigms of incrementalist, reformist social justice” (pp.1578-1579).

For Rodriguez, abolition should be considered “as a counter-Civilizational distension of ‘freedom’ that defies the modern disciplinary (and generally militarized) orders of the citizen, the nation-state, jurisprudence, politicality, and — most importantly — the gendered racial ascendancy of the white human and its deadly regimes of normalized physiological and cultural epistemic integrity” (p.1579).

Like Davis, Rodriguez highlights the continuity between the contemporary carceral state and the legacy of slavery. Indeed, he stresses this continuity even moreso than does Davis, or for that matter Gilmore. This is because Rodriguez relies more closely on Afro-pessimist appropriations of the concept of racial capitalism that stress the fundamental continuity of the racial order in relation to its origins in the Middle Passage and on the plantations (not to mention settler-colonial genocide), more than do Marxist and Gramscian accounts, such as those provided by Davis and Gilmore, with their theoretical focus on the dynamics not just of continuity and reproduction but also, crucially, of historical change. According to Rodriguez, there has been a “***general historical continuity*** of power relations that structure U.S. state institutions and the social-economic formations within which they perform their sovereignty” (p.1604).

Which is not to say that Rodriguez disregards history. To the contrary, Rodriguez emphasizes the continuous legacy of historical origins. To this end, he argues that “there is an ample and still-growing archive of study that explicates the roots of the contemporary U.S. carceral regime in the paradigmatic national power relation of racial chattel. Indeed, Rodriguez contends that “contemporary abolitionist praxis thus amplifies the notion that abolition is an unfinished project precisely because the slave relation has never been abolished and instead has been constantly reanimated through changing regimes of carceral domestic war.” Rodriguez goes on to sketch the key historical moments through which this unfinished project has passed. In his words: “As a relation of chattel-colonial dominance, incarceration emerged with particular global force through: (1) the historical technologies of captivity that structured the Transatlantic Middle Passage and the hemispheric racial chattel enslavement of African-descended peoples; and (2) the geographic-ecological production of the Western Civilizational project via the Treaty of Tordesillas, Manifest Destiny, and the manifold forms of conquest that have produced the (continuing and continuous) carceral subjection of Indigenous and Aboriginal peoples via reservations, nation-state borders, notions of ‘the frontier’, and other incarcerating measures” (pp.1582-1583).

Nor does Rodriguez’s depiction of the deep historical continuities underpinning the contemporary carceral state – his pessimism of the intellect, so to speak – lead him to embrace anything like a pessimism of the will. Instead, he espouses a full-fledged commitment to an insurgent, revolutionary praxis. In his words: “abolition is a generative, imaginative, and productive concept precisely because it entails a radical reconfiguration of relations of power, community, collective identity, and sociality that does not rely on carcerality and its constitutive, oppressive forms of state and cultural violence” (p.1612).

Indeed, according to Rodriguez, “[a]bolitionist praxis addresses carcerality as a logic of power that generates multiple, overlapping, and differently scaled carceral regimes (reservations, plantations, segregated cities/towns, prisons, military bases, and so forth). Thus,” he insists, “eliminating carceral-state violence via prisons, jails, police, detention centers, and military bases is but one aspect of a broader rethinking — and remaking — of collective, insurgent ‘power’ that simultaneously asserts a liberated autonomy from and posits a radical challenge to long historical relations of gendered, racial-colonial dominance” (p.1612).

As such, for Rodriguez – and in this crucial respect his account differs little from the other authors whom we have considered – “abolitionism articulates a fundamental critique of existing systems of oppression while attempting to actively imagine as it practices forms of collective power that are liberated from hegemonic paradigms, including but not limited to forms of power constituted by the logic of carcerality, patriarchy, coloniality, racial chattel, racial capitalism and heteronormativity” (p.1612).

**Abolitionism and the Movement for Black Lives**

The tension between a more reformist-friendly and a more insurgent articulation and praxis of abolitionism is rendered explicit and addressed insightfully by Brendan McQuade in his 2018 article, “Histories of Abolition, Critiques of Security.” In the article, McQuade analyses a manifesto from a group associated with the Movement for Black Lives. The manifesto, titled “Burn Down the American Plantation,” sketches an “insurrectionist position,” even more explicit than the one espoused by the academic Rodriguez, and, McQuade contends, it serves to expose “the tensions between a seemingly more moderate abolitionism based in academia and [the] non-profit [sector] and the revolutionary iteration expressed in militant direct actions” (p.2). According to McQuade, “[t]he manifesto adopts an Afro-pessimist frame” (p.3), and sketches five principles for action: “(1) self-defense, (2) direct democracy down to the neighborhood level, (3) conflict resolution and revolutionary justice, (4) the abolition of gender, and (5) reorganization of social property relations along cooperative lines” (p.3). In these principles, the manifesto takes inspiration from the Kurdish freedom movement’s revolutionary model of democratic confederalism, a model being put into practice in the North-east of Syria, in the so-called Rojava revolution.

McQuade elaborates a rather sophisticated critique of such insurgent posturing – of how the writers of the manifesto “use the example [of Rojava] to support their call for insurrectionary action, but they never consider the wider conditions that inform the apparent success of these remarkable antistatist experiments” (p.4). Instead, McQuade insists, they simply take Rojava “as a blueprint,” and effectively “assume its strategies can be applied to a radically different context without any adjustment” (p.4).

McQuade proceeds to sketch a DuBoisian “alternative mandate for abolitionist praxis, one which highlights the interplay of disruptive direct action and incremental change within a historically informed understanding of a particular social struggle. This holistic approach,” which in crucial respects resembles the Gramscian account of Gilmore, “highlights the complexities that are erased by the transhistorical assertions of seemingly ubiquitous and unchanging structures of violence.” McQuade is explicit in his critique of the afro-pessimist framing of the insurgent manifesto. According to McQuade, “the ahistorical pessimism that informs the analysis of more militant abolitionists may actually impede effective political struggle because it ignores the historical specificity of the present and therefore prevents us from developing a politics that can address the problems of our time and place” (p.4).

Nevertheless, McQuade, like the other authors we have considered, also espouses the ultimately revolutionary implications of abolitionism. For McQuade, “[a]bolition is the foil of bourgeoisie security,” it “is a way of thinking about producing social order outside of the logic of capital and private property, state violence, and racialized subjectivity” (p.5). Indeed, McQuade argues, “[a]bolition is an important strand of revolutionary theory, one that is embedded in all liberatory movements and, in the US context, has a deeper historical lineage than the socialist movement. As such, McQuade contends, “[r]ediscovering these global histories of abolition and recentering abolition as a counterpoint to security politics is [nothing short of] a necessary task in developing a viable socialist politics for the twenty-first century” (p.5).

**Conclusion**

Let us, therefore, conclude. In this lecture, we have considered a variety of scholarly accounts of abolitionist theory and praxis. We reviewed the main arguments advanced in important books by Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, as well as chapters and articles by Liat Ben-Moshe, Dylan Rodriguez, and Brendan McQuade. We looked at the various ways that these different accounts explained the emergence and transformations of the carceral state, as well as the emergence of the abolitionist movement, in deeper histories, often emphasizing the legacy of slavery (and to a lesser extent colonial-settler genocide). We also examined in some detail Gilmore’s conjunctural Gramscian account that situated the astronomical growth of incarceration in California in relation to the organic crisis of the military Keynesian order and the rise of neoliberalism. Finally, we highlighted both the tension between reformism and abolitionism, as well as the tension between more reformist-friendly and more insurgent visions and versions of abolitionist tactics and strategy.