

Abolition as Zapatismo

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The following are our perspectives as organizers on the ground, working in the borderlands in occupied Kumeyaay Territory. Here we draw on work with an organization that listens to and accompanies asylum seekers and migrants detained in a modern-day concentration camp: the Otay Mesa Detention Center (OMDC) *alongside increasing calls to abolish ICE, the police, and all borders*. The preliminary analysis provided here is our attempt to outline what abolition can look like when joined to a praxis of Zapatismo.

For starters, we take abolition to mean the collective liberation of our communities. It is the imagining and creation of autonomous spaces where we can exist in dignified ways and in actual community with one another. This is opposed to the forms of competition to which capitalism drives individuals and communities as a whole.

What we mean by Zapatismo as praxis are the seven Zapatista principles that guide our organizing: to obey, not command; to serve others, not serve oneself; to build, not destroy; to propose, not impose; to represent, not supplant; to convince, not defeat; to go below, not above. Abolition thus becomes the process of creating that autonomous space, not

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individually or abstractly, but through a set of practices of collectivity and conviviality. In order for abolition to take hold, to grow within and without the *entrañas* (entrails) of what the Zapatistas have called the capitalist hydra, there thus needs to be an organizational praxis with a logic that exists outside of, or at minimum works to evade, the logic of racial capitalism.

We hold that the capitalist hydra, or racial capitalism, is best understood as a civilization of death, as a world economic system that exploits and controls much of the resources in the world, with only a few benefiting, by feeding on real and imagined social divisions. Nevertheless, the reality is that there is a much larger world that has existed outside this logic, that continues to exist and resist in a variety of forms. That world is known by many names: Indigenous communities that are currently resisting and have resisted for centuries. Indeed, there are more people outside the logic of said civilizational impulse whose lives are not guided by a profit motive, but one of conviviality with one another while honoring and protecting land and life. These are not abstract idealizations, but rather, the current water defenders and land defenders of our times.

What makes the Zapatista communities, in particular, such a globally recognized and influential movement that has inspired many more movements is that they actively seek to operate outside the logic of capitalism and

have proven to the world that it is possible to do so in order to create a world where many worlds fit. As such, it is up to us in our respective communities or *trincheras* (trenches) to resist and live dignified lives by creating not two, three, or many Vietnams, but more and more *caracoles*, more sustainable, equitable lives that allow from our *trincheras* the flourishing of new ways of living and ultimately new worlds.

Abolition is the *Ya Basta!* of today. It means: Stop dehumanizing peoples and communities! Stop destroying the natural world! STOP with the system that is against life itself!!! *Ya Basta!* Enough! Abolish the state, the police, ICE, borders!! These are all institutions that cannot be reformed under the logic of capitalism; they need to be abolished, destroyed.

Abolition has inspired the imagination, just like the Zapatistas, in terms of what it would mean to have a world without prisons, without detention centers, police, or ICE. For the first time, abolition is in the mainstream media, and discussion in communities on how to abolish the police or cut police resources is happening in many cities across the U.S. For the first time, there is more visibility from the perspective of the people documenting their truths and exposing the continued violence at the hands of police.

There have been many George Floyds, and the promise is that there will not be another George Floyd forgotten with impunity. The world will know what has happened to the countless Black and Brown lives as we continue to make our case for abolition. George Jackson long ago argued that if we need one word to describe the coming fascist time, that word would be reform. The time of reform is over. Welcome to a new wave of continued struggle for justice, for actual transformation, and true abolition. Welcome to the world of global and intercommunal Zapatismo!

To understand abolition today, it is important to understand the historical context of the abolition movement in the 19th century and its quest for the liberation of enslaved Black people in the white-supremacist, settler-colonial entity called the United States. The passage and ratification of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865, simply reformed the racist institution of slavery as it allowed for an exception clause to its presumed outlawing. Said loophole prohibited slavery and indentured

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servitude “except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted,” paving the way for the convict lease system that allowed for prison labor to be contracted out to private interests for profit, oftentimes to the very same previous slaveowners. This practice, while rooted in the continued exploitation of African Americans after the Civil War, paved the way for other forms of captive labor of communities deemed expendable for the color of their skin, in turn also exploiting their labor, creating a second class of poor people: working-class migrant laborers not seen as worthy of citizenship.

Earlier forms of captive labor have been compounded by the detention and warehousing of would-be migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers towards similar ends. While the series of narratives, from the formerly enslaved to the Chinese, Japanese, Irish, and Italians, may differ in the details, as does the captivity of Indigenous children sent to boarding schools or the detribalization of Mexican laborers, the end result coheres in a structure of racial capitalism that divides and exploits through dehumanization all the same. Moreover, we see this logic in the blocking of migration from countries where racial capitalism has already destroyed their means of sustainability, as well as from Muslim countries, and more recently Haitian and African countries because of Title 42.

What is currently happening is the structures of capitalism are proving themselves

unsustainable. Wealthier states are continuing to build and enforce their borders, causing more violence and death to those making their trajectory to the centers of capital. The Zapatistas refer to this time as the storm; the walls of capitalism will continue to be built and become more bloody, resources will be plundered, and there will be more scarcity around the world. Capitalism cannot fix the destruction and hole it has created for itself, and the only way to not face the reality of its destruction is to cage itself from the problems and chaos of the world. The Zapatistas' analysis of the storm is not unlike Aime Cesaire's declaration that a civilization that is unable to solve the problems it creates is a decadent civilization, a dying civilization. The question is: How can we bring forth the death of a civilization of death?

This capitalist system is no longer being sustained by the imperialist and neoliberal forms that had sought to fix previous economic crises. Thus, the fundamental political dilemma that needs to be addressed is the need to dismantle this entire civilization that is anything but civil; all of its institutions of power that thrive on profit, death and destruction—from universities, social welfare, and the criminal justice system to financial institutions and healthcare systems. We need to do more than abolish ICE, more than abolish the police, and more than abolish borders; those are simply the bonds or glue that hold together the assemblage of states and

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institutions as a unified civilizational whole. It is not about saving what is good or not good about the civilization of death. It means that everything this system is dependent on is premised upon and sustains itself through the social fabric of racial capitalism, and it will continue to surveil, police, and consume all aspects of our lives until it is destroyed. But that “until” is key because it speaks to the radical hope we need, one that must take root in our ancestral and Indigenous knowledges and practices, in the defense of our territories and those of the peoples of where we reside, and in the honoring of land and life. And at the same time, it must take root in the new imaginaries to be built collectively in our respective communities.

Case in point: the border “crisis” is not about a broken immigration system or a broken asylum system; the crisis is the existence of borders. These systems are doing exactly what they are intended to do: to continue to oppress Black and Brown bodies and peoples for profit because they/we, will never be seen as human beings as long as we live in a white-supremacist world. We agree, there are many fronts to fight the ongoing problems that result from displacement, Indigenous dispossession, and continued abuses by Customs and Border Protection (CBP), police, and border patrol. We must not be naive; yes legal help, legislative help, humanitarian help may alleviate some issues, but they are not sufficient so long as we

continue to live under a racial capitalist logic.

The U.S. Empire only serves to create an artificial sense of national identity and false illusion of prosperity, hope, and justice. It has no real interest in the reality of how millions of people are living, being displaced from their homelands, militarized through war, living under extreme poverty, with no food or water to continue to feed and support their families. It instead feeds itself off such misery. Its institutional apparatuses—CBP, police, border patrol, and others—mark migrants, refugees, Black and Brown bodies and peoples, as less than human, and one way it legitimizes itself is by making claims that people need to do the so-called “right thing” of waiting in an imaginary legal line as the only way of getting legal citizenship or having an asylum claim accepted.

These crises at the border will continue to persist so long as we feed the frenzy of multinational corporations under a globalized capitalism. How do we respond, organize, and mobilize? There is no one answer or one way. All approaches that help bring visibility to the problem matter, but some end up leaving long-term problems for others to resolve. Or worse yet, they re-inscribe national imaginaries when the problem is ultimately global in nature.

When it comes to the idea of abolishing the border, we thus recognize that, in most immigrant rights work, at times seems as if we are just putting a bandage on top of another bandage. Helping support one family or one person is, indeed, a small victory in itself, but it can be a drain of energy that affects the psyche. Nevertheless, all politics is local. This is the *trincher*a, or trench, in which we find ourselves while never losing sight of the various tentacles of Empire.

Some decades back, Linda Bosniak warned that to engage in migrants’ rights work while not challenging the very existence of borders at the same time is itself contradictory; by accepting national borders, one is inadvertently committed to the condition of possibility that creates vulnerabilities for migrant, refugee, and asylum seekers. Thus, the problem we are facing requires more than international solidarity, which maintains borders in place.

Instead, our language needs to change to articulate our enemy as not

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just a broken national immigration system that isn't living up to the (false) promise of freedom and opportunity, but rather, we need to name U.S. Empire, global racial capitalism, colonialism, hetero-patriarchy, and the continued oppression that touch all of us on a global scale. It also means our forms of networking and organization must also change. We recognize there are processes and institutions of captivity and enclosure worldwide (e.g., mass incarceration, detention centers, forced labor, among others) locking away millions of People of Color, poor people, Indigenous communities, queer siblings, women, Black and Brown bodies for the benefit of extracting their labor and whatever forms of value can be used to benefit multinational corporations. These forms of captive labor help sustain global systemic racism and global white supremacy that privileges the white bodies of the world. The Otay Mesa Detention Center (OMDC) is but one microcosm of the problem that we find before us.

We do not claim to have a blueprint on how to abolish detention centers, prisons, borders, state powers. Yet we hope that what we do at OMDC, and how we do it through accompaniment, can inspire others to organize themselves. We are not here to center anyone's one struggle, for "there is no center, there is no periphery"—those are only the cartographies of power that we seek to transform rather than invert. We are here to accompany each

other's struggles as we do the work of abolition starting in our local context.

We organize and accompany detainee *compas* around their decisions to organize: how to and when to organize because we understand they are the ones at the front line of that particular *trincheras*. We do not impose our agenda or present ourselves as if we know best. Many on the inside have no idea what abolition is and do not care to. They are just concerned about their personal freedom and their loved ones. The discrimination and homophobia experienced at the hands of officers, and at times even amongst *compas* themselves, is felt as strongly as the systemic oppression across various axes of domination that is reproduced in the continued abuses inside and outside detention centers and prisons. This is but a glimpse of what is shared to us by the *compas* through hotlines we help operate.

Therefore, we recognize there is no way of knowing how to organize until we start to organize together in struggle. We do this by doing and learning as we do. What is key is that the approaches and the strategies must be derived from collective work. The approach our organizational work has taken has been to understand the long-term global problem and know that this fight is not going to be won overnight but instead requires a long-term approach of accompaniment with our incarcerated and detained siblings until all borders, detention centers, prisons, and capitalism have fallen. We are in

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accompaniment because we ourselves are not safe and because we ourselves are not outside this problem; we are in accompaniment because we ourselves are also in struggle, battling police brutality, systemic racism in all sectors of society and levels of government. We fight for the preservation of our natural resources, our water, land, and the integrity of Indigenous communities.

We are in accompaniment because we choose not just solidarity; we ourselves chose to resist. We do not agree with conceptions of ally-ship as a political framework, because our Zapatismo is personal; it is about committing our entire lives fighting for liberation. We do not proclaim ourselves to support poor oppressed communities who we recognize as different from ourselves. Ours is not a temporary strategic approach to be allies in distinct struggles, to show we are down for your cause, or that you are down with our cause. In such a framing, both remain separate causes, and we remain siloed communities with other borders between us.

Ours is not about individualizing approaches of shaming white fragility and other fragilities or about taking stock of each other's privileges, as if oppression can be resolved through a scorecard. While we recognize power relations continue to mark all of us, we choose not to frame our political praxis in terms of the internal fissures and divides among or towards each other, or reduce our differences to a sameness. On the

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contrary, as the Zapatistas remind us, we are equal because we are different.

Life is precious and we must live as communities, see each other in community, and survive together guided by intercommunal and intergenerational commitments of reciprocity. We do this by arriving at one collective agreement at a time, and by organizing carefully and strategically as if our lives depended on it. Taking the seven principles of Zapatismo seriously in every collective decision we make has been a way to both unlearn the logics of capital that seek to divide and exploit us, and to begin to learn a new way of thinking, feeling, walking, and being in the world not just for ourselves but for our various others as a starting point for our own liberation. We bring on the death of a civilization of death through an affirmation of life itself! 