Robyn Maynard

Police Abolition/Black Revolt

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the contemporary moment of Black revolt and the struggle to defund and abolish police in Canada and North America.

KEYWORDS: police abolition; defund police; Black radical tradition; Canada; COVID-19

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article couvre le moment contemporain de la révolte noire et de la lutte pour retirer du financement à la police et l'abolir au Canada et en Amérique du Nord.

MOTS CLÉS: abolition de la police; retirer du financement à la police; tradition radicale noire; Canada; COVID-19

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The lynching of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police sparked a chorus of protests that are global in scale, marked by calls for radical transformation and

Fig. 1. Photo credit: Joshua MacDonald and Black Lives Matter-Toronto, used with permission

channeling the world toward an abolitionist future. The conditions for global Black uprisings emerge in a context of enduring anti-Black logics, the ravages of racial capitalism and forms of surveillance and punishment that were put in place centuries ago, from which we have not yet emerged. Still, the contemporary eruption of political contestation is unidentical to, if growing out of, past generations of struggle. Against a backdrop of failed police reforms, increasingly inequitable distributions of public resources and the vast inequities laid bare by the COVID-19 response, there has been an upsurge of wide-spanning forms of Black revolt: demonstrations, press releases, hunger strikes—demands on the state, against the state and against the logics that have served to violently curtail Black life in the Americas since 1492.

If the most visible uprisings have been those against policing, the registers of Black revolt against the racially uneven proximities to death so brutally exacerbated by the pandemic have been wide ranging. From spaces of confinement (jails, prisons and detention centres) to the front lines of highly exploited essential workers, undocumented and temporary agricultural and factory labourers, contestations of differing scales, organized and informal, have permeated the landscape in recent months. These forms of Black struggle have dramatically spread in scale and scope since George Floyd's public execution.

Even as economies and nations have been "closed down," the violence of police killings has been unceasing in North America and well beyond. The deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and Tony McDade in the US, and D'Andre Campbell and Regis Korchinski-Paquet north of the colonial border, demonstrate that while labouring on the front lines of the pandemic, Black peoples are continuously outside the register of the "public" within common framings of public safety and health. Tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets—are still taking to the streets—across Canadian cities and towns, condemning Black expendability and demanding transformation, confronting the police and refusing the expendability of Black life.

This moment of protest and uprising, which may well become a movement, is undergirded by demands for forms of change that are substantive, transformative and focused on shifts that veer us sharply away from the catastrophic violence of the past. The current moment refuses *inclusion,* refuses "equality" within the status quo and all of its attendant violences. Instead, this upswing of revolt demands nothing short of a new world.

Perhaps the most visibly transformative demand has been the renewed surge of energy to defund—and abolish—the police.

I. Policing Black Life in Canada

The struggle to defund the police is struggle against a form of anti-Black violence that is at once a contemporary crisis and a historical inheritance. In North America, policing emerged as and remains a form of racial, gendered and economic violence shaped by the logics of slavery and settler colonialism. The policing of Black life in Canada is embedded in the historical development of the nation-state and its historical antecedents. The surveillance of Black movement was a facet of life within early (then) French colonies in the 16th and 17th centuries, with Black peoples continually suspect for being possible "runaways" (Nelson 2016). State and extrajudicial violence was evidenced in the public corporal punishment of enslaved *and* free Black peoples in the British Maritimes (Whitfield 2016). As more formal policing was entrenched, law enforcement continually functioned in order to enact and maintain racial, gendered and economic inequality. This is evidenced, in the 19th century, by the policing of Black (and Indigenous) women across Canadian cities for "vagrancy" or prostitution-related offences (Backhouse 1985; Sayers 2013) and the high arrest and incarceration rates of Black men in the 20th century (Mosher 1998; Mosher and Akins 2015). Deeply intertwined with these logics is the historical role of the RCMP (formerly the North-West Mounted Police) as a force of quelling Indigenous rebellion, furthering Indigenous dispossession for white settlement and conquest, all the while violently suppressing emergent labour movements and their challenges to the rule of capital over life (Comack 2012; Toews 2019).

The policing of Black life emerges from, and is endemic to, the Canadian nation-state in its very functioning. The ongoing investment in carceral and anti-Black agents of repression, an outgrowth of slavery and settler colonialism, has nonetheless taken new and more intensive forms in recent decades. An ongoing disinvestment in Black community supports, programming, education and housing has been matched by a continually increasing scope and intensity of policing and an ongoing expansion of police and prison budgets.

The intensity and scale of policing has dramatically ramped up in the past 50 years as part of long-standing domestic warfare against Black communities. Essential to this movement was the 1980s "war on drugs," which intensified the scope and scale of law enforcement powers over Black communities and cemented the practice of racial profiling (see Maynard 2017; Kitossa 2005). The effects of this escalation are visible in the dramatic rates of Black incarceration in federal prisons. At the same time, crime "prevention" relies on the policing of Black presence in public space: studies conducted in Toronto, Montreal, Halifax and Vancouver demonstrate that Black peoples are stopped by police anywhere from 2 to 6 times more frequently than white residents (see OHRC 2017; Armony et al. 2019; Wortely 2019; Prystupa 2018).[1] In effect, Black communities are being surveilled, harassed and criminalized merely for existing in public.

National spending on police operations has increased steadily since the mid-1990s, reaching 15.1 billion in 2017–18 (Coner et al. 2019). A 2013 government report noted that the cost of policing nationally has more than doubled since 1997, "outpacing the increase in spending *by all levels of government*" (emphasis added), with police salaries increasing by 40% since 2000 (whereas most Canadians salaries increased by 11%; Public Safety Canada 2013). Spending on anti-Black carceral controls has gone up, accompanied by a militarization of the practice of policing: the use of SWAT teams increased by 2,000% over the past four decades, "increasingly being used by public police for routine activities such as executing warrants, traffic enforcement, community policing and responding to mental health crises and domestic disturbances" (Walby and Rozier 2018). For Black communities, this militarization has been marked by at times fatal violence: Somali refugee communities have experienced raids in which they were assaulted with battering rams and flash-bang devices, with elderly Somali women describing being physically brutalized—and in one instance told to "die" in the context of tactical raids (Fox 2013)—in incidents described as racial profiling and elder abuse. The death of Haitian 47-year-old Bony Jean-Pierre, in Montréal-Nord, shot in the head with a rubber bullet during a tactical squad raid in the context of drug enforcement, further illustrates that state warfare on Black communities is more than a metaphor (CTV Montreal, 2018).

II. Reform, Defund and/or Abolish?

The violence inherent to the practice of policing itself has been continually challenged by Black families, community members, activists and organizers who have staged—across decades—sit-ins, tent cities, die-ins and a multitude of other tactics in defence of our lives. The major state response in the wake of Black organizing and uprisings, however, has been not only an ever-increasing budget and an ever-expanding scope of policing, but also a series of police reforms that have served only to uphold the status quo of racial violence and maintain, extend and even expand the scope of the institution. At the municipal level, police forces have implemented "diversity" and "sensitivity" trainings, expanded the recruitment of female and "visible minority" officers, expanded police foot and bicycle patrols, hired community liaison officers and expanded spaces for police-community dialogue. At the provincial level, one response to ongoing community protest has been the creation of civilian oversight mechanisms like Ontario's Special Investigations Unit (SIU) and Quebec's Bureau des enquêtes indépendantes (BEI), tasked with conducting "independent" investigations when the police use lethal force.[2]

From the perspective of protecting Black life, all of these reforms have been abject failures, even as they have succeeded in perpetuating the illusion of legitimacy of benevolence for law enforcement agencies. The local reforms and increases in funding for law enforcement agencies across the country have occurred alongside an *increase* in the number of deaths at the hands of police, which have nearly doubled over the past 20 years (Nicholson and Marcoux, 2018), impacting Black and Indigenous communities most substantially,[3] with broad impacts on Black peoples, especially Black drug users and sex workers, Black homeless and mad peoples.

With no empirical or ethical leg to stand on, calls for *more* police reforms at this historical juncture are morally untenable: body cameras, racial diversity in hiring and implicit bias are, after all, the conditions that nonetheless allowed for the public execution of George Floyd. This reality is recognized by Black and multiracial communities across North America that are now forwarding calls, not to reform or reimagine, but to defund, demilitarize and dismantle the police—and, along the way, to reduce their scope and reverse their expansion into schooling, mental health response and the wide arena of public and private life that have been so naturalized in recent decades (Ritchie, Kaba & Ervin, 2020, 8toabolition.com). These calls emerge from generations of struggle against policing, displacement and environmental devastation wreaked by the state.

Calls for defunding the police, however, do not aim simply to combat a racist and violent institution, to cut it down to size on the way to complete elimination, though this is one core element of the struggle. The call to defund, in fact, emerges from the Black radical tradition, which has not only contested racial violence in all forms but has also been a form of world-building. Abolition, as Gilmore and Davis and Kaba continue to remind, is as much about building the *conditions for safety* as it is about dismantling institutions of harm and captivity, and ending racial violence in all of its forms. Du Bois's (2014) *Black Reconstruction* details, painstakingly, how the abolition of slavery did not mean simply ending legal bondage: Reconstruction was a project (if violently aborted) that was geared toward creating a world that supported Black life, and human life more broadly. The more contemporary call for the abolition of police and prisons is grounded, similarly, by the call to create and sustain life-affirming conditions.

Moves to defund police—and the prisons that policing makes possible—emerge from a broader political project of divestment *and of investment*: a movement away from prisons and police and toward institutions and initiatives that protect, nurture and sustain living and all of the richness of human and ecological life. The police and prison systems consume huge sums of public money; they syphon wealth out of Black and non-Black communities and deploy resources toward policing and caging those *made* vulnerable by the state and by state-sanctioned practices. Abolition, in contrast, as Mariame Kaba notes in her historic *New York Times* intervention, does the opposite, building life where life has been abandoned: "We are not abandoning our communities to violence. We don't want to just close police departments. We want to make them obsolete. . . . We can build other ways of responding to harms in our society" (Kaba 2020). The radical implications at the core of the call to defund, indeed, make up a broader call to invest in the root causes of harm rather than attempting to use arrests and prisons to manage populations abandoned by the state: it is this that grounds calls to divert public money toward community-led anti-violence programs, support for survivors of gender-based violence, harm reduction programming, mutual aid, transformative justice, a safe supply for drug users and the decriminalization of homelessness, drugs and sex work—these being only a few of the world-building measures invoked within its call (for Canada, see Black Lives Matter—Toronto, 2020; for the US, see Ritchie, Kaba and Ervin, 2020). Redistributing "national" public wealth—divesting police funding and re-directing billions of dollars—marks a necessary undertaking toward ending the enduring proximity to death that is experienced by Black communities.

In Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Montreal, Toronto, Hamilton, Vancouver, Winnipeg and well beyond, in addition to pop-up marches, vigils and occupations of police headquarters, community members are holding town halls, forwarding motions to remove police from schools, demanding cuts to bloated police budgets and forwarding "peoples budgets" and alternative forms of community safety. This organizing stems, broadly, from courageous young Black peoples risking everything for a new world, and builds from generations of radical thought, struggle and praxis by incarcerated intellectuals, Black feminists, multiracial coalitions of prison abolitionists, survivors of sexual violence, of everyday people desiring more than what has been offered by a morally bankrupt political class. In its best iteration, the #DefundPolice movement is nothing less than an attack on one of the most enduring forms of racial violence and anti-Black carceral controls since slavery, a rethinking of the sexual and gendered and transphobic violences at the heart of the colonial project.

III. Conclusion: An Expansive Terrain of Abolition

As we enter the expansive terrain of a #DefundPolice era and turn toward undermining and overturning the long-standing violences of our era, it is essential to vigilantly maintain the vast expansive possibilities—and requirements—of the project at hand. This includes forms of violence that are global in their scope: domestic policing, after all, is only one facet of the global controls that enforce the boundaries of racial capitalism and anti-Black carceral controls on a planetary scale. The demand for the reinvestment of *public* wealth, meanwhile, requires an interrogation into the racially uneven violences required to produce wealth in the first place, as laid out by generations of Black radicals including Eric Williams, Cedric J. Robinson and Claudia Jones. A call to redistribute social wealth necessarily requires that we envision forms of Black liberation that are neither confined within the limitations of the nation-state nor bound within the confines of the metropole.

Defunding and redirecting: these projects demand that we reckon with the realities that "wealth," if unevenly distributed along racial lines in North America, is also itself the product of racial violence and exploitation: capital was/is accrued from slavery and colonialism, from displacing Black and Indigenous peoples from the places they reside, from rending Black life fungible, exploitable, disposable. This dispossession is an ongoing reality in Canada, from Wet'su'we'ten to Herongate, and well beyond the apartheid fences of the global north. Calls to defund and redirect/reinvest social wealth demand, too, that we reckon with the global delineations of racial-colonial capitalism. This, or risk naturalizing imperialism and the world-ending violence directed against Black, Indigenous and racialized peoples globally in the name of profit. Redistribution in the context of uninterrupted imperialism, after all, amounts to little more than a more equitable division of the spoils of war, barbarism and violence that have defined Euro–North American "civilization" for half a millennium.

The global dimensions of Black life—and the carceral and economic controls undermining life at every turn—make the terrain of abolition necessarily expansive. We will not, after all, achieve the conditions required to render Black life *liveable* when "our" institutions, retirement funds and investments (for those who have them) are, quite literally, premised on the destruction of Black life elsewhere, anywhere.

This quickly globalizing moment of Black revolt in the context of COVID-19 demands nothing less than a total upending of the global and enduring legacies of slavery and colonialism and the creation of frameworks for living otherwise. As police are removed from their long-standing strongholds in our neighborhoods, as monuments to slavery and genocide are thrown into the sea, as Rhodes falls and Leopold III is removed from his pedestal, these testaments to brutality are being exposed for the violence they celebrate, their permanence questioned, if not negated. While there are no guarantees of the future to come, the conditions for possibility of a different world are wide ranging. This moment demands nothing less than a vision of abolition that transcends nation, upends empire and overturns the epistemologies that have justified and enabled the *longue durée* of barbarism so consistently hidden behind the veneer of "civilization."

Notes on the Contributor

ROBYN MAYNARD is a Black feminist abolitionist scholar-activist and author of the national bestseller *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Fernwood Publishing, 2017). She is part of the research and writing team for the website defundthepolice.org. She is also a Vanier scholar and PhD student at the University of Toronto.

Notes

1. The Wortley Report (2019) also identified that Black people are more likely to be charged for the same behaviour than white residents of Halifax.

2. In both provinces, the oversight bodies have been critiqued for a lack of independence, being staffed largely by former police employees, and marred by the fact investigations have led to few charges, and zero or less than 1% criminal convictions. From when the BEI was instituted in Quebec in 2016 until 2019, it investigated 126 cases, including 71 deaths, and laid zero charges (McKenna 2019; see also Maynard 2017b). In Ontario, CBC's 2018 "Deadly Force" report demonstrated that over 17 years and 52 incidents, just seven Toronto Police officers have faced charges after being involved in the death of a civilian, and only one was found guilty (Dunn 2018). A 2010 *Toronto Star* expose

uncovered a "cozy" relationship between police and prosecution, officers breaking conduct rules of investigations, and a general lack of "rigour" within investigations, highlighting that at that time, out of 3,400 SIU investigations over 20 years, criminal charges were laid in 95 cases, and 0.5% of officers were ever convicted (Bruser and Henry 2010).

3. In police killings documented by CBC across Canada over the past two decades, 70% of victims of police killings having mental health issues or substance use issues, and in Toronto, the rate of death *8.3% of the population* but *36.5% of police fatalities* (Dunn 2018).

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