

**ABOLISHING**

**STATE**

**VIOLENCE**

A WORLD BEYOND BOMBS  
BORDERS AND CAGES

**RAY ACHESON**

**READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE**

The following study guide is intended for use in universities or high schools, or by book clubs or activist groups, to supplement reading of *Abolishing State Violence: A World Beyond Bombs, Borders, and Cages*. The guide is divided into chapters, each of which includes a set of discussion questions, a few suggested actions that can be undertaken collectively or individually, and some recommended readings for more information. A more extensive list of resources, including websites, organizations, books, articles, podcasts, and more, can be found in the Further Resources section of *Abolishing State Violence*.

## INTRODUCTION

### Discussion Questions

1. Do you think the concept of abolition, derived from antislavery movements in the United States, is a valuable approach to addressing other structures of state violence?
2. This book addresses seven “structures of state violence.” What are other structures you can think of, relevant in your country, that you feel cause harm and should be abolished? How are they related to other structures of violence?
3. What systems of power (i.e. patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity) do you think need to be confronted in order to transform society? How have you been impacted by these systems of power in your own life?
4. “Deterrence” is identified in the book as a strategy underscoring several strands of oppression. What are other policies or approaches that structures of state violence rely upon or utilize?
5. Do you think it’s possible to reform structures of state violence, or must they be abolished? Do you think the concept of non-reformist reform is useful for distinguishing between changes that lead to abolition versus those that lead to reinforcement of the institutions of oppression?
6. The book draws on the work of many Black feminist abolitionists to argue that feminism provides a particularly helpful framework from which to pursue abolition. What other traditions, theories, and organising practices are helpful for an abolitionist approach to state violence?

### Suggested Activities

1. Develop a plan for addressing harms caused by state institutions, including transformation and abolition of structures, redesign of budgets, a system of reparations and accountability, or other aspects you think are important.
2. Map out alternative structures to provide a system of “promiscuous care” rather than oppression and discrimination.
3. Create a toolkit for your community that offers information and suggests practical actions for people to undertake locally to challenge structures of state violence.

### Recommended Reading

- Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2019).
- Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah, eds., *Revolutionary Feminisms: Conversations on Collective Action and Radical Thought* (London: Verso, 2020).
- The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London: Verso, 2020).
- Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015).
- W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward the History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998 [1935]).
- Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2019).

# CHAPTER 1: DISBANDING POLICE

## Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever had an experience calling the police or interacting with them?
2. How is Blackness or Indigeneity or racialized “otherness” criminalized in your country? Can you think of examples of how people of color or LGBTQ+ people are specifically harmed or targeted by the police?
3. This chapter describes the origins of policing within the United States. What are the foundations of policing within your country? What similarities and differences are there to the US system?
4. How much money does your city or town spend on policing? How does that compare to the rest of the items in your city’s budget?
5. How can you challenge conversations or proposals that promote militarization of the police as the answer to “crime”? How can you instead steer conversations toward empathy and care for people, especially people who have been marginalized and oppressed?
6. Are there existing resources within your community or that you’ve heard about elsewhere that could serve as alternatives to involving the police? Are those resources sufficiently supported, funded, and staffed? If not, what actions could you take to build greater support for alternatives to the police within your community?

## Suggested Activities

1. Consider what mainstream news or television shows tell us about who the police are and what they do and compare that to what police actually do. Find out how your community is being policed and try to talk to friends and family about the reality of policing.
2. Consider how some police reforms strengthen and protect the police and how you can take action to oppose reforms that expand the scope of policing in your community.
3. Design a public budget that redirects resources toward health care, housing, education, food security, and employment, and that establishes alternatives to existing police forces.

## Recommended Reading

- Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth E. Richie, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022).
- Mariame Kaba, *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).
- Mariame Kaba, Woods Ervin, and Andrea J. Ritchie, *#DefundPolice Toolkit: Concrete Steps Toward Divestment from Policing & Investment in Community Safety* (New York: Interrupting Criminalization, 2018).
- Derecka Purnell, *Becoming Abolitionists: Police, Protests, and the Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Verso, 2021).
- Interrupting Criminalization, MPD 150, and Project Nia, *Police Abolition 101*, January 2021, [interruptingcriminalization.com](http://interruptingcriminalization.com).
- Project Nia, *Towards an Abolitionist Horizon: A Guidebook for Young Organizers*, June 2021, [issuu.com/projectnia](http://issuu.com/projectnia).

# CHAPTER 2: DISMANTLING PRISONS

## Discussion Questions

1. What is your definition of justice? Do you think prison can deliver justice? Why or why not?
2. What is the purpose of prisons and jails as they currently operate?
3. What are some ways that prisons and jails have failed to prevent, reduce, or transform harm within your community?
4. Do you believe that it is possible to reform the prison industrial complex? Why or why not? Have you seen any evidence that reform will address the inhumanity and harms of the prison industrial complex?
5. How does transformative justice address harm? Could a reparations framework contribute to justice?
6. How would you respond to someone who argues that abolitionists do not believe in accountability for harm? What is the difference between accountability and punishment? What is the difference between punishment and consequences?

## Suggested Activities

1. Join a letter writing campaign with Critical Resistance, Survived & Punished, or another prison abolitionist organization to communicate directly with incarcerated people and support them and their families.
2. Talk to your friends and families about the harms created by incarceration and discuss what kind of structures could be built instead to ensure accountability, reparation, and justice.
3. Explore the footprint of incarceration in your city or town: what jails, detention centers, or prisons are located in or near your community? Are they public or private? How much funding do they receive? Are they considered “good employers” for the region? What impacts do they have on the community? What are the demographics of those incarcerated in these facilities?

## Recommended Reading

- Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).
- Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, eds. *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement* (Oakland: AK Press, 2020).
- George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (New York: Random House, 1972).
- Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- Eric A. Stanley, Dean Spade, and Queer (In) Justice, “Queering Prison Abolition, Now?” *American Quarterly* 64, no.1 (2012): 115–127.
- Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2018).

# CHAPTER 3: DECODING SURVEILLANCE

## Discussion Questions

1. Does surveillance feel like a significant part of your everyday experience? What are some of the types of surveillance that are normalized in your city, community, or house?
2. What are some of the messages—in the media, in popular culture, and in your community—that have contributed to the idea that surveillance enhances safety?
3. Do you think surveillance technologies incorporate racial, gender, or other forms of bias?
4. What kind of limits do you think are necessary on artificial intelligence, surveillance technologies, or data collection in order to prevent harm and protect the privacy, dignity, and lives of people?
5. Are you concerned with the weaponization of surveillance technologies and artificial intelligence? Do you know if autonomous weapon systems are being developed right now in your country?

## Suggested Activities

1. Map the use of surveillance technologies in your city or town. Are there CCTV cameras? Facial recognition? What technologies do you use personally in your home or on your phone that have surveillance capabilities?
2. Join an organization or work with a coalition that is working to prohibit the use of facial recognition, predictive policing, or other harmful, biased technologies in your community.
3. Learn about and explore how to support efforts to prohibit autonomous weapon systems and to develop rules for the use of cyber technologies that are used to surveil activists or attack critical infrastructure.

## Recommended Reading

- Peter Asaro, “Will #BlackLivesMatter to Robocop?” University of Miami School of Law, 2016 (University of Miami School of Law, 2016).
- Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Boston: Polity, 2019).
- Joy Buolamwini, Aaina Agarwal, Nicole Hughes, and Sasha Costanza-Chock, “We Must Fight Face Surveillance to Protect Black Lives,” *Medium*, June 3, 2020.
- Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Shoshana Amielle Magnet, eds., *Feminist Surveillance Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
- David Lyon, ed., *Surveillance as Social Sorting: Privacy, Risk and Digital Discrimination* (London: Routledge, 2003).
- Shoshana Magnet, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

# CHAPTER 4: DECONSTRUCTING BORDERS

## Discussion Questions

1. Do you think borders are necessary? Why or why not?
2. Do you think the extraction of capital from the Global South or the inequitable fueling of conflict or climate change impacts have any bearing on whether people should be able to move freely around the world?
3. Do you have any experience with being targeted or harassed at border crossings or know anyone who does? Why do you think this experience happened?
4. What has your country's government's response been to refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants? Is there a different reaction to people on the move from different countries or regions? If yes, why do you think that has been the case?
5. What alternatives to encampment, detention, deportation, and "deterrence" could ensure care, dignity, well-being, and human rights for people on the move?
6. What do you think a more just, humane, and ethical system of migration should look like?

## Suggested Activities

1. Explore whether your country is spending money on "border security." Map out the corporations involved and the policies and politicians supporting militarization of border enforcement and the detention or deportation of people on the move.
2. Learn about the history of asylum seeking and refugee rights and talk to your friends and family about how your country treats people on the move.
3. Join or support organizations providing care for people on the move within and between countries, including those providing humanitarian aid, legal assistance, multilingual information, opposition to detention and deportation, and other vital services, or those calling for abolition of the border industrial complex.

## Recommended Reading

- Justin Akers Chacón, *The Border Crossed Us: The Case for Opening the US-Mexico Border* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).
- Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).
- Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (New York: Verso, 2017).
- Todd Miller, *Build Bridges, Not Walls: A Journey to a World Without Borders* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2021).
- John Washington, *The Dispossessed: A Story of Asylum at the US-Mexican Border and Beyond* (New York: Verso, 2019).
- Harsha Walia, *Border & Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).



# CHAPTER 5: DEMBOLIZING WAR

## Discussion Questions

1. How much money does your country spend on its military budget? How does this compare to spending on other things in the national budget?
2. Why do you think the US economy is so invested in the military-industrial complex? What are some measures needed to disconnect economics and politics from militarism, weapons, and war in the United States (or other countries)?
3. How has war impacted your life or the lives people you know? Have you directly experienced armed conflict? Do you have family or friends in the military? Have you been impacted by wartime domestic policies, military budgets, environmental harms, or changes to immigration or travel policies related to war?
4. What corporate connections exist between war and other issues you care about, or aspects of your daily life? Can you think of companies that make weapons that also make other products you use, or that have been involved in other aspects of state violence?
5. What systemic harms or oppressions are exacerbated by war (i.e. gender or racial inequalities)? Do you think these oppressions are inherent or inevitable in the context of war? Do you think systemic discrimination and oppression help facilitate war?
6. What are some alternatives to armed conflict that could help achieve more peaceful and just international relations, or reduce tensions between groups within countries?

## Suggested Activities

1. Map out how many US military bases are in or near your community, or in your country. Investigate how these bases have impacted local economies or if there have been harms committed against local populations. Consider joining anti-base networks and call for the withdrawal of bases from your community or country.
2. Get involved with or support a disarmament or demilitarization campaign or organization that is working to ban weapons, reduce military spending, end arms transfers, or divest from weapon manufacturers.
3. Write op-eds or blogs about the need for disarmament, demilitarization, and ending war in connection with other issues, such as climate change, police violence, etc.

## Recommended Reading

- Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).
- Justice for Muslims Collective, HEART Women & Girls, Vigilant Love, the Partnership to End Gendered Islamophobia, Project South, the Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans, and the US Campaign for Palestinian Rights, *Abolishing the War on Terror, Building Communities of Care: A Grassroots Policy Agenda*, March 2021, <https://communityresourcehub.org/resources/abolishing-the-war-on-terror-building-communities-of-care-a-grassroots-policy-agenda/>.
- International Women's Network against Militarism, *A Feminist Vision of Genuine Security and Creating a Culture of Life*, April 2021, <http://iwnam.org/2021/04/13/a-feminist-vision-of-genuine-security-and-creating-a-culture-of-life/>.
- Megan MacKenzie and Nicole Wegner, eds., *Feminist Solutions for Ending War* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).
- David Vine, *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2015).
- Dean Spade and Aaron Belkin, "Queer Militarism?! The Politics of Military Inclusion Advocacy in Authoritarian Times," *GLQ* 27, no. 2 (2021): 281–307.

## CHAPTER 6:

# DECOMMISSIONING NUCLEAR WEAPONS

### Discussion Questions

1. Do you think nuclear weapons provide security? If so, for whom? And at what cost? Do you think “nuclear deterrence” is a valid national security policy? Why or why not?
2. What ideas and arguments does mainstream nuclear weapon discourse and policy ignore or preclude? Whose perspectives and experiences are included in discussions that you’ve heard or been part of regarding nuclear weapons?
3. How have you been impacted by nuclear weapons? Are there missile siloes, uranium mines, weapon production facilities, nuclear test sites, or waste storage sites in or near your community? Does your country host US nuclear weapons or spend money on the maintenance and modernization of nuclear weapons?
4. Do you think nuclear weapons will be used again in an act of war, or by miscalculation or mistake? Why or why not? Are you concerned when the presidents of nuclear-armed states make threats about using their nuclear weapons? Can you think of other ways nuclear weapons cause harm even without being detonated?
5. Why do you think nuclear weapons still exist, even though we know how much harm they cause and even though most countries in the world support their prohibition and elimination? What economic, political, gendered, and racialized systems of power impact nuclear weapon policies?
6. What lessons can we learn from transformative justice in relation to nuclear weapons? Can we repair the damage of nuclear weapons and work to prevent future harm while we work for their elimination? What alternative systems could be built to achieve and maintain peace and security instead of weapons of mass destruction?

### Suggested Activities

1. Use NukeMap ([nukemap.org/nukemap](http://nukemap.org/nukemap)) to see what would happen to your town or city if a nuclear weapon was detonated there. Investigate what would happen to hospitals, schools, homes, and other civilian infrastructure.
2. Host a screening of the virtual reality documentary *On the Morning You Wake (To the End of the World)* ([www.onthemorningyouwake.com](http://www.onthemorningyouwake.com)) or Princeton University’s simulation Plan A ([sgs.princeton.edu/the-lab/plan-a](http://sgs.princeton.edu/the-lab/plan-a)). Talk to your friends and family about the humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclear weapons.
3. Join the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. Encourage your government to join the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons ([www.icanw.org/the\\_treaty](http://www.icanw.org/the_treaty)), your parliamentarians or congressional representatives to sign the ICAN Parliamentary Appeal ([pledge.icanw.org](http://pledge.icanw.org)), and your city or town to join the ICAN Cities Appeal ([cities.icanw.org](http://cities.icanw.org)). Divest your money from nuclear weapons and encourage your bank, pension fund, or city council to do the same ([divest.icanw.org](http://divest.icanw.org)).

### Recommended Reading

- Ray Acheson, *Banning the Bomb, Smashing the Patriarchy* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021).
- Carol Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” *Signs* 12, no. 4 (1987): 687–718.
- Daniel Ellsberg, *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).
- Vincent J. Intondi, *African Americans Against the Bomb* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).
- New Left Review, ed., *Extermination and Cold War* (London: Verso, 1982).
- Beatrice Finn, ed., *Unspeakable Suffering: The Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons*, report, Reaching Critical Will, February 2013, [https://www.icanw.org/unspeakable\\_suffering\\_the\\_humanitarian\\_impact\\_of\\_nuclear\\_weapons](https://www.icanw.org/unspeakable_suffering_the_humanitarian_impact_of_nuclear_weapons).



# CHAPTER 7: DEMOLISHING CAPITALISM

## Discussion Questions

1. How have you seen neoliberal economic policies, such as austerity measures, affect your country or community?
2. What do you see as the relationship between capitalism and the other structures of violence discussed in this book—or others not covered here?
3. Do you think growth is necessary for development? Why or why not? If yes, how can we address the relationship between growth and environmental degradation and inequalities? Do you think degrowth provides a useful approach to economic justice and environmental sustainability? Why or why not? What other approaches exist that put focus on establishing a balance between environmental and human needs?
4. What forces have been at work to bind militarism and capitalism so closely together? Who profits from this relationship and who suffers from it? How are patriarchy and racism and other systems of oppression bound up in this relationship?
5. What is your experience with economic inequalities? Have you experienced gender, racial, or other discriminations and differentiations in relation to work, care, or other aspects of your life?
6. What lessons for economic justice and environmental sustainability can be learned from non-mainstream approaches, including Indigenous, feminist, socialist, and other perspectives? What would you change about or add to these different frameworks?

## Suggested Activities

1. There is a common saying that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. But capitalism is a relatively modern economic system and many abolitionists and others have envisioned and, in some places, enacted alternative systems. Draft some points for talking to people about how capitalism is not the only option, and what we need to do to build an alternative economic system that works for the majority instead of the minority.
2. Learn more about degrowth economics and consider what steps you can advocate for within your community or country to promote economic justice and environmental sustainability.
3. The end of the chapter provides some “what if” suppositions about alternative economic choices. Add to this list with your ideas for changes to mainstream political economy.

## Recommended Reading

- Giorgos Kallis, Susan Paulson, Giacomo D'Alisa, and Federico Demaria, *The Case for Degrowth* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).
- Jason Hickel, *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (London: William Heinemann, 2020).
- Martha E. Gimenez, *Marx, Women, and Capitalist Social Reproduction: Marxist Feminist Essays* (Boston: Brill, 2018).
- Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).
- Richard Seymour, *Against Austerity: How We Can Fix the Crisis They Made* (London: Pluto Press, 2014).
- The Red Nation, *The Red Deal: Indigenous Action to Save Our Earth* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2021).

# CONCLUSION

## Discussion Questions

1. How do you define security or safety? What do you think are necessary actions or systems to achieve your vision?
2. Why does abolition require creative and collaborative imagination and action? How can cultivating intentional relationships and participating in collectives help us to imagine new worlds? What relationships would you like to nurture or build?
3. How can we move beyond the binary of success and failure? How can we embrace an attitude of experimentation and imagination? How can you help others do the same?
4. Do you see feminism, anti-racism, and other anti-oppression frameworks for thought and action as being important for abolition? Why or why not?
5. How can you practice hope? How can you practice imagining new solutions and possibilities for responding to harm?
6. What would a world beyond states look like? How can we build systems of mutual cooperation, solidarity, and care beyond formal state institutions and mechanisms?

## Suggested Activities

1. Support a local mutual aid organization and work within your community to provide promiscuous care.
2. Join an organization or coalition working to abolish structures of state violence. Learn about movement strategy and connect with others working for social, political, economic, and environment justice and peace.
3. Make transnational connections with activists, organizers, and academics working for change in other locations and across issues. Learn from their strategies and struggles and act in solidarity with them.

## Recommended Reading

- Critical Resistance, *Toward Healthy Communities Now and Beyond COVID-19*, April 2020, <https://criticalresistance.org/resources/toward-healthy-communities-now-beyond-covid-19-a-platform-for-abolition-during-the-pandemic-by-critical-resistance/>.
- Verónica Gago, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (London: Verso, 2020).
- Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, forthcoming).
- Kate Hamaji, Kumar Rao, Marbre Stahly-Butts, Janaé Bonsu, Charlene Caruthers, Roselyn Berry, and Denzel McCampbell, *Freedom to Thrive: Reimagining Safety & Security in our Communities* (Washington, DC: The Center for Popular Democracy, Law for Black Lives, Black Youth Project 100, 2017).
- Tim Hollo, "There's No Time Left Not to Do Everything," *Arena Quarterly* 3, September 2020.
- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).