



*“...imprisonment would not  
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democratized.”*

**Abolition  
&  
Dystopia**

**Like slavery, imprisonment would not be destroyed – it would be democratized.**

**We would do better to reject every reform and technological solution offered by the economy, confront rather than accept the gradualism of activist policy makers,**

***and participate  
uncompromisingly in active  
revolt wherever it occurs.***

**Article first published by Mask Magazine in Neal Shirley's column *Prisons Are for Burning*.**

**Neal Shirley has been involved in a range of (anti) prison related groups for about eight years. Most recently he's been involved with a project that corresponds with prisoners and solicits and disseminates their news and analysis across North Carolina's prison system. He co-authored the book *Dixie Be Damned: 300 Years of Insurrection in the American South*. He makes a living doing food service work and teaching mixed martial arts to kids of all ages, and spends his free time fighting in cages and scheming new ways to deep-fry southern delicacies.**

**A** century and a half ago, a huge social struggle was waged over the question of slavery on this continent. Slave uprisings and mass escapes were increasingly common, and conflicts internal to the ruling class over what kinds of colonial and industrial expansion should take place added to the tension. The American Civil War was a product of the state intervening in this struggle, and it resulted in new regimes of bondage and control.

The loophole in the 13th amendment, which abolished slavery “except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted,” made this abundantly clear, and the politics of Reconstruction even more so. While occupying the former Confederacy, the Union Army itself enforced labor contracts by which Black people were often made to work for their former masters. Former slaves were evicted from lands they had taken over, industrial projects increased in number and scope, and the wage labor and convict lease systems favored by northern capitalists solved the labor problem created by the absence of slavery. Bondage was not destroyed by slavery's abolition – it was democratized.

Today, we witness an unprecedented renewal of the discourse of “abolition,” now with the idealistic gaze firmly set upon the massive prison-industrial complex that has come to define our lives, in particular those of young men of color. This rhetorical framework, by which “radical” reforms, activism, and technological development will replace prisons and even policing, has emerged not just in the usual mish-mash of liberal and leftist scenes, but in the very heart of the capitalist State. Fueled by the financial collapse of 2008 and subsequent budget crises, everyone from Democratic hopefuls to right-wing judges can be heard sounding the call: We need to shrink prisons, move away from “mass incarceration,”

and develop “alternatives” to prison. All of a sudden, the president and his opposition all sound an awful lot like Angela Davis.

The vanguard of this political development is also a technological one: emergent technologies in population analytics, biometrics, genetic mapping, and computing systems suddenly make prison abolition a real possibility for 21st century state and capitalism. Take the booming technology of ankle bracelets, for example.

North Carolina has tripled the use of electronic monitors since 2011. California has placed 7,500 people on GPS ankle bracelets as part of a realignment program aimed to reduce prison populations. SuperCom, an Israeli-based Smart ID and electronic monitor producer, announced in early July 2014 that they were jumping full force into the US market, predicting this will be a \$6 billion-a-year global industry by 2018. The praise singers of electronic monitoring are also re-surfacing. In late June 2014, high-profile blogger Dylan Matthews posted a story on Vox Media, headlined “Prisons

are terrible and there’s finally a way to get rid of them.” He enthusiastically argued that the most “promising” alternative “fits on an ankle.”

The techno-utopian vision here is boundless. One pair of enthusiasts even drafted a document, “Beyond the Bars,” that envisions a world where “advanced risk modeling, geospatial analytics, smartphone technology, and principles from the study of human behavior” allow for a smartwatch to control the movement of entire populations.

Maybe this sounds like conspiracy theorist nonsense – like a scene from Hollywood’s renewed obsession with dystopian settings – but think about all the developments we’ve already accepted into daily life that could make this totalizing reality possible: metal detectors at public schools, drug tests at public housing, breathalyzer machines in our cars, police body cameras, mass data collection via cell phones, GPS, halfway houses, community policing substations and permanent police checkpoints at the entrances to certain neighborhoods, city

planning courses at universities, DNA mapping...The list is pretty endless, and it doesn’t take a paranoid wingnut to start to understand how prisons might actually be abolished. Instead of prison being a discrete, physical place, a “state of exception” from normal life that houses only a small minority of the population, prison would become a nameless normality, something a plurality if not majority of people are interacting with, in some version, every day. Like slavery, imprisonment would not be destroyed – it would be democratized.

None of this goes to say that we shouldn’t destroy prisons. Prison and police are the absolute enemy of all liberatory efforts in the 21st century, by desire and necessity. But we would do well not to fall into the same limitations as did slavery’s critics in the antebellum United States. However broad its proponents may declare their concerns to be, prison abolitionism, in its name, scope, and vision, is primarily limited to reforming one aspect of domination and oppression in this society, not destroying that form of control. And it

offers the state a crucial escape route through already existent strategies and technologies of profit, punishment, and control.

We would do better to reject every reform and technological solution offered by the economy, confront rather than accept the gradualism of activist policy makers, and participate uncompromisingly in active revolt wherever it occurs. Developing our own communities of care and solidarity as we rebel against the world around us, offers the only real “alternative to prison.” As a discourse, “abolition” has immediate appeal, but the fruit it will most likely bear can already be seen in the reflection of a body camera or heard in the quiet beeping of an ankle bracelet.