

Carceral realism: Is there no alternative?

Punishment and imprisonment are deeply embedded in our thinking but as Oly Durose argues, we are capable of building less violent, more nurturing solutions to society's problems

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*‘Why didn’t they just leave the place?’ – Ursula K. Le Guin, The Dispos-
sessed*

In Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, children in the fictional world of Anarres are learning about the history of their neighbouring planet, Urras. A prison-less utopia, Anarres is diametrically opposed to the hyper-capitalist police state of Urras in almost every way. Dumbfounded, the Annarresti children struggle to fathom a violent reality they have never known. For the Urrasti however, it’s a reality they have no recourse to escape.

Back on planet Earth, more than ten million people are currently in prison. They are joined by hundreds of thousands more confined inside police custody, jails, immigration detention centres, border checkpoints, offshore processing centres and work camps. Incarceration does not have to be physical, though, to constitute captivity. The Anarresti’s stupefaction is deliberately jarring, because it reminds us that we have taken the inevitability of our own punitive systems for granted, imprisoned by our collective refusal to imagine something different.

Le Guin is not the only author to trigger curiosity in the question of collective imagination. In *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Mark Fisher laments that as marketisation seizes more territory in our daily lives, capitalism naturalises itself as an unavoidable condition of human existence. Perhaps there is no better proof of *Capitalist Realism*’s influence than in the author’s inability to police the borders of its own brilliant simplicity. For there is one kind of ‘realism’ that is more potent than any other, a kind that Le Guin’s utopian universe exists to expunge. And that’s carceral realism – the widespread sense that not only is carcerality the only viable system of conflict resolution, but that it is impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative to it.

Capitalist-carceral realism

Carceral realism is more than just advocacy for prisons. It embodies a deep-seated dependency on carceral regimes for making sense of our existence. Why would anybody refrain from harmful behaviour, and how could victims find solace, if there was no punitive consequence? These questions frame the subject of carcerality as the other, but if we asked these questions about ourselves, perhaps we’d reach more imaginative conclusions. Do you try and avoid harming others because of an all-encompassing fear of retribution? And when you err, is it an infliction of punishment that invokes regret? Or are you motivated by something else, perhaps an intuition to look out for each other?

These are not questions that our carceral state encourages us to contemplate. Indeed, the ability to protect itself from conceptual resistance is something that carcerality shares with capitalism. By forcing us to fight over basic resources, capitalism moulds

us into competitive beings, creating the very theory of human nature that justifies the perpetuity of our dog-eat-dog world. Likewise, carcerality naturalises its own continuation by compelling us to define human beings by their criminality. People behind bars are ‘inmates’, dehumanised as worthy objects of suffering. They are ‘offenders’, instrumentalised to stoke our most irrational anxieties about human behaviour. The very existence of the carceral state convinces us that we cannot live without it.

Capitalist realism and carceral realism do not just operate in similar ways. They rely on each other to survive. Carceral realism is, really, a belief in two inevitabilities. One, the inevitability of interpersonal conflict. Two, the inevitability of a punitive response. Herein lies the circularity of carceral realism: neither of these beliefs can exist without the other. Today, racialised and marginalised communities bear the brunt of laws that criminalise poverty, exploitation, inequality, addiction and mental illness. Far from neutral institutions, prisons respond punitively to a very narrow conception of harm, leaving a much wider system of social, economic and carceral violence in its wake.

In the absence of any honest reckoning about the function of prisons, carceral realists can only limit some of the worst symptoms without curing the disease. Just as capitalist realists ensure social reforms are contained within the boundaries of capital, carceral realists propose reforms (more professional staff, cleaner prisons, more rehabilitation) that entrench carcerality itself, particularly for those deemed truly worthy of confinement. To borrow a phrase from Fisher, carceral realists ‘subordinate us all to a reality that is ‘capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment’. What, then, are we waiting for?

Everyday Abolition

To many, abolition is a utopian pipedream. Even among its sympathisers, there’s a tendency to treat a world without prisons as an ideal destination. This fails to recognise abolition as something that can guide us in our everyday lives, here and now. As academic-activist Sarah Lambie advocates, practicing ‘everyday abolition’ means undoing carceral logics wherever they are found. These carceral logics may not necessitate physical confinement, but they normalise punitive responses to harm by locating blame in the individual and inflicting suffering in return. These carceral logics are found in our workplaces: from verbal reprimands to termination. They are found in child-rearing: from being sent to the naughty step to being grounded. And they are found in our schools: from detentions to suspensions. While the omnipresence of carceral logics is suffocating, it also presents an opportunity to chip away at carcerality on several fronts at once.

Everyday abolition also means building networks of care to displace our retributory cravings. Practising mutual aid may seem like a tangential task, but it is an essential means of dismantling the political conditions that engender violence in all its forms. By striving to ensure that everybody in our communities has the resources they need

to lead collectively fulfilling lives, we break down the capitalist-carceral-realist cycle. That's because we erode the violent hierarchies of class, race and gender that mediate our interpersonal relationships.

That's not to say that we won't encounter conflicts of our own within these movements. But abolition starts with us, in our spaces, in our campaigns and in our communities. Rather than surrendering to our cravings for retribution, why not nurture collective compassion, care and healing instead? We can train each other in de-escalation and early intervention, teaching ourselves to respond to harm in ways that reduce our reliance on systems of state oppression. We can practice forms of community accountability that respond to violence with radical reflection, learning, love, and restitution. And we can move beyond mere insistence, and prove that a society without cages is possible.

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