

Road to Abolition: Analyzing “Defund the Police” and State Hegemony

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During the summer of 2020, a series of high-profile police killings of Black people ignited protests across America and the rest of the world. The deaths of George Floyd, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, and countless others sparked widespread outrage and compelled many to examine the inherent violence within policing institutions. Much like the Ferguson protests after the death of Mike Brown in 2014 and responses in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin’s murder in 2012, these movements exemplify an ongoing resistance to anti-Blackness and systemic violence. What may be unique about the movements of 2020 is that along with the worldwide resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, slogans such as “defund the police” entered the mainstream conversation on race and police brutality.

In an interview with *Democracy Now*, Angela Davis, a well-known political activist in the Black community, suggested that the combination of a global pandemic and highly publicized cases of racist policing led us to witness a struggle that “rapidly shifts popular consciousness and suddenly allows us to move in the direction of radical change.”¹ Long-time political organizers such as Davis have reasons to be excited about the radical potential of current movements. “Defund the police” is situated within the more radical call for the complete abolition of policing and prisons. To abolitionists like Mariame Kaba, defunding the police is a necessary step in undermining the hegemony of these institutions and a pathway to a society free from incarceration.²

A key contribution to abolitionism comes from the centuries-long legacy of the struggle for Black liberation. In her work *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander draws a direct connection between Slavery, Jim Crow-era racial segregation, and the modern system of incarceration. Alexander argues that in every era since its creation, the United States has employed a racialized system of social control.³ This system is inextricably connected with all systems of oppression, but most prominently white supremacy and capitalism.

In Gramscian terms, these structures and values are hegemonic to the nations of Canada and the United States.⁴ Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony can be broadly understood as an exercise of political power in civil society. It is both a social and political project.⁵ To obtain hegemony, the ruling groups strive to maintain control over the subaltern groups through extracting consent.⁶ Social hegemony and state domination work in conjunction to make the ideas of ruling groups appear universal, forcing these ideas onto subaltern groups without consent.⁷ The state, prisons, and police forces are all tools necessary for maintaining the hegemony of white supremacy and capitalism.⁸

In the past, reforms to the system have typically been suggested as a solution to the issue of police brutality, but today’s activists are calling for the abolition of the current system of policing entirely, as represented by the rallying cry “defund the police.” The traditional call to “reform the police” versus the current calls to “defund the police” demonstrate two fundamentally different approaches to the issue of police brutality. One is a call to amend and reinforce the hegemony of the police and, by extension, the state, while the other ultimately calls for the abolition of these institutions. White supremacy and capitalism have always been intrinsic to institutions of policing, yet many citizens who have consented to the socio-political hegemony of the state have seemingly participated in an outcry to dismantle its institutions. It is therefore remarkable that many are challenging common-sense notions of policing by rejecting reforms and demanding abolition.

This paper strives to explore police abolition and the potential of sustaining radical momentum by examining the traction of the call to “defund the police.” This will be done through a combination of theoretical analysis and original research. I will utilize Gramscian notions of hegemony, Neo-Marxism, and Critical Race Theory to articulate observations about abolitionism in the popular consciousness. Specifically, I aim to draw a direct connection between the calls of “defund the police” and abolition of all policing institutions. Furthermore, I will analyze Google Trends data surrounding statements associated with the 2020 protests such as “defund the police.” The rise and fall of these statements in popular discourse provide some insight as to how abolitionist ideas are sustained within the popular consciousness. It reflects the antagonism between the hegemon and subaltern, where dominant institutions attempt to reconcile and negotiate with dissenting voices.⁹

In exploring these works, I strive to understand the relationship between the turmoil of 2020, Black radicalism, abolition, and all movements of emancipation. I am a non-Black researcher, and therefore I do not personally experience anti-Blackness. My work must be considered an incomplete summary of abolition and Black radicalism. I do not strive to articulate the experiences of the Black community, instead I strive to provide an examination of solidarity from a non-Black perspective.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In light of the mass mobilizations against police brutality in 2020, Gramsci's concept of hegemony is central to understanding the political state's relationship to abolitionism. Notably, Gramsci does not characterize hegemony as inherently negative. In fact, a hegemonic project is almost essential for any attempt at establishing dominance and order. In modern society, however, hegemony must be understood in terms of colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy. The colonial, capitalist state is one that enacts systemic violence upon the subaltern and enables structures of oppression.¹⁰ Therefore, Marxism and Critical Race Theory are both necessarily incorporated into this framework.

The institutions of policing are tied directly to the hegemon's control over the subaltern, as it serves to extract consent and enforce domination.¹¹ The police provide direct means of suppressing counter-hegemony and maintain a carceral mindset within civil society, which shapes how harm and criminality are addressed at every level.¹² According to Steve Jones, a Gramsci scholar, policing institutions are coercive forces of the state that operate with high levels of consent.¹³ A resistance to policing is a resistance of more than excessive force, it is a resistance to all the founding ideas and institutions of white supremacy that permeate the state and civil society. It must be considered a fundamentally counter-hegemonic movement.

According to Gramsci, a counter-hegemonic revolution requires that each community member achieve self-consciousness and realize the proletariat's potential to influence hegemony.¹⁴ More importantly, counter-hegemony must be an ongoing process instead of one cataclysmic event.¹⁵ Abolitionism has been a long building resistance project that evolved from the struggle for Black liberation.¹⁶ It has always aimed to dismantle every institution of white supremacy, from Slavery to incarceration.

To properly analyze the current reality, we must contextualize it in terms of ongoing counter-hegemony

movements. Counter-hegemony is closely related to the concepts of common sense and good sense. Gramsci refers to ideas commonly held by social groups as "common sense," and it is revolutionized by "good sense."¹⁷ Thus, our confidence in the effectiveness of carceral justice constitute as common sense, whereas good sense is developed through counter-hegemonic responses to the failures of policing. Those interested in abolition must examine whether we are experiencing a common-sense revolution or a moment where revolutionary aesthetics are co-opted by state institutions to redirect radical energy towards maintaining its hegemony.

PAST CONDITIONS: THE ROOTS OF ABOLITION

Understanding the abolitionist struggle as a non-Black and non-incarcerated subaltern requires one to move beyond the independent, high-profile cases of racist policing and consider abolition as an ongoing, collective struggle. Abolitionism is related to all emancipatory struggles.¹⁸ It is key to study not only the Black Lives Matter movement, but also the broader resistance to white supremacy, incarceration, and all systems of oppression. The Gramscian analysis lays the foundation for conceptualizing the domination of these structures and this section details the expansiveness of their hegemony.

The Political State and the Hegemonic Project

Gramsci establishes that the hegemon exercises political dominance through disciplining the subaltern when consent does not emerge spontaneously.¹⁹ Institutions of policing are not simply impartial enactors of justice but are constructed by hegemonic societal forces and are active in maintaining order. Criminality must therefore be understood as a tool of the hegemon.

The imposition of colonial law marks the first step to the nation-building project of the emerging settler-colonial hegemon. By constructing legality that justifies colonial possession of the land and criminalizing Indigenous peoples, the United States and Canada enable their colonial expansion. The establishment of colonial judicial narratives over pre-existing Indigenous ones marks the new hegemonic project of white supremacy.²⁰ This process have also facilitated the development of Slavery and racial capitalism.

Davis indicates that Slavery has been, in many ways, a predecessor to the modern-day prison.²¹ Through the Thirteenth Amendment, Slavery was

abolished in America, except as a punishment for a crime. This directly resulted in immediate attempts to criminalize newly emancipated Black people. These mass incarcerations are rooted in the white supremacist tendency to reduce racialized individuals to the alien and the criminal.²² The War on Drugs gave rise to mass incarceration of racialized poor people and served to reinforce the racist assumption that Blackness is inherently criminal. It enables a system of racialized control and facilitates the globalization of capital based on militarism and labour exploitation.²³ Expanding Davis's analysis, Chandra Talpade Mohanty addresses how criminalization of racialized women specifically benefits a patriarchal capitalist empire. Prison labour as an emerging industry must be considered in context of the capitalist demands for cheap labour and in conjunction with the exploitation of women's work.²⁴

Through these perspectives, it can be concluded that imprisonment is a continuation of social structures rooted in the domination and exploitation of marginalized groups. The project of white supremacy is built upon the subjugation and disappearance of the racialized "undesirable." Similarly, capitalism categorizes individuals in terms of their productive value. Criminality is utilized to frame responses to alienation and economic exploitation as a matter of individual merit. Consequently, adherence to one's group identity becomes synonymous with order and security. Prisons emerge as instruments to control, segregate, and eliminate the "undesirable" members of society. Ruth Wilson Gilmore states that prisons are constructed to target the vulnerable of any demographic.²⁵ Therefore, one must consider the extensive systems of oppression which require tools of punishment and segregation.

Counter-Hegemony: Reform or Abolition?

Prison reform is not a novel concept. The management and ratification of the modern prison remained prevalent throughout its existence.²⁶ Just as most individuals today cannot envision a world without imprisonment, many once found it difficult to envision a world without Slavery or segregation.²⁷ Yet the modern prison itself was previously considered a progressive reform. The penitentiary was developed as an alternative to publicized corporal punishments, which supposedly offered a chance for rehabilitation through the more "humane" alternative of incarceration.²⁸

Notably, this reform emerged with the rise of the bourgeoisie and its concepts of individual rights.²⁹ The promises of liberal modernity cannot be separated from the elimination of alternate epis-

temologies, nor the prioritization of individual and property rights over the wellbeing of marginalized collectives.³⁰ From Australia, to the United States, to Canada, settler colonial states have been weaponizing the rhetoric of progress and civilization to frame Indigenous and Black communities as morally and socially deficient.³¹ The penitentiary does not address its own roots in criminality, punishment, and the nation-state. Therefore, it remains part of the neoliberal modern project that is centred around "civilizing" the colonized subaltern.³² Nevertheless, the penitentiary's transformations demonstrate that police and prisons are not static entities. These institutions are products of social processes and have the potential to be altered or abolished, despite the common-sense notion that they are essential to facilitating social order.

It is daunting to conceive of a project that would be adequate to replace the scope of the modern prison system. However, Davis stresses that there is no singular replacement to prisons.³³ Achieving complete decarceration of society requires one to question how punishment relates to justice and why punishment is tied with corporate profit. As Gilmore states, abolition is focused on the presence of life-saving communities, not the absence of prisons.³⁴ We must search for a "continuum of alternatives" that will replace the spaces prisons have taken up in our individual and collective consciousness.³⁵ Those who have taken up the chant of "defund the police" must expand their imaginations beyond shrinking police departments and towards a greater emancipatory project.

It is critical to draw a clear distinction between defunding and reforming the police. Resistance to incarceration has existed since the penitentiary's conception, but those who aimed to reform it have fundamentally different ideas from those who strived to abolish it.³⁶ Reforms are focused on funnelling resources towards police departments and seeking to preserve the power and authority of the police. Abolitionists point out that reform fails to address the fundamental issues within policing and reformist policies have had little to no impact on addressing the harms of policing.³⁷

When discussing the implications of the 2014 Ferguson protests, Davis states that organizers must "infuse a consciousness of the structural character of state violence into the movements that spontaneously arise."³⁸ This corresponds with Gramsci's discussion of common-sense, hegemony, and the subaltern realizing its revolutionary potential.³⁹ In order for the spontaneous movements to engage in long-lasting counter-hegemony, they must not be reduced to individual incidents. Though high-profile events have the

capacity to generate rapid mobilizations, organizing against police brutality cannot revolve around holding a singular perpetrator cop responsible: the movement must focus on the relationship between police violence and the broader industry of incarceration and American militarism.⁴⁰

Institutions also strive to neutralize the crisis by co-opting social movements and redirecting radical energy towards sustaining the hegemonic order. Gramsci and Fanon have warned that the subaltern cannot view incremental concessions as victories.⁴¹ Elevating individual subalterns to positions of power cannot be regarded as a substantial shift in the dynamic between the hegemon and the subaltern.⁴² Furthermore, electoral victories and incremental reforms that legitimize the colonial, capitalist nation-state cannot constitute social transformation. Similarly, Alexander highlights the various manifestations of a racial caste system in America. This analysis indicates that the white supremacist capitalist state has always managed to reinvent itself and reassert its dominance in moments of crisis.⁴³

Overall, theoretical discussions about the nature of abolitionism, the hegemony of policing, and possible challenges from dominant institutions are reflected in the movements of 2020. We must view them as a culmination of centuries of critiques and resistance to white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism. Defunding the police needs to be considered as part of a greater abolitionist movement and fundamentally different from reformist efforts.

CURRENT POSITIONS: ANALYZING MOVEMENTS OF 2020

One's conception of the current moment cannot be separated from one's understanding of abolitionism and Black resistance. The call to defund police has always been situated within a radical counter-hegemonic movement to undermine the white supremacist and capitalist state. The vitality of counter-hegemony is inextricably connected to the popular consciousness, as Gramsci notes that the subaltern's self-awareness is integral to the development of revolutionary potential.⁴⁴ To substantively explore the traction of the slogan, I opted to observe the popularity of the statement "defund the police" through Google Trends. Given the popularity of Google's search engine, observing the frequency of certain search terms can serve as an indication of the level of public attention directed at any given subject.

A Case Study in Google Trends

Google Trends is a tool for inputting key terms and rendering a graphic of their popularity over a certain timeframe. The data demonstrate the search frequency for any given term or phrase. I collected data surrounding two sets of terms. The first set is "defund the police," "abolish the police," and "police reform." The second set is "prison abolition" and "police abolition." This comparison can demonstrate whether abolitionist slogans are overtaking reformist ones. I compared their popularity from December 1, 2019 to December 1, 2020. The regions were respectively set to either the United States or worldwide.

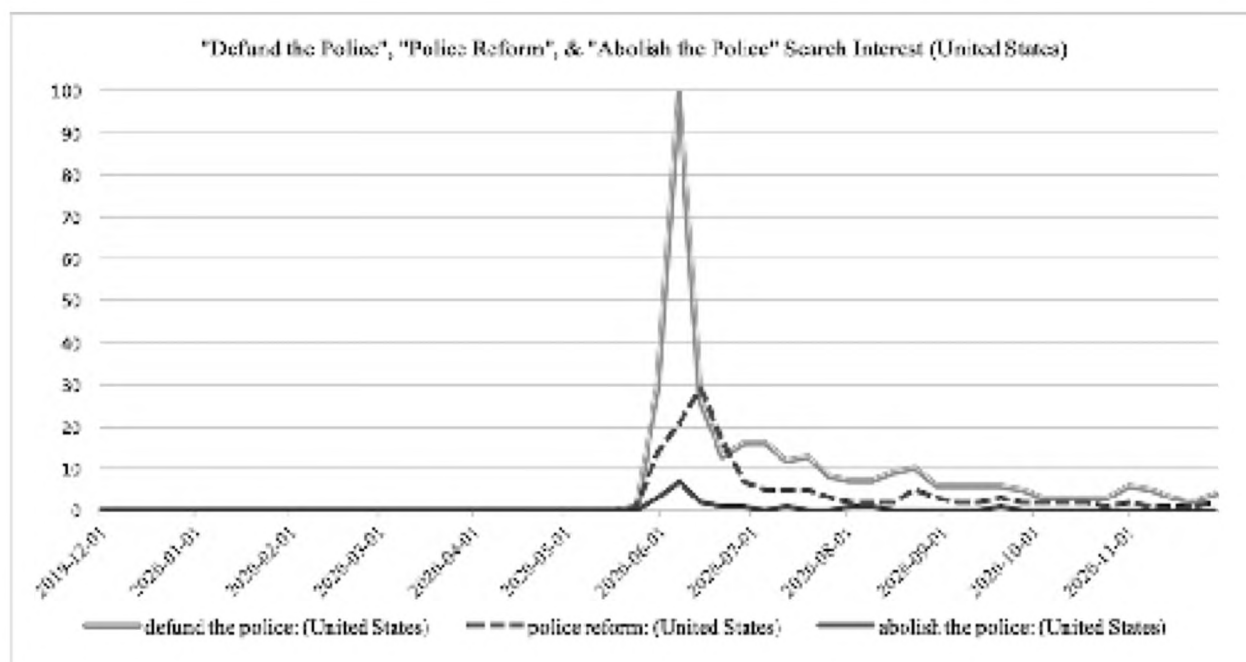


FIGURE 1

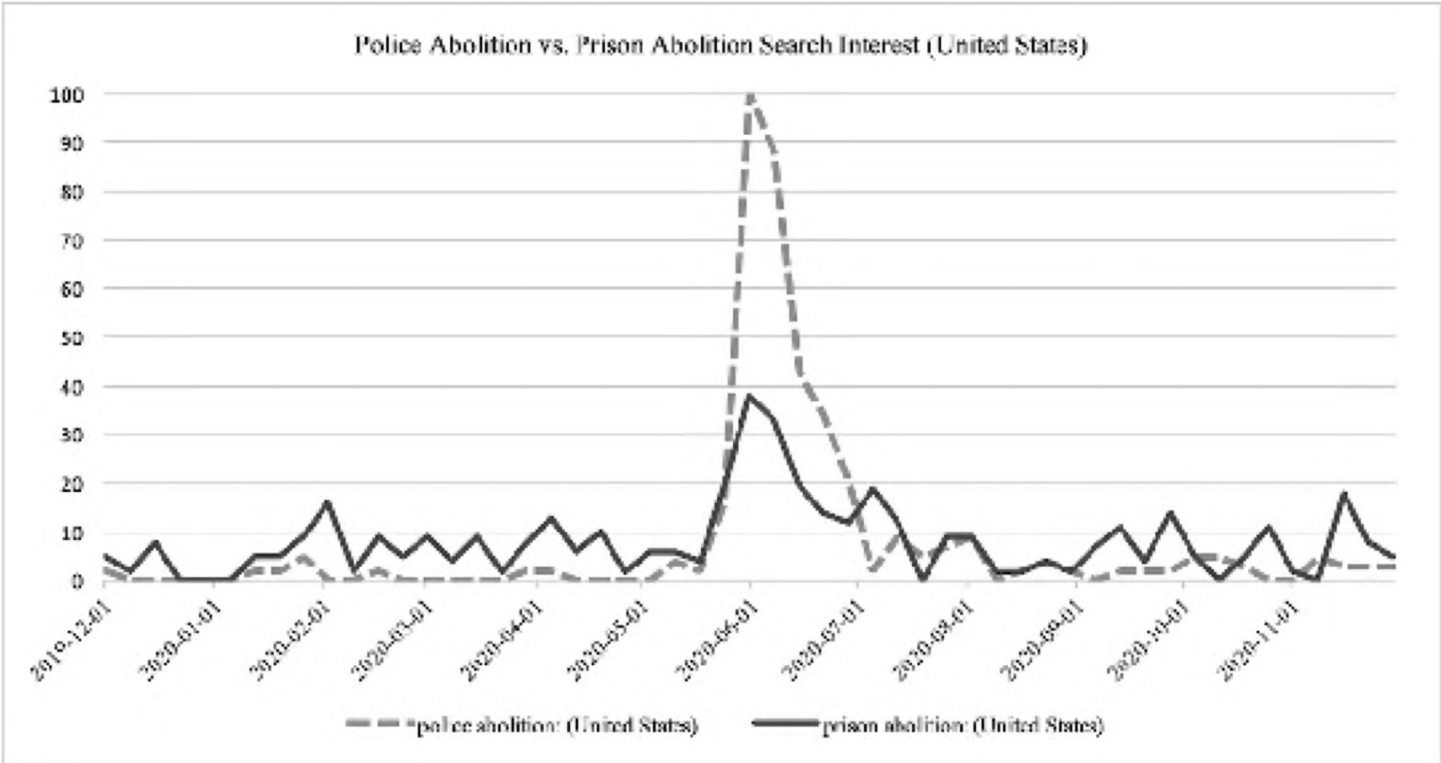


FIGURE 2

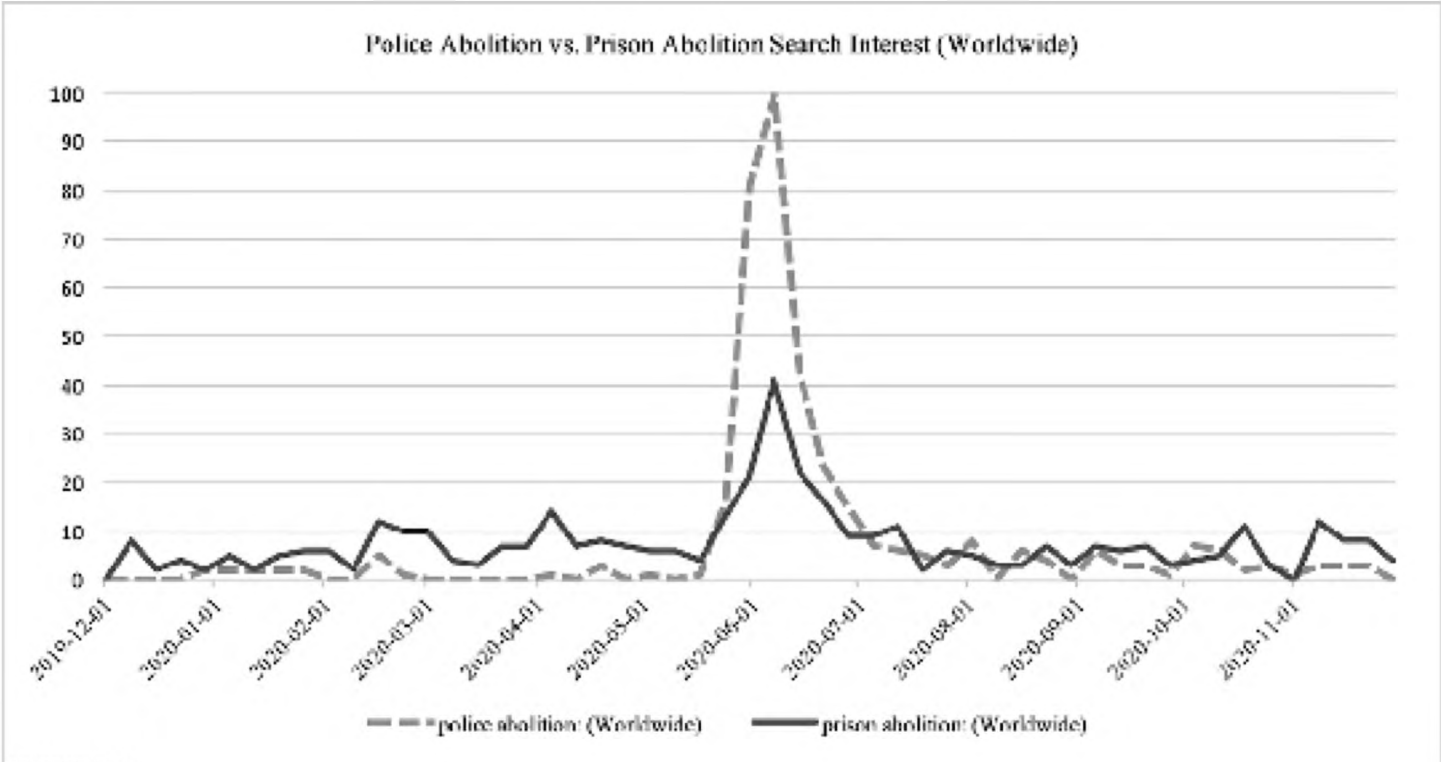


FIGURE 3

The three figures demonstrate the findings from Google Trends. It is important to note the significance of the values on the vertical axis. The website states that the numbers on the graph

represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means that there was not enough data for this term.⁴⁵

The graphs all clearly depict a heightened interest in all topics related to policing during June and July, which corresponds with the height of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. From Figure 1, it is clear that “defund the police” did significantly overtake “reform the police” during its peak. It also continues to generate more search interest than reform over the next few months. However, “defund the police” and “reform the police” both vastly overshadow “abolish the police,” indicating that they remain part of the mainstream discourse, while abolition is less discussed.

In Figures 2 and 3, the statements “police abolition” and “prison abolition” also show a peak in search interest over June and July of 2020, and both exhibit a more sustained popularity over time. “Prison abolition” seems to have an ongoing level of interest that is higher than that of “police abolition” prior to June 2020, but “police abolition” shows a sharp surge, and then overtakes “prison abolition” in search interest. Afterwards, the two remained close in popularity. Their eventual proximity suggests that the smaller number of individuals with sustained interest engaged with both slogans. The worldwide and the American results did not contain any major differences.

I have omitted a comparison of “Black Lives Matter” and other related terms because they drastically surpassed the ones examined in search popularity, making it impossible to visually distinguish between the less popular terms. A similar effect was revealed when comparing the statements “defund the police,” “police abolition,” and “prison abolition,” where the latter two were simply too insignificant to meaningfully compare. These trends are significant as they indicate that individuals who are searching Black Lives Matter have substantially decreased interest in engaging with its core issues. It also suggests that individuals who are aware of defunding the police are not necessarily drawing connections to the action’s radical abolitionist roots. Overall, it reveals superficial engagement by so-called allies of the movement who have favoured apolitical statements as part of wide-sweeping diversity declarations without acknowledging the true extent of the emancipatory project.

This case study clearly demonstrates the dramatic rise and fall in popularity of “defund the police.” It offers imperfect yet important insight into how the popular consciousness engages with notions of abolition. The data can be easily interpreted as discouraging, as the rapid rises quickly fell over the next few months. However, Gramsci characterized power as an ongoing process, therefore it is counterproductive to search the data for some indicator of a drastic decisive common-sense revolution.⁴⁶ According to this definition, it would be impossible for one cataclysmic event to dramatically shift common-sense. The overall message of defunding the police has not necessarily been outright rejected, but it is certainly at risk for being repurposed to align with hegemonic interests. The subaltern will inevitably come across contradictions, pushbacks, and moments of radicalization as it reckons with the hegemonic project.

Despite these challenges, the data demonstrate a clear moment when many are recognizing the possibility for abolishing policing. Regardless of

whether they are aware of the full extent of defunding the police, many are encountering the notion that the authority of the police can be challenged. The significance of this moment cannot be discounted. Much like how abolition places incarceration and policing in the context of many systems of oppression, the fervour of this moment is propelled by other social and economic crises such as the increasing threat of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. An overall sense of insecurity holds potential to either allow the state to consolidate its power or unite the subaltern to resist hegemonic structures that are ultimately unsustainable.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This case study on Google Trends has created a departure point for conceptualizing continuous and non-continuous solidarity with abolitionists. Analyzing the impact of the 2020 protests allows one to understand the potential of the current moment and to identify the obstacles that organizers currently face. To view police brutality as an isolated incident and call for the punishment of individual perpetrators reinforces a carceral mentality. As Davis stated, the indictment of officers is not necessarily an indicator for change. It is precisely in the interest of the hegemon to allow these perpetrators to be regarded as faulty actors that can be eliminated, rather than viewing the entire system of policing as inherently flawed.⁴⁷ This fragmented understanding of social movements reinforces the idea that one can simply isolate and amend one piece of an entire system, which corresponds with the notion that imprisonment corrects inherently faulty actors in society. Both of those approaches overlook the functions of structural violence, which is simultaneously the most significant cause of social harm and inseparable from the notion that individuals can be categorized as inherently productive or inherently criminal.

Utilizing incarceration to combat the violence of policing ultimately upholds the hegemony of the Prison Industrial Complex and enables it to continue to harm marginalized communities. If the outrage of the non-incarcerated and non-Black subaltern only concerns itself with searching for justice through individuality, then it fails to substantially align itself with the oppressed. The rapid rise and fall of popular interest towards defunding the police exhibits this, as mainstream resistance to policing materialized in the face of high-profile incidents of police murders and failed to recognize the ongoing violence by the white supremacist state. One of the major challeng-

es for subaltern groups is realizing the revolutionary potential of interconnecting liberation movements, therefore viewing emancipation as inextricably connected to one's life and happiness, not as an objective separate from it.

Both Fanon and Gramsci have warned that the hegemon will attempt to maintain its hegemony through negotiations and concessions. Often, these concessions will be regarded as victories despite the incremental changes they bring.⁴⁸ The hegemon is forced to constantly reinvent itself as a response to the resistance of its hegemony, which is precisely what the modern prison has done.

By allowing for concessions and representations of the subaltern within hegemonic institutions, the subaltern is inclined to continue to relate and consent to hegemony.⁴⁹ For instance, the Democratic Party in the United States positions itself as the opposition to white supremacy and perpetuates the message that voting is the ideal solution to social problems. As the 2020 presidential election approached, the corresponding decline in the calls to defund or abolish the police demonstrated a detachment between progressive policies and mainstream discourse. The Democratic Party's utilization of the faces of racialized people, women, and other marginalized groups demonstrates an attempt to appeal to the subaltern, yet this results in watered-down policies and obfuscation of the violence inherent to the white supremacist state.

Regarding the electoral victory of Joe Biden as an absolute victory of the subaltern is dangerous for organizing counter-hegemony. Despite grassroots organizing being integral to the victory of the Democratic Party, it attributes its success to the party establishment. Through elevating individual members of "diverse" groups to positions of power, the administration will continue to reinforce the notion that the subaltern has been adequately represented. Gramsci specifically warns about this form of representation.⁵⁰ Organizers who critique state institutions will be regarded as "divisive." This has been demonstrated through Democratic Party members blaming their electoral losses on the so-called "radical" calls to defund the police.⁵¹ The decline in the interest towards defunding and abolishing the police that occurred during the electoral process is indicative of the attempt to remove abolitionism from the popular consciousness, because despite their claims of anti-racism, the Democratic Party is complicit in enabling structural violence.

Ultimately, it is important to note that although abolition may have been erased in mainstream

discourses surrounding police brutality, it does not indicate a lack of organizing efforts. The sustained interest towards prison abolition demonstrates how organizers have been constantly preparing for opportunities for mass movements to arise. Prison abolition mirrors the abolition of Slavery precisely because many understand it is a struggle that may outlive them.⁵² Yet this does not dim the hopes for a shifting hegemony. Most community organizing that relates directly to developing networks of resistance to incarceration occurs outside of the spotlight. The outburst of energy during moments of mass mobilizations are a product of decades of ongoing organizing. It is unrealistic to expect individuals to constantly sustain the same high levels of energy, and therefore, it is integral to view social movements as continuous and interconnected.⁵³

Overall, the conditions for counter-hegemony are being developed through heightened interest towards vocabulary associated with abolition. It is no doubt a powerful moment and perhaps a beginning of many individuals' radicalization. However, it is also evident that the connection between defunding the police and the abolition of all institutions of policing has not been substantially established. The more "radical" goal behind the slogan is being omitted in hegemonic social justice discourse. This creates opportunities for the state to posture itself as the champion of the subaltern and maintain its hegemony. Hegemonic institutions present themselves as the solution while simultaneously perpetuating the conditions of systemic violence. Abolition must be realized through transforming how harm and conflict are addressed at the interpersonal and institutional levels. It cannot be isolated from all emancipatory struggles. Establishing continuous ways of practising abolition and strengthening ongoing community care networks are key to sustaining counter-hegemony. Abolition must necessarily become so integral to life that it is impossible to isolate it. Only then will the subaltern understand the full scope of the hegemonic project, reject incremental solutions, and realize its revolutionary potential.

Endnotes

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5. Noaman G. Ali, "Reading Gramsci through Fanon: Hegemony before Dominance in Revolutionary Theory," *Rethinking Marxism* 27, no. 2 (2015): 242, doi:10.1080/08935696.2015.1007793.
6. George Hoare and Nathaniel Sperber, *An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 121.
7. Ali, "Reading Gramsci through Fanon," 243.
8. Hoare and Sperber, *An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci*, 126–127.
9. "Subaltern" describes the social groups that the "hegemon" exerts control over. An important element of Gramscian hegemony is that it depends on the consent of the subaltern and does not always rely on domination through force. This struggle of power often leads to political negotiation and intellectual persuasion in order for the hegemon to continue to secure the subaltern's consent; Hoare and Sperber, 125–126; and Ali, "Reading Gramsci through Fanon," 241.
10. Hoare and Sperber, *An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci*, 123–124.
11. Jones, *Antonio Gramsci*, 49–50.
12. Kaba, *We Do This 'til We Free Us*, 112. The logic of punishment and imprisonment creates a carceral mindset which prevails in all government institutions. The authority of prisons is upheld through utilizing punishment and criminalization as the primary source of accountability. A carceral mindset reinforces stigma against those labelled as criminals and suggests punishment is a valid solution to social marginalization.
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27. Davis, 3, 7, 45.
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34. Kushner, "Is Prison Necessary?"
35. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 46.
36. Kushner, "Is Prison Necessary?"
37. Kushner.

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39. Ali, "Reading Gramsci through Fanon," 251.
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