

ABOLITION DEMOCRACY: THEORY AND PRAXIS

LESSON PLAN: SESSION 6

Session 6: Abolish Prisons

What does it mean for an institution like the prison, founded on the very notion of reforming the delinquent, to constantly be defective, deficient, or deviant itself, and constantly in need of reform? How should we think about an institution like the prison that exists in a constant state of needing to be reformed?

In the media and public debate, we are constantly confronted with these arguments and the choice between reform or abolition.

W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of "abolition democracy" suggests that this is a false dilemma. It is a trap. Neither piecemeal reforms, nor abolition alone would truly advance the cause of racial justice. Neither one, standing alone, properly addresses the legacy of systemic racism in this country. Instead, we need to pursue, simultaneously, the abolition of these punitive institutions *and* the invention of new institutions guided by a different paradigm than punishment.

That is the lesson of Angela Davis's writings and the work of so many prison abolitionists.

In this session, we reflect and discuss these ideas and the broader debate over the reform versus abolition of the prison.

Readings and Podcast:

Ruth Wilson Gilmore *Makes the Case for Abolition*, The Intercept, Vol 1. (54 min) and Vol. 2 (31 min), [available here](#).

Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2023.

Kaba, Mariame, and Kelly Hayes. "A Jailbreak of the Imagination: Seeing Prisons for What They Are and Demanding Transformation." *Truthout*, May 3, 2018. <https://truthout.org/articles/a-jailbreak-of-the-imagination-seeing-prisons-for-what-they-are-and-demanding-transformation/>.

McLeod, Allegra. "Prison Abolition and Grounded Justice," 62 *UCLA L. Rev.* 1156 (2015): 1156-1239. Available at https://www.uclalawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/McLeod_6.2015.pdf.

Van Buren, Deena. "Imagine a World Without Prison," TED Talk.

Multimedia:

Columbia Center for Contemporary Critical Thought. Abolition 9/13 | Prison Abolition with Reginald Dwayne Betts, Allegra McLeod, and Bernard E. Harcourt. February 4, 2021. <https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/abolition1313/9-13-prison-abolition/>.

Additional Reference:

“A World Without Walls” Abolitionist Toolkit, *Critical Resistance*, [available here](#).

Harcourt, Bernard E. “[Reducing Mass Incarceration: Lessons from the Deinstitutionalization of Mental Hospitals in the 1960s](#),” 9 *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law* 53-88 (2011).

Kushner, Rachel. “Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 17, 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html>.

Reading Notes

Ruth Wilson Gilmore Makes the Case for Abolition, The Intercept

- This is a long interview covering police and prison abolition from a variety of angles and threads together both the theory behind abolitionism and the ways in which abolitionist struggle intersects with other struggles and movements in history and today.
- Gilmore highlights that the reductionist view of prison abolition – that it is unrealistic to eliminate prisons overnight and simply let things happen– fails to consider the conditions under which harms occur and the systems actually needed to make sure they do not continue.

Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete?

- This was one of the first foundational texts on prison abolition. It distinguishes between prison reform and prison abolition, the ties between contemporary prisons and the United States’s history of chattel slavery, gender injustice and the prison system, the prison industrial complex as a system, and abolitionist alternatives.

Kaba and Hayes, “A Jailbreak of the Imagination: Seeing Prisons for What They Are and Demanding Transformation.”

- This essay is particularly important because it was written in 2018, just prior to the uprisings in 2020 that would cast the idea of prison abolition into the mainstream. It is important to read this text as a crucial step from the early 1990s to the current conceptions of prison abolition. Consider especially how this article denaturalizes the idea of the prison.

Questions:

Ruth Wilson Gilmore Makes the Case for Abolition, The Intercept

- Gilmore asks, “Under what kinds of social relations and relationships are people more likely to do harm to each other?” How would you answer this question?

Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete?

- Consider the title of this book — the word “obsolete” implies that there might have been a time when prisons were necessary. Is that the sense that you get after reading Davis’s book? Why do you think Davis chose this title?

Kaba and Hayes, “A Jailbreak of the Imagination: Seeing Prisons for What They Are and Demanding Transformation.”

- A key element of this article is in how it denaturalizes the prison and the effects it has on public safety (or lack thereof). Think of some examples of ideas that you have learned that help naturalize these ideas. Did you realize you were being taught certain ideas that might not necessarily be true? What contexts were you in when you learned these things?
- How would you naturalize the ideas of abolition? What would you want people to consider “common sense”?