

No borders! No prisons! No cops! No war! No state?

A conversation with William Anderson, Dean Spade, and Harsha Walia
November 15, 2022

<https://bcrw.barnard.edu/event/no-borders-no-prisons-no-cops-no-war-no-state/>

00:00:04:19 – 00:00:34:13

Speaker 1

PREMILLA: Hello. My name is Premilla Nadasen, co-director of the Barnard Center for Research on Women. And I'm really happy to be welcoming all of you today to our event, "No Borders! No Prisons! No Cops! No War! No State?," a conversation featuring Harsha Walia, William Anderson and Dean Spade. Gord Hill was supposed to be a part of the conversation, but is unfortunately unable to make it tonight.

00:00:34:26 – 00:01:04:12

Speaker 1

We regret Gord's absence, but are looking forward to this conversation. I'd like to start off with a few notes of acknowledgment, thanks, and some accessibility information. First, a land acknowledgment. Tonight's event is taking place online, but we are all physically located somewhere and we recognize that all land is indigenous land. Barnard College is located on the traditional ancestral territories of the Lenape people.

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Speaker 1

In terms of accessibility, you can find a link to live transcription for this event directly under the video on either the YouTube page or the BCRW event page. Thank you to Denise Hinxman from Total Caption for providing the live transcription. Thanks also to our ASL interpreters for today's events, Cheryl Henderson and William Mendez Gallardo from COCOA Language Advocacy and Consulting. We are planning for tonight's conversation to take place for one and a half hours, so will be ending around 8:30 Eastern time, 5:30 Pacific.

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Speaker 1

If you have a question for any of the speakers, you can type it into the YouTube chat. We'll be collecting any questions there for the Q&A and that will take place towards the end of the event. This event is made possible by the Patricia Wizmer Professorship in Gender and Diversity at Seattle University. Special thanks to Natasha Martin and Teresa Earenfight at Seattle University.

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Speaker 1

I also want to thank my colleagues at BCRW for all of their work, including my co-director Janet Jakobsen, as well as Hope Dector,

Sophie Kreitzberg, Pam Phillips, Avi Cummings, and Miriam Neptune.

00:02:42:00 – 00:03:14:23

Speaker 1

Tonight's conversation asks abolitionist thinkers to consider the role of the state. When we imagine a world without borders, policing and prisons, do we imagine a world without governments? How do we imagine providing caretaking without the state? What are the new systems of caretaking that we are building, practicing, and imagining? So we're really excited to hear from three creative and insightful speakers Harsha Walia, William Anderson and Dean Spade.

00:03:16:01 – 00:03:28:07

Speaker 1

And I'm going to keep their very impressive bios short to allow for more time for conversation. So I'm just going to give you the brief two sentence versions, and we have longer versions on the BCRW event page.

00:03:30:09 – 00:04:04:10

Speaker 1

William C. Anderson is a writer and activist whose work has appeared in The Guardian, MTV, Truthout, The British Journal of Photography, and Pitchfork, among others. He is the author of The Nation on No Map and coauthor of As Black as Resistance. He is also the co-founder of Offshoot Journal and provides creative direction as a producer of the Black Autonomy podcast.

00:04:04:19 – 00:04:30:17

Speaker 1

Dean Spade has been working in movements to build queer and trans liberation based in racial and economic justice for the past two decades. He's a professor at Seattle University School of Law and the author of Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis and the Next, as well as Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law.

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Speaker 1

We're grateful for the many contributions and projects that Dean brings as a longtime collaborator with BCRW, including this conversation. Harsha Walia is a Punjabi writer and organizer based in Vancouver, which is Coast Salish territories. She's been rooted in migrant justice, anti-racist, feminist, abolitionist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist movements and communities for over two decades. She's also the author of Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism and Undoing Border Imperialism.

00:05:13:01 – 00:05:36:29

Speaker 1

And she's co-author of *Never Home: Legislating Discrimination in Canadian Immigration*, as well as *Red Women Rising: Indigenous Women's Survivors in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside*. So we're really grateful to have all of our speakers here tonight, and we are looking forward to this conversation. With that, I'll turn things over to you, Dean.

00:05:40:03 – 00:06:07:02

Speaker 1

DEAN: Thank you so much, Premilla. Thank you to our interpreters and our captioner and to everybody at BCRW who's making this event possible. I'm so excited. I've been so excited about this event and it is finally here. I'm joining from Duwamish land, Seattle, Washington. I just wanted to say that kind of, how the idea for this event emerged. In 2021,

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Speaker 1

I attended some meetings that were convened by Andrea J. Ritchie and Mariame Kaba, which Harsha and William were also part of, about this question of how abolitionists, defining it broadly to include, like people doing border abolition work, people trying to abolish the family policing system, people trying to get rid of the cops and prisons, and like how all those kinds of abolitionist understand or relate to the state.

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Speaker 1

And the conversations were aimed at addressing what I think is like a pretty serious debate between some abolitionists and among some abolitionists, although I think a very, like friendly and generative one, but important. And then for some people it's like, not a debate because a lot of people haven't actually gotten to think about it that much.

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Speaker 1

There's kind of like a silence or a gap. I think especially, I notice, for people who are for abolitionists working and living in the United States, where there's such a longterm marginalization and silencing around like anti-state or anarchist thought and social movement work and like a lot of kind of like simplistic misunderstandings about that. So a lot of people haven't gotten to really ask ourselves, like, if I'm against prisons and borders and militaries and whatnot, what does that mean?

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Speaker 1

Am I still trying to get the state to take care of people? What's my relationship to electoral work? How do we think about, kind of what

some of our end goals are and whether that's central to our abolitionist politics or not. I think these are just really complicated, interesting questions. And so coming out of those conversations and many others like them that I have frequently and have had for years, I just wanted to be part of making more spaces for those conversations to happen publicly, and just to give people more chances to hear each other out on these ideas.

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Speaker 1

And I specifically wanted to have this conversation with Harsha and William and Gord. I'm so sad that Gordon not able to be with us, but I hope you'll all look up his work. I think Sophie is going to post for me in the chat. His website, Warrior Publications, all of his books and interviews and videos are, it's really worth listening to

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Speaker 1

and regarding his work. I think of these people as three thinkers who are really making these conversations accessible and urgent and compelling and coming from various radical lineages and various sites of struggle that are very complementary. And, and I feel there's a lot of wisdom having a conversation with the three people. And tonight we'll get to have two of them, which is great.

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Speaker 1

I want to, before we turn it over to the conversation, just point out two resources that Andrea Ritchie and Mariame Kaba have created that might be useful. One is that recently they had an event related to their new book, No More Police, which they put in conversation with another new book that's out called Rehearsals for Living by Robyn Maynard and Leanne Simpson.

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Speaker 1

And so you can watch that conversation on YouTube, and Sophie's going to put that in the chat. And then also just today, they released this new tool for trying to build this discussion in your own community about the relationship between abolition and abolitionists and the state. And it's got a lot of generative questions and examples. And so I hope people will use that to have this conversation in your own, people working on campaigns in your own city or doing abolitionist work on your campus or wherever you're doing it.

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Speaker 1

So okay, with all of that introductory matter, let's bring on Harsha and William and I want to pose this first question to each of them. I'm curious to hear from each of you to start, how you think about

this question of how those of us who want to abolish cops, prisons, militaries, and borders should relate to the question of the state, and perhaps in particular to the governments we live under

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Speaker 1

in the case of those of us here, Canada and the U.S.. Do you think of abolitionists as trying to take over the state to shift resources and use its apparatuses to change the distribution of life chances? Or do you think of abolitionists working toward dismantling states and why? Maybe we'll just start with Harsha.

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Speaker 2

HARSHA: Just that small question, Dean. Thank you so much. Let me just take a moment to thank you all for your time, for being here in conversation, Dean, for convening us. And really, I could say so much about Dean and William's work that have been such compasses for my own. And I learn so much from the ways in which Dean, you think through mutual aid and think through really the state as violence,

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Speaker 2

right? That the administrative form of the state and the coercive arm of the state is actually inherent to the state. And William, all of your incredibly beautiful, caring work to tend to the so many ways in which Black anarchism is just such a vital part of the radical tradition. And the thoughtful ways in which your podcasts and your writings really force us to think about the necessity of thinking against and beyond nationalisms in the ways in which we think of nationalisms within the constraints of the nation state.

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Speaker 2

And so I'm so indebted to both of you for your intellectual traditions, your organizing work, and all that you've gifted us in ways in which we think and create alongside. So thank you so much. Thank you, folks, for being here. And Cheryl and everyone else who's interpreting. Please let me know when and where to slow down. And I just want to remind us that these spaces that we create together, are abolitionist practices, right?

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Speaker 2

We think about accessibility, we think about questions, we co-create, and we can't ever underestimate how much we build through these kinds of processes and thoughtfulness. In terms of how we think about the state, I think a lot of my answers in organizing are prefaced with the fact that I'm a Gemini. That explains a lot about me. I also live on the West Coast, so astrology explains everything, which is that I'll

first say that I'm primarily a practitioner, which is to say that I think as organizers, one of the things we do best is to tend with complexity and nuance, right?

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Speaker 2

Which is to say that even as we have critiques, we know when and where to build, where to find fissures, where to find leverage points. And so I think one of the ways in which abolitionists relate to the state is contextual, is that it depends on the moment that we're in, what our organizing demands are, what we are trying to fight to win.

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Speaker 2

And at the same time, we can have a broader vision that seeks something bigger than that moment, right? And that those aren't dichotomies. Those are ways in which we build. Right? We build and we fight at the same time. I'm on unceded Coast Salish Territories, lands of the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Squamish nations. Indigenous nations who stewarded these lands for many centuries continue to do so.

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Speaker 2

And I think one of the pertinent, salient, central questions of abolitionists and our relationship to the state, particularly in settler colonial contexts like Canada than the US, is that we can't simply acknowledge land as a side note. It means that we have to understand the nature of the state and its founding condition as one of settler colonialism alongside racial capitalism and enslavement.

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Speaker 2

One of the first rallies when I moved here to what some call Turtle Island was an antiwar demo. And at the antiwar demo, people were, you know, we were sloganeering around Canada out of Afghanistan, Canada out of Iraq. This was, you know, at the turn of the century, feels so long ago. And, you know, there was a contingent of indigenous youth who started chanting Canada out of Canada, Canada out of Canada.

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Speaker 2

And we all had to sit with that, right? Like what does that mean if we understand imperialism as something that happens over there but not over here? What does that say about understanding not only of imperialism, but about the nature of the state and the founding possibility of the Canadian state? And so, you know, there are many examples, but I offer that one as a starting point of how do we think about the state, particularly where I'm located, the Canadian state, as a settler state, as one that is illegal one, that is an imposition

on indigenous peoples whose entire legal and political and judicial and economic infrastructure is built to maintain and reinforce settler

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Speaker 2

colonialism. And so where I am, the carceral state, the western state, the liberal state, the modern nation state, they're all the same thing. They're all constitutive of and I'm made up of these same forces of violence. And so maybe the last thing that I will say shortly, and I'm sure we'll pick up on this again, and you know, Dean, you were talking about some of the ways in which anti-authoritarian politics is perhaps misunderstood.

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Speaker 2

I think one of the ways in which it is most misunderstood is that especially in this kind of era of rising fascism, where, of course, fascism is deeply libertarian, I would emphasize that anti-authoritarian politics against the state is not individualistic. It is not the same thing as right wing libertarian politics. In fact, it requires us to be present.

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Speaker 2

It requires us to make politics. It requires us to be collective, requires us to practice democracy. And even though Ruthie Gilmore would perhaps not agree with where I would conclude about the nature of the state, I think it follows the trajectory of abolitionist thought in that, when Ruthie tells us that abolition requires presence, I would also extend that to, you know, anti-authoritarian politics requires us to be present.

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Speaker 3

WILLIAM: I guess I can just jump in. Thank you for everyone who's making this happen and I'm really honored to be here as well. Dean, your work has been amazing and I feel really inspired by everything you've been offering to the conversation right now at a really pivotal moment in terms of the need for mutual aid and survival programs and all of this sort of work that we're seeing is absolutely crucial right now.

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Speaker 3

And Harsha, I told you I was going to gush over you a little bit as well. Really happy to be in conversation with you. I've never told you this, but I've known about your work for a long time, going back to when I was first sort of a baby organizer coming into to the immigrant rights movement.

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Speaker 3

I knew who you were before you ever knew who I was. And I was really inspired by a lot of the things you were doing when I first got started. So I'm really, really happy to be talking with you and to see how our lives all intersect at this time. And I hope that we can do something good to make a difference together.

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Speaker 3

So when it comes to the state, I think that there has been a lot of time. We've had ages now to really see the state form for what it is. And so when I'm thinking about the state, I don't think that you can seek to abolish the police or militaries, prisons, or borders and say that you're going to leave the state form intact.

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Speaker 3

Because I think that what you're talking about at that point is reforming it. And so, the state is a repository for all these forms of violence. That's what it's for. And so it was not designed to to free people. It was designed to give a monopoly on power to a ruling class. So, you're still talking about reformism. And I know that, you know, a lot of abolitionists have different feelings about this, but I think you're still talking about reformism and you're not necessarily trying to abolish anything

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Speaker 3

if you're talking about taking over a state, because you're talking about systemic reform at that point. And so, I think that one of the greatest pitfalls that we encounter when we have this conversation is the conflation of the state with society. And so people obscure the difference between the state and a population that lives within the confines of the state because traditionally statist of all models, both past and present, have argued for the reformative potential of the state and thereby made the state itself liberation.

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Speaker 3

So I think that what I'm trying to say is, you know, that's why historically you hear this sort of phrasing that like, X revolution achieved liberation. Liberation is equated with governance. So I'm talking about the container that the ruling class is holding society in. That is what the state is. So this is the structural harm that's been codified in the model that is establishing order and authority at the expense of others.

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Speaker 3

And there's always an other when it comes to the nation state, because the model requires it. It absolutely requires an outsider and it requires an other. And so borders require it, police require it, military is required, and so on. So the state is never neutral. It's not a, it's not a tool that you can just go pick up off the ground and say, this is just a hammer, I'm going to go hammer some nails with it. It has blood on it.

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Speaker 3

It has violence tied to it and its foundation. And I really think that if you if you do the deep study here, you know, we see that like Marx knew this, Engels knew this. This is why it had, the state had to, you know, quote unquote, wither away. But we know clearly at this point that states do not wither away.

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Speaker 3

And I think I said this when we spoke about it before, you know, states are not flowers. They're not, they don't wither away. They don't just dissipate. And even if, even according to their idea of seizing the state for working people, it doesn't need a group of good-hearted people in control of it. And I think at this point, given the history of the state that we've seen across time, that it's pretty naive to think that. And since it's not a neutral object and it has its own life and its own history and its own intrinsic design, it's like the way we think of policing.

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Speaker 3

So if we think about this through the frame of policing and we're thinking about the different types of states and the history of Western radicalism, are we just saying that capitalist states are a few bad apples? You know, like people say that the cops who commit extrajudicial murders are just a few bad apples and they just need to be rooted out of the police force?

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Speaker 3

Are we saying that it's not all states, you know? Are we saying that the central idea, according to many of the conceptions of state socialism that we know, if we use this frame of policing, it would recognize the state form as an ultimate, as like the ultimate cop. Are we saying we just need a better trained state, like we need better trained police?

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Speaker 3

And then you can start thinking about representative governance or new administrators like a citizen review board. Are you saying you just

need a better group of people to hold, anybody accountable that's not doing what they're supposed to do? Because we're talking about trying to reform an apparatus and control an apparatus that does the oppressing by putting new political measures in place that will supposedly keep it accountable.

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Speaker 3

And I just, I think that that's always going to be reformist. And this is what Black anarchism has told us, this is what anarchism has said more largely, but it's also in the truth of the broader socialist movement, because there has been a universal understanding that the state is the problem. But different people had approaches to trying to either control it or get rid of it completely.

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Speaker 3

And I think at this point we can see that it doesn't get reformed into being, you know, something that's going to liberate people.

00:24:08:00 – 00:24:23:03

Speaker 1

DEAN: Thank you. I appreciate that thing you're saying too, about like, how people are conflated with the governments under which they live. And I feel like this is so visible in the way that the war between Russia and Ukraine is talked about. It's almost like it's two sports teams and you got to decide which one you're going to pick.

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Speaker 1

And I'm like, I'm against all those governments and for all their people, right? And that feels like such a, the inflation of government and their people feels like at the center of so many deep misunderstandings. Also, obviously like accusations that people who oppose Israeli colonialism are against Jews. I mean, it's the same it's like, you know, it's so frustrating that conflation, it feels very central.

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Speaker 1

That is, it's so statist and so convenient to states if we believe that the state represents the people who live in it. And I think hopefully those of us who live in the U.S. and Canada don't think so. You know, we know like, we don't want those wars. We don't want those borders. We don't want those prisons. Anyway, I really appreciate everything you're both saying.

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Speaker 1

And I wanted to talk about, you know, I'm kind of going through with

you some of the typical questions I think come up for people that are really sincere questions that I think a lot of abolitionists are struggling with. And one of the ones I've heard a lot is like, but don't we need the state during disaster? Don't we need the state when COVID happens, when the pandemic occurs? Don't we basically need the state to be the thing that regulates polluters and stops, you know, deals with climate crisis, like with the big disasters?

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Speaker 1

Don't we need the state to, you know, to be the thing that redistributes life chances and that, like, you know, makes the fantasy of the welfare state stuff. Like, I'm just curious if you all would talk about how you think about that. How do you talk to people who are like, running into that obstacle to this kind of thinking?

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Speaker 1

William, do you mind starting?

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Speaker 3

WILLIAM: Yeah, sure. I can go. I really appreciate it the way actually, I really appreciate it the way that Harsha talked about this in Border and Rule, and the way that states have used the pandemic to further secure their borders and enforce these harsh immigration policies through the COVID 19 pandemic. And we also saw this strategic hoarding. And as Harsha said, you know, this is something that exposes the fault lines across the societies that we live in.

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Speaker 3

And so, again, if you're if you're talking about organizing things to meet needs in a society, a state is not necessarily what that's for. Again, the state is the structure that is used to maintain power, this monopoly on power. And so a group of people at the helm of a state, no matter how like minded you might think that they are across ethnic, religious, political fraternity does not guarantee coherence and efficiency.

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Speaker 3

And we are living that right now. People that are collectively working together to meet needs are absolutely required to think outside of the state and have never actually required a state to be able to respond to crises. And so I really appreciate the work of one of my one of my mentors, Modibo Kadalie, and his framing and the book Pan-African Social Ecology.

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Speaker 3

Everybody check that book out if you haven't had the opportunity to yet. But you know, Modibo, who's a former member of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and a student of C.L.R. James, who's a friend of Walter Rodney, he talks about in that text, he addresses this fact that, you know, whenever these ecological crises spring up, that there is a social vacuum that's exposed by the fact that state power is unable to satisfactorily respond to these crises that are getting worse and worse and more frequent,

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Speaker 3

and there are these intense, intensifying catastrophes. And what's ultimately exposed, again, is that, you know, these ruling classes, these parties, these ethnic groups, religious groups, monarchies and so on, that have control of the state, again, there's always that other, again, that other for them to abandon, an outsider, an enemy of the state, who is going to suffer disproportionate harm because of the fact that those people who are in power, who have the control and the authority of the state are not neutral because the state is not neutral.

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Speaker 3

So, of course, we know that, you know, these folks who are most neglected always end up being poor people, criminalized people, stateless people, undocumented people, refugees, and so on. And they fall outside the considerations of who's prioritized. So Kadalie, he uses a Jamesian approach to thinking about, you know, what he would talk about as direct democracy as a solution to to delinking from the state in order to build autonomy and collective power.

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Speaker 3

And so that doesn't, it doesn't, you know, require us to think about how the state is failing us because the state isn't for us. And the state you know, the state can't fail who it was not designed to serve. And so that kind of brings up this issue I feel we we run into with the term "the failed state," right?

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Speaker 3

And so, we can't fail us because we are us. And we don't need states, we don't need police, we don't need borders or the military, politicians or saviors or anything of that sort. We are what we need because we are what make, what makes anything that I'm talking about work. It's people that make these things work. It's not the state, we're talking about

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Speaker 3

people that make these things work. So we have to rethink our approaches, approaches to crisis, and we have to rethink our approaches to self defense and counter violence and so on, without centering the structures that have consistently been turned on us. Even when we thought that they were for us, they're designed to help us in whatever manifestations we've known them as historically.

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Speaker 3

So that's how I how I tend to think about that.

00:30:43:29 – 00:31:10:24

Speaker 2

HARSHA: Thanks, William. Thank you. And I feel so energized by everything you've been saying. Yeah, you know, I think there's a, even kind of in that question, I appreciate that question and I think one of the things is within that question itself, right? The idea that during the, during moments of crisis, don't we need the state? And the flipside of that is, well, to what degree has the state created the crisis, you know? So it ends up becoming this kind of circular logic.

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Speaker 2

And, you know, just drawing on what, William, you were saying earlier about how that kind of extends to prisons and police, right? We know that, you know, non-abolitionists, liberals, centrists, right wing, etc., the crisis of safety ends up becoming, the solution to that ends up becoming the police and prison, right? But of course, we know as abolitionists, one of our responses is like, well, if prisons and police resolved anything, why would we be in a crisis of safety, right?

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Speaker 2

And so that's the same kind of question I have about the state, is we know that the state is failing, is failing people constantly all the time, because it was designed to do so, not because it can be refashioned to do something else. Which isn't to say that there is not a train of struggle that may involve the state and we can kind of come to that, but that we have to understand that functionally, that is the state's role.

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Speaker 2

And really, you know, also that it's important that we don't, that we don't conflate governance with the state, right? The state is not the only form of governance, and that many people are self-governing and many things that we do are forms of governance. And that's important to remember. And I think one of the things here is maybe like what is

the nature of the state, right?

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Speaker 2

Maybe we're not clear about what the state is and isn't. And there are many different definitions of the state. And we're, kind of here for a poly sci history lesson. But I think it is important to at least understand that despite all the differences about the nature of the state, there are some things that are true about all things about the state, right,

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Speaker 2

if we were to generalize? One is that we know that the state in all its forms maintains a monopoly over the legitimate forms and sources of violence and governance, right? That is one of the things that it does, even if one were to argue that there is a care form of the state. We can return to that, but it still maintains a monopoly over maintaining, governing, and deciding that.

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Speaker 2

I would also argue that one of the key functions of the state, even if we were to imagine a utopic state, if that were to exist, it would always have a border, right? As William said, there's always a sense of who belongs and who doesn't belong. And, you know, the Nordic states are often kind of held up as an example.

00:33:23:13 – 00:33:50:12

Speaker 2

Canada, where I live, is often held up as an example of a state that perhaps has lower numbers of police, lower numbers of prisons. You know, the Nordic state is the example of the kind of quintessential utopic social democratic welfare state that has some of the most restrictive immigration policies on the planet, right? And those go hand in hand because the state then becomes the carceral border state of who belongs and who doesn't.

00:33:50:12 – 00:34:20:11

Speaker 2

And, you know, I think that is a really important way if we are thinking about abolition internationally and through a lens of internationalism, that, you know, one of the fundamental questions that a state will not resolve is a borderless world. Because what is a nation state without a border? It would cease to exist as a state, right? And so I think that is one of those things that we need to think through about the nature of the state.

00:34:21:04 – 00:34:48:04

Speaker 2

I think it's also impossible to think about, as William was saying, to think about the nation state as it exists, not in a vacuum but as it actually exists. That it is inseparable from the state's relationship to private property and to capital, right? It literally is the jurisdictional grounding for capital. It is what maintains the enclosures. And, you know, I often think about Edward Said, who, you know, was writing decades ago.

00:34:48:23 – 00:35:14:16

Speaker 2

And in some ways we have to return to history because, you know, independence fighters of that era, of the so-called postcolonial era very much were aware of the dangers of liberation getting co-opted into the nation form state, right? Now perhaps we take it for granted because that is the international order within which we live, an Intrastate system. Edward Said wrote quote, “The newly triumphant politicians seemed to require borders and passports

00:35:14:16 – 00:35:37:15

Speaker 2

first of all. What had once been the imaginative liberation of a people and Aimé Césaire’s inventions of new souls, and the audacious metaphoric charting of spiritual territory, usurped by colonial masters, were quickly translated into and accommodated by a world system of barriers, maps, frontiers, police forces, customs, and exchange controls.” Endquote. And there are so many others whose work we could point to.

00:35:37:15 – 00:36:02:27

Speaker 2

But I just want to say that because I just want to emphasize what William was saying, is that the state, as we know it, does not exist in a vacuum. It is constitutive of, necessarily constitutive of, all of these forms of violence, particularly borders. And then I just also want to think through again, this idea of you know, who would provide in a crisis.

00:36:02:27 – 00:36:23:11

Speaker 2

And again, emphasizing, you know, William, what you said. I would say, one, you know, two things. One is that what we know of as a care arm of the state or the redistributive arm of the state, I would say that is secondary to the functioning of the state. That is not a primary role of the state. It is a secondary role of the state.

00:36:23:11 – 00:36:54:26

Speaker 2

The main function is an oppressive monopoly over violence, enforcement, and so on. But also to emphasize secondly, as William, you did, that that what we do know is the redistributive arm of the

state, the provision of public works like roads and hospitals and sanitation and social system, etc., that is organized by people. That is literally the people. And so for me, it's actually interesting because if anything, I'm like, doesn't that give us, you know, rather than saying, okay, the state has to do this for us, if anything, that actually gives me some sense of hope.

00:36:55:05 – 00:37:19:28

Speaker 2

I'm like, actually, this is people, everyday people who are able to build roads, who have the skills to do it, who have the skill set to know how to build water works, who know how to create sanitation systems, right? So if they weren't working for the state, right, if they weren't in the bureaucratic arm of the state, this is actually people with the skill sets, with the labor power, with the capacity, with the imagination, with the brilliance to do this.

00:37:20:09 – 00:37:46:18

Speaker 2

And that's important to emphasize because when people say the state provide it, no, it's actually, as Williams said, it's people doing this work who know how to do this. And the very last point I want to make and I think this one is something for abolitionists to think through, and I think it's a source of confusion, perhaps, is that sometimes we also conflate the redistributive arm of the state to kind of say that the state is, that arm of the state is the commons.

00:37:48:01 – 00:38:15:00

Speaker 2

And here I would strongly make the point that the state's provision of public goods when it does so is not what the commons is, that I think there's some confusion about this because the commons is a fundamentally different concept. The commons is an idea of inclusion and access as inherent, not something that's granted or mediated by the state, and also not something that is individually possessed.

00:38:15:01 – 00:38:45:04

Speaker 2

It is cooperative. It is not a commodity, it is not even a service. The commons or communing or committing is necessarily a verb, and the state form actually originated in order to enclose and destroy the commons, as we know. And so I think it's important to, it may seem like it's just a semantic thing, but I think it is important to differentiate between what we want to build, which may include a sense of the commons, of abolitionist commons, of commencing.

00:38:45:27 – 00:39:06:08

Speaker 2

But the redistributive arm of the state turns hoarded and stolen and confiscated wealth, and turns it into a public service that is

individualized, that can be commodified, and that can be given or taken as a right, which is different than our concept of what a commons would be.

00:39:06:08 – 00:39:23:10

Speaker 1

DEAN: Thank you both. I mean, I just think this question is so deep. And it's been surprising to me to see people pose it to some degree about the pandemic, because it's like, what happened during the pandemic? Like private companies got tons of money to make vaccines that then were not allowed to be distributed all over the world.

00:39:23:10 – 00:39:40:26

Speaker 1

Like could you do a worse job? You know what I mean? Like, I really believe, like people who want to make medicine would make it without things like big pharma in their way. And actually the medicine would be distributed more in the world and, like the pandemic, like every crisis we've ever seen, enhanced the wealth divide, including the racial wealth divide and the gender wealth divide.

00:39:40:26 – 00:40:12:10

Speaker 1

It just feels like, you know, I think about this a lot, too, because people are like, well, we need the state to show up when there's disaster. And it's like, well, here in the U.S., we have FEMA, and they consistently, what consistently happens when there are acute disasters in the U.S. like fire and flood and hurricane, is that the government strategically and consistently abandons the same populations, has already less infrastructure, whether that's levees or whatever in their areas and their neighborhoods, and then brings like, military and guns and cops.

00:40:12:10 – 00:40:32:10

Speaker 1

It's just like, it's so obvious that this, the fantasy of the, and I'll speak to the U.S. government, like showing up during disaster and saving people, you know, has always been like very, very, very uneven and untrue. And then is now more than ever, like what's happened in our lifetimes is they have built up the security side of that,

00:40:32:19 – 00:40:58:29

Speaker 1

and very much let go of whatever care, shreds of care that were mostly for white people in very particular ways, like that is even, you know, barely there. And I feel like I was thinking while you guys were talking about that book *Storming the Wall*, which is a lot about like the ways the U.S. during the same period that it kind of has denied climate change, has prepared for it just by like doing military and strategic practices about how to like, you know, cordon off and

contain climate refugees at the borders.

00:40:58:29 - 00:41:17:03

Speaker 1

Like that's of what they're focused on with climate change. Not like, what are we to do about water and food. It's just like, who are we going to shoot and how are we can put people in cages. Like that's, I just, letting go of the fantasy of the caregiving state I think is really hard because there's a particular kind of socialism that asks us to keep fantasizing about it.

00:41:17:18 - 00:41:57:12

Speaker 1

That's very common. And some of that takes place in the rhetoric around things like the Green New Deal and Medicare for All, which like are, you know, things that we might strategically support. But like, you know, we can't have a for profit health care system and a, yeah, our government is organized around maintaining that extraction. And like the idea of these very, these like too little too late reforms would resolve that feels like an overinvestment for me, to me, in the fantasy of the caregiving state, both around the welfare state which has always only given out poverty relief in an intensely racialized gendered way that has excluded immigrants and

00:41:57:18 - 00:42:26:25

Speaker 1

strategically excluded Black people and you know, and emergency really. Anyway, I could go on about that, but I just, I think it's really, really hard to let go. It's almost like facing this fear, like, oh, my God, what if it really it's just on us, which we keep seeing again, again, with every storm, with every fire, it is, you know? And and that's really scary and really hard because we also have the the boot of the state in our neck, making us pretty unprepared because everyone's like working a million jobs and doesn't have basic, you know, stuff to share with each other.

00:42:26:25 - 00:42:50:27

Speaker 1

So it's, there's a kind of profound fear that I think people reasonably feel about letting go of the fantasy of being cared for in an emergency. I think part of the fantasy of the state too, is really based, in the US I see this a lot, in the idea of desegregation, the history of desegregation, and the idea that the federal government saves us from the from the state and local governments, and that you see this, I think also now around the discussion around abortion access and around trans health care.

00:42:51:07 - 00:43:15:22

Speaker 1

I wonder if you all would talk about that, like how do people who

don't want to fight for a strong state think about like the rising white militias and like the kinds of terrifying local rule questions that are, you know, regionally dispersed in many different ways. Harsha, do you mind starting with that?

00:43:17:19 - 00:43:54:25

Speaker 2

HARSHA: Sure. Thank you. I'll try. And, you know, part of it's, of course, contextual in terms of, you know, as you as you laid out the US context. But, you know, one thing that maybe I can offer is that I do think that one of the ways in which we work around this question of the state for me is, you know, if we can have the vision, or perhaps we don't have that agreement, but among those who do, if we can at least agree that the main tendency of the state today and now is carcerality, even if we don't believe it to be inherent.

00:43:54:25 - 00:44:15:14

Speaker 2

I do. But even if we don't agree on on that fundamental piece, I think at a practical level, we could agree that the main tendency of the state is carcerality, its main form is carcerality. We see that in terms of its functions, as you both point out. We see it in terms of its, you know, the practical budget allocation, etc..

00:44:15:14 - 00:44:38:04

Speaker 2

Then I think one thing we can agree on is that we always have to be vigilant against the state. That's the very minimum kind of point of agreement that I think we can have. And then how we engage with the state in this moment, I think it really is contextual, right, in which that we can engage the terrain of the state while building against the state.

00:44:38:04 - 00:45:09:23

Speaker 2

I don't think there's a contradiction here. I think all organizing for a very long time has recognized that to struggle against the state doesn't mean that we cede the terrain or a strategic engagement with the state. Right. That's just that's the reality of of what we live in and under whether that those are campaigns to defund, whether those are campaigns for, you know, to end detentions and deportations and to close prisons, whether that's the fight against family policing and to ensure families, families not being separated in all its different forms.

00:45:10:24 - 00:45:33:09

Speaker 2

I don't think there's a contradiction to be against the state while effectively demanding more of the state, if you will, right? Because in some ways, and I'll give an example, demanding more of the state

can sometimes actually, it can render the state effectively obsolete if you win it. So in Canada, one of the fights right now is a fight for status for all people.

00:45:33:09 – 00:45:53:24

Speaker 2

This is a fight that's been going on for decades in the migrant justice movement. And the status for all demand is one that literally is status for all people, right? That breaks through the idea of good versus bad migrant breaks through the politics of innocence. It's the fight for not a single deportation, not a single detention. And even as a rhetorical device,

00:45:53:24 – 00:46:16:07

Speaker 2

if people won status for all, which is what we've been arguing for 20 years, the primary function of the border would effectively become obsolete. I mean, it doesn't end mass global displacement. It doesn't end mass immobility. But at the level of the local and the provincial and the federal government where we're located, it would effectively deeply weaken the primary function of the state.

00:46:17:03 – 00:46:43:06

Speaker 2

And that is, of course, true of many abolitionist fights, right, which is to weaken the power of the state and the carceral power of the state, while as organizers, you know, as I said earlier, finding the pressure points where we can organize to meet the material needs of people who are trying to build alternatives. So in terms of how we engage with the state, for me it's less of a question of the, kind of, the local or the federal, if you will.

00:46:43:23 – 00:47:14:08

Speaker 2

I think at different points, our pressure points may be in, you know, local municipalities. Sometimes the biggest fights are municipal because municipalities, as we know, control police budgets. Municipalities also have a lot of power around homeless encampments, for example. But so for me, it's less a matter of the local versus the federal. It's more just trying to find those fissure points, depending on what we're organizing against and the context within which we are, to work beyond the state as a vision.

00:47:14:08 – 00:47:35:13

Speaker 2

And if we're ever working within the state, it's to do it in such a way where it is tactical with the vision, you know, along the lines of a non-reformist reform that will weaken the power of the state and that will build more power within communities. And every time where we build as we fight, we can't take for granted the potential, right?

00:47:35:13 - 00:47:57:14

Speaker 2

Every time people can experience our own power, can experience the possibility of what it means to be alongside your comrades, your community, that is effectively how we fight not only the state, it's also how we fight growing fascism and the right, right? Because one of the ways one of the thing is the right feeds on is, individualism is a fear-based

00:47:57:14 - 00:48:23:08

Speaker 2

politics, is fundamentally a politics against collectivity. And every time we build collective power and that we remember that, you know, we we have to remind, we have to remember to mask up, right? The state has abandoned people in the pandemic as we've already noted. So every time we bring bring up that fight, right, that we remember to take care of each other, that we remember to mask up, that we think about access, that we think about how we build community,

00:48:23:29 - 00:48:41:10

Speaker 2

I think those are the ways in which we undo the state and sometimes, you know, force the state along, if you will. But that really often is a rhetorical device rather than a belief in the state, as the state.

00:48:41:10 - 00:49:23:07

Speaker 3

WILLIAM: Yeah, this is a wild question because particularly when we have these conversations about white supremacist threats and the rising threat of fascism with, especially in a U.S. context, the state is the white supremacist threat. In a U.S. context, the state's lifeblood is white supremacy, Christian conquest, colonialism, imperialism. The state doesn't protect us from the right.

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Speaker 3

This is, the state is where the right is given legitimacy. This is the institutionalized extension of the right wing social forces that are otherwise called extremist and white supremacist radicals. This is their legitimate form within the state. That's, that is where they are given legitimacy to be able to cause harm.

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Speaker 3

So we can think about this with regard to the police, for instance, that we know come from slave catchers. We can think about this with regard to the military, you know, being overrun with with neo-Nazis and white nationalists and neo-Confederates and so on. And we also, at the same time, know that white supremacy and capitalism are global

forces.

00:50:27:05 - 00:50:58:27

Speaker 3

And so you can also look at how the US has exported, throughout the world, capitalist models as well as carceral models. Even when we look at things like the Eastern State model for prisons that was picked up throughout South America, throughout Asia, and used as a standard for the modern prison, these are things we have to think about.

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Speaker 3

And so as much as there have been, you know, revolutions against these forces, they permeate even the states that they're at odds with. So so, you know, like, look, I'm not a patriot by any measure. I'm not a nationalist mercenary for states of any sort. And I know, but I also recognize that there is not an equal balance of power across states at the same time.

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Speaker 3

And I actually get frustrated with a lot of anarchists because of the fact that a lot of times when anarchists are having these conversations, they talk about states as if they're all on this universal equal standing and that's just not, that's not true. You have to recognize power or else your your politics are very limited. If you cannot recognize that there is imbalance of power across even the spectrum of states.

00:52:05:15 - 00:52:38:10

Speaker 3

And that doesn't mean that you cannot be critical of states and what violence that they commit no matter what. But it does mean that you need to recognize power in order to have a real conversation about what is happening on the global playing field of states. So I think it's important to look at, you know, when and where people have sought to weaponize state power to overthrow like one ruling class and establish another ruling authority.

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Speaker 3

And what we certainly cannot do is pretend that what happened historically and in specific contexts can be plastered onto a current U.S. context. So what came before was for before. And that doesn't mean that it's for now or that even necessarily it succeeded back then completely, because we also know that such efforts have been followed by their own sets of horrors.

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Speaker 3

There have been purges, there have been camps, there has been ethnic cleansing, there has been imperial expansion, there has been state capitalism, fraternal violence, even within state socialist projects. And again, you know, this is what's going to come naturally when you're talking about dealing within the state, which is not ours by design. We're talking about the Western conception of the state

00:53:36:26 – 00:54:17:04

Speaker 3

that is over the entire world, that is terrorizing this world, that is destroying the planet. And it's not meant to free oppressed people. So it's meant to oppress. And you cannot guarantee honesty or sincerity among the controllers of the state. So when violence happens in that way, it's not it's not surprising. So if we're going to have this conversation about fighting the right way, first of all, we need to start by talking about fighting, because I'll tell you right now, the US left is not prepared by any measure and not armed and not trained to fight the right in any sort of circumstance.

00:54:17:21 – 00:54:48:01

Speaker 3

You're not going to defeat the right wing with quotes from your favorite radical texts and podcast. And you know, if every leftist faction in the US started preparing to fight the right wing at this very moment, there would still be a lot of questions. So many people are going to have to understand autonomy and self-defense when they're forced to understand it and see that there is no state coming to rescue them at home or abroad.

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Speaker 3

You're going to be on your own and you're going to have to figure out autonomy and you're going to have to figure out self-defense and you're going to have to figure out counter violence without a state coming to rescue you. And I appreciate, Dean, what you said, too, about the romanticization of federal response with regard to history. I have a lot of feelings about this as a Black southerner.

00:55:11:26 – 00:55:45:29

Speaker 3

My family's from Alabama. My family is, I'm descended from Black migrants who migrated across this country trying to escape white supremacist apartheid in the south. So because of the intervention that occurred during the civil rights movement, during the Civil War, etc. that my family experienced, I was raised with a positive outlook on federal intervention, on the state and its ability to intervene in these oppressive situations.

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Speaker 3

But that has never erased the fact that state violence and abandonment have always preceded and followed any such intervention. There's never been a moment where Black people were able to look to the state in the U.S. and say, this is something that's going to be a saving grace for me, this is something that's going to not inflict violence on me, even in those moments, obviously, during the civil rights movement, the Civil War, and so on and so forth.

00:56:17:11 – 00:56:38:20

Speaker 3

And that also applies to a global context. Because if we want to expand the conversation and talk about Black anarchism, you know, I'm going to bring up Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin fleeing and going to Cuba and finding out there that he was under arrest. And then going, getting deported to Czechoslovakia and being put under arrest. And then going to East Germany and being arrested again.

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Speaker 3

We can expand that conversation even further outside of Black anarchism and talk about the killing of the first Black communist who's remembered popularly by many historians as the first Black communist, Lovett Fort-Whiteman being killed in the USSR. We can talk about William Lee Brent and his experience in Cuba. We can talk about Assata Shakur going to Cuba and saying that the state is not God.

00:57:05:28 – 00:57:39:07

Speaker 3

We can talk about Robert Robinson in the USSR. We can talk about Homer Smith and what he saw in the USSR. There are so many names of so many Black people, you know, I can go to the African continent as well. We can go to so many instances of these people who have been overlooked, Black people who have fled to state socialist projects from the US, who have fought in state socialist revolutions, and had these realizations that the state and this concentration of power was not some pure thing

00:57:39:14 – 00:58:19:27

Speaker 3

that was a saving grace that was never going to be turned against them. And oftentimes it was at their expense to the point where they were imprisoned or killed. Or when they saw other people get killed. And it's a really important part of this conversation to talk about this in a global context and not romanticize and have this overzealous nostalgia when it comes to state socialist revolutions or thinking that we can have an imbalanced view of power with regard to how anarchists oftentimes, I feel, talk about the state, the state problem

00:58:19:27 – 00:58:44:25

Speaker 3

on a global scale. I think that there is a balance that has to be struck in this conversation. And so, you know, rest in peace to Russell Maroon Shoatz, who told us that, you know, when it comes to this question of centralization, he said it should be answered with an emphatic no. He said, because it makes us easiest, it makes us easier

00:58:44:25 – 00:59:29:11

Speaker 3

targets. And he told us that many of the greatest efforts that we know historically when it comes to African and Native people throughout the Americas to resist and overcome oppression and white supremacy were decentralized. And he tells us in his essay, *The Dragon and the Hydra*, that we need to think about things anarchistically and autonomously struggle against these things, because he speaks about having that honest view of history and that critical view of history that tells us that this isn't a necessity to try to organize through centralization and through the state. And that it is actually something that can end up becoming a weakness. And so many people throughout Black history and across the

00:59:29:11 – 00:59:55:09

Speaker 3

spectrum of the Black radical tradition, statist and anti-state, have recognized this. And so I think that there's an important truth that has to be recognized by excavating a lot of that history and working to learn from it so that we don't just repeat mistakes of the past and start treating these radicalisms, these Western radicalisms like they are religions, that we just have to keep doing the same thing over and over again

00:59:55:09 – 01:00:27:23

Speaker 3

because it's tradition. This is not supposed to be tradition. Anarchism, for me, is a tool. I'm not an ideologue. This is a tool. This is something that I'm thinking about how we can use to actually achieve something that will be different, that will be better for our lives. It's not a religion for me. It's not my faith. When something is not working and when something has egregious failures and shortcomings and horrific atrocities that happen, you should say, Hey, maybe we shouldn't do that again, instead of making excuses for it or pretending that it didn't happen at all.

01:00:28:10 – 01:00:33:22

Speaker 3

So, I don't know if that answers the question. I started trailing off a little bit there at the end because...

01:00:35:12 – 01:00:57:02

Speaker 1

DEAN: It answers so many good questions. So much of what you both have

just said, and I just appreciate it so much. And I do still feel, I just feel like I'm endlessly fascinated by the romance of the state and the belief that it will save us from white supremacy or heteropatriarchy. Like how? You know, when it is the engine of those things, when it is what keeps those things most firmly in place and puts down resistance

01:00:57:02 – 01:01:21:29

Speaker 1

to those things, like again and again and again. And when you're talking about counter fighting, William, I was thinking about Mark Bray's book, *The Anti-Fascist Handbook*, and this part where he just talks about how the thing that seems to really work with fascists popping up in different communities is just to like, relentlessly harass and protest them because they're very insecure and it becomes very uncomfortable for them to be doing something that's so unpopular.

01:01:22:03 – 01:01:51:21

Speaker 1

And I think this is true in so many ways. Like so much of an anarchist take on transforming relations like racism and sexism and violence in our communities is to like cultivate really strong social norms otherwise. Like this is what abolitionist takes on sexual violence are. How do we produce a world in which people actually learn really good ideas about sex and gender and consent and sexuality, and like practice those and know that like, people are going to put up with it if they do other stuff. And that there's, you know, that it's not like we're waiting for the cops to come,

01:01:51:21 – 01:02:08:10

Speaker 1

it's like we're going to enforce together, in this community, these norms that are based in liberation. It's just such a different take and it requires collective action instead of this very passive, like, someone else will take care of it. And, and there's so much, I think, desire, honestly, that feels sometimes like a mommy daddy desire people have that

01:02:08:10 – 01:02:23:17

Speaker 1

the state will do stuff that we're scared we don't know how to do together because they've like trained us really well to not know how to do it. And so it's a big skill-building push. I want to ask just one more of my questions, then jump into these amazing questions people have been putting in the chat on YouTube.

01:02:23:17 – 01:02:46:27

Speaker 1

Thank you, everybody, for that. My last question is, why does it matter how abolitionists approach these questions? Like when does it

actually make a difference if we know we're anti-state when we do this work or not? Can we just like, work on all of our projects, like maybe we're trying to stop a prison or a border enforcement expansion project where we live, or maybe we're trying to shut down some jails or some courts or defund some police departments,

01:02:46:27 – 01:03:12:09

Speaker 1

or maybe we're doing a lot of work supporting people currently caught up in law enforcement systems, but can we just do all that work without having to figure out what we think about the state? Or like, when does it become, when does the rubber meet the road for us as we try to work together and some people have really strong views on this stuff and some people haven't thought about it and people differ, like when does it matter?

01:03:12:09 – 01:03:18:04

Speaker 1

Maybe Harsha, do you want to start us?

01:03:18:04 – 01:03:51:00

Speaker 2

HARSHA: I'll try. Thank you. Thank you for this conversation. When does it matter? I'd say, I mean, I think that it matters in terms of how we, not if but how we approach the state, right? So if our tendency is to say that, you know, for example, if we believe that the state passing hate crime laws will suddenly resolve or, you know, the rise of white supremacist violence, then I would suggest that that's the wrong approach, right?

01:03:51:00 – 01:04:19:23

Speaker 2

Because we know, as you all have laid out, that the state cannot actually resolve the rise in white supremacist violence and all forms of right wing violence, right, transphobia, heteropatriarchal violence, the rise in white supremacist violence, violence globally, Zionist violence globally, right, those are not resolved through state legislation at their core. And so I think the ways in which it matters is, I'm probably repeating myself,

01:04:19:23 – 01:04:46:20

Speaker 2

but if we do understand, regardless of whether abolitionists are doing work and maybe we have different understandings of the state, if we can agree that the main form the state currently takes is a carceral one, then the ways in which we do our work and the strategies that we adopt will differ than if we believe, if we fundamentally believe that all we need to do is reform or retool the state.

01:04:46:20 – 01:05:08:03

Speaker 2

Right? Like those questions and those answers will look different depending on how we approach the state. So I think that's when it matters the most. I don't think it is necessary for people to have a shared perspective on the state to do work together. I mean, the same way that I think we all do work together in many different ways.

01:05:08:03 – 01:05:29:26

Speaker 2

And I would echo what William said, for me, I'm not ideologically bound. For me, my criticisms of the state comes from witnessing the violence of the state, right? Like it's not just, it's not just an ideological position. And, you know, one of the things that when we remain curious about possibilities is then we become curious to build them, right?

01:05:29:26 – 01:05:50:26

Speaker 2

Then we actually put our energies towards imagining something else rather than, frankly, what I've seen from the demobilization from sometimes having misplaced faith in state systems. Like I have frankly seen way too many people burnt out by having misplaced faith in the system than people who have a healthy criticism of the state and then who just always know,

01:05:51:09 – 01:06:07:28

Speaker 2

right, that we're going to have to keep fighting this. Whereas sometimes I think misplaced optimism means that we burn out faster because we're like, Shit, I really thought I was going to win this in this lifetime. And that's just not, that's not what struggle teaches us. And so for me, there's a practicality to having a healthy skepticism of the state.

01:06:07:28 – 01:06:27:01

Speaker 2

Frankly, it means people are aware of the roadblocks that will get put in our way. We understand reconfigurations of state power so that when we think we win and the state remorphs, right, to reassert its power, we are one step ahead of them. We may not be able to stop it, but we can understand what's happening.

01:06:27:01 – 01:06:48:07

Speaker 2

So it's in those strategic, tactical organizing moments where I think it matters the most in terms of how we think together, how we act together. But again, it doesn't mean that we never engage with the terrain of the state, right? And I can't really say this way or that way because it really so much depends on the work that people are doing, what their context is.

01:06:48:07 - 01:07:10:00

Speaker 2

But I think having a historical understanding of what the state has been, not understanding the state as kind of, some decontextualized tool, as William put it so well, but to understand that it comes with a history and a context that the state is constitutive of violence and oppression, means that we then approach the state in a certain way.

01:07:10:23 - 01:07:42:24

Speaker 2

And it also means, you know, I would just echo that it is also important to be thoughtful about the ways in which imperialism informs all of this, right? Like states are not equal, but to be anti-imperialist and to be anti-state are not also contradictory, right? One can be anti-imperialist and be critical of the ways in which certain states have more power than others, and to also know that sometimes what that means is that criticisms of states become harder because of the threat of imperialism, right?

01:07:42:24 - 01:08:10:04

Speaker 2

And one of the things that we're hearing now so loud and clear, for example, in Iran and Kurdistan from feminists on the frontline, is that, you know, you can't let, we can't let the ways in which the US has of course had a long history of imperialist intervention and interference with Iran, distract from the fact that people are fighting a particular state form that is oppressive, right?

01:08:10:04 - 01:08:49:00

Speaker 2

So it is possible to have solidarity and recognize the ways in which imperialism informs all of the ways in which state forms often actually accrue more power, right? But also that, yeah, the ways in which states operate is in this much, in a global context that people are always contesting. And, you know, the one example that I want to point out briefly, because something William said made me think of this. William, when you were talking about the state form, you know, not being equal around the world yet, also recognizing the ways in which certain forms of the state have consistently displaced and violated people,

01:08:50:16 - 01:09:27:25

Speaker 2

you know, it made me think about one of the ways in which Indigenous peoples around the world have fought various states has actually been mega-dam projects, right? That even in certain state forms that were seen as liberatory, as post-colonial, if you will, some of the first fights against those states were Indigenous peoples fighting against dams. And you know, in the past 60 years it's not small, you know,

even by the most, kind of, conservative estimates, we know that the number of people who've been displaced by mega dams is almost 80 million people around the world.

01:09:28:27 - 01:09:57:03

Speaker 2

80 million people. Right? So again, that form, you know, that romanticization of state forms has to, those questions have to be central. They're not secondary, right? If 60 million people are fighting certain forms of state development, that's not an ancillary, you know, a throw away consequence that has to be central to how we understand questions of development, of violence, of coercion, of extraction, etc..

01:09:57:27 - 01:10:24:15

Speaker 2

So I want to kind of place that in the center of it. But just to return to this question of how we relate to the state, I think it is contextual and I think for me it's really our ethical political orientation must always in the minimum be one of you know, healthy skepticism of the state. And whenever we do win something from the state, we remember it's because we fought. We fought to win that, and that we are going to have to remain vigilant to maintain that victory, right?

01:10:24:15 - 01:10:39:10

Speaker 2

That it's not something that the state just granted, that people fought to win it. And that's an important part of history, too. Like I'm in Canada where people think like, Oh, Canada just grants healthcare, as if there wasn't a fight to fight for some basic universal social programs, you know, and as bordered as it is.

01:10:39:10 - 01:11:04:11

Speaker 2

So for me, I think, I don't know if that's too simplistic an answer, but that's for me how engagement with the state as abolitionists makes the most sense, is to constantly be vigilant, to constantly be critical, to constantly claim our victories, rather than ascribe them as something that the state just inherently or naturally does.

01:11:04:11 - 01:11:47:19

Speaker 3

WILLIAM: Yeah, one thing I want to say at the top of my mind right now is that a lot of what we see, especially when we're having this, in terms of this being a global conversation with regard to the state form, a lot of what we see, I feel like masquerading as anti-imperialism is global lesser evil-ism with regard to states. And the way that we're very critical of liberals and the way that they approach thinking about the two party system in the US, people do that

same thing with the binary of state socialist projects versus capitalist Western states on a global scale.

01:11:48:03 - 01:12:33:08

Speaker 3

So it is this sort of really hardcore dedication and loyalty to not criticizing or saying anything critical of what you feel like is your team or your party or your side, and who loses is the most oppressed people, the most vulnerable people. Again, stateless people, refugees. The people who are always kicked around, who are always disinherited, who are always enclosed on, who are always, who are always killed and who are always oppressed by state, always across the board.

01:12:33:23 - 01:13:17:18

Speaker 3

And when we break free from this sort of fetishization of states, I think that we can see that there is an absolutely important point that it does matter because historically a number of radical projects, revolutions, coalitions, and so on have been sabotaged, have been collapsed, have been assassinated, around the question of the state. And so namely, because of what often happens when people who want to attain that sort of power get the opportunity to turn the guns on their enemies, they might end up turning them on former comrades.

01:13:17:19 - 01:13:41:11

Speaker 3

They might turn them on co-conspirators as well, once they gain that power. There's nothing that says that they won't. And when you go back again to Russell Maroon Shoatz, as I was quoting earlier, that's one of the reasons he argues for decentralization in that essay that I mentioned, because he says, you know, a lot of these radical projects, state projects have turned into fraternal violence and people turning guns on each other.

01:13:41:11 - 01:14:11:08

Speaker 3

And that is something that absolutely has to be recognized when we study history so we don't repeat it. We have to look at these things truthfully so we don't repeat them. And so if we're trying to be abolitionist towards different ends, I think that that's fine. But at some point, political lines are drawn because I'm not trying to reform the state. And the people I struggle alongside are not trying to reform the state. And I'm not trying to reform the police. And I'm not trying to reform the military either.

01:14:11:08 - 01:14:41:01

Speaker 3

I'm not trying to redraw borders. I want to fight alongside people who don't want borders. I don't think that it's a matter of coming to an agreement as much as it's a matter of sincerity for me. And so I'm

looking for people who are sincere and fluid enough to be truthful about what circumstances we're under. And that's more important to me than ideological lines, because ideology is, like I said, it's a it's a tool for me.

01:14:41:13 - 01:15:06:26

Speaker 3

It's not, it's not my religion. It's not something I'm, I don't fly flags. Like I said, I'm not a patriot. I'm not a mercenary. I'm not committed to these things in any sort of way. I've come from these different radicalisms. I've come out of them because learned enough to be able to say, I think I got what I needed here.

01:15:06:26 - 01:15:54:26

Speaker 3

Let me see what's over here. I'm learning and I'm drawing from all of them. I don't strictly draw from anarchists, I don't strictly draw from state socialists, I don't strictly draw from any one ideology. I learn from the larger picture of all of the truths that come together in the mosaic of history. And so, like I said, I'm not doing any sort of cultish, history-worship leftism or any sort of nostalgic zealotry that won't break me free from these ideas that are dead or that are antiquated or that are disproven at this point. When, you know, when theory starts becoming something that you're just repeatedly doing and saying,

01:15:54:27 - 01:16:19:13

Speaker 3

you're repeating talking points from 100 years ago, 150 years ago, like they apply to this modern moment. You know, like you just, you might as well start calling that your faith. When something has been shown to have faults and to have these problems that are inherent in it, you have to say this is going to happen again, and learn from it, and then come with new ideas and new theory and new approaches.

01:16:19:13 - 01:16:51:25

Speaker 3

This is the task at hand. So we're not really radical if we're not doing that. If we're just repeating the same thing over and over and over again and turning radicalism into tradition and into faith, then well, that's not radicalism! That's actually very conservative. So we have to break free from this sort of thinking and think beyond and think about an absolute new approach to new situations and new predicaments.

01:16:52:06 - 01:17:18:07

Speaker 3

So I'm concerned with, you know, being around people who, or not concerned, but it's more my prerogative is to be around people who want to put in work and build and are ready to take these radical new

approaches and have new ideas and new theory. I don't really care about, like, these cliques and these squabbles amongst people who aren't accomplishing anything.

01:17:18:27 - 01:17:40:08

Speaker 3

Because I've been in the movement for half of my life now. And you see who shows up and you see who just talks. And we're in a moment where that's really, really present, where we can see who is talking and who is showing up. And that's going to be through our actions. And so I think about the work of the Black anarchist Kwasi Balagoon.

01:17:40:08 - 01:18:02:08

Speaker 3

He has an essay called Anarchy Can't Fight Alone. And he says in that essay, you know, some people are going to disagree, but you have to be willing to fight enough and to defend the principles you're willing to stand on by putting your life on the line and struggle. So I'm looking for fighters. I'm not looking for talkers.

01:18:03:00 - 01:18:22:29

Speaker 3

So that's who I want to work with. I want to, if I see somebody, even who I have a disagreement with, who I see fighting, that to me shows more than anything what they're about. And we prove ourselves in our work through our actions and through the results that we get, not just by talking about what kind of world we want.

01:18:23:04 - 01:18:50:25

Speaker 3

This is a moment where we are seeing some very scary, horrific things. And there's nothing, there's nothing to be done with just all this talk and talk talk. We have to actually put our money where our mouth is and put our lives on the line and work to change these conditions and actually show the value of the theory, the value of the radicalism that we draw from.

01:18:51:07 - 01:19:24:15

Speaker 3

Otherwise, you know, we can just have silly debates and, you know, talk figuratively about all of these things. So that, you know, the anti-state socialist anarchist versus state socialist debate, whatever it might be, the difference is, you know, like, we have to be able to actually put our value on what we're able to accomplish through our actions, and know that no matter what, we're trying to change conditions for the better.

01:19:24:24 - 01:19:50:08

Speaker 3

And that is not something that's going to have some guaranteed recipe

or guaranteed approach or one size fits all radicalism. Conditions are constantly changing, and we have to be ready to adapt and to be thoughtful and critical about what the conditions are, rather than going to this sort of universal approach that we pull from whatever ideology says we're supposed to do in any given moment.

01:19:50:08 – 01:19:58:09

Speaker 3

That's not how it's supposed to be. We're supposed to be willing to learn and to take action and to innovate based on the circumstances that we're living in.

01:19:59:29 – 01:20:18:00

Speaker 1

DEAN: Thank you. Yeah, I mean, I also think, there's something about abolitionists, which is that, the thing I think is really interesting about the abolition movement, that it has always provided a lot of entry points for people, whether or not they already identified as abolitionists. So you can be like, I'm mad about this new prison or police station being built in my community,

01:20:18:00 – 01:20:33:13

Speaker 1

I join the fight and then I learn about abolitionism from other people and we get to debate it and hash it out, and see if that's how I believe. Or I learn about it because somebody I love is in prison or because I am. Or that like people, that like people don't all have to all be card-carrying members of any ideology to like work together.

01:20:33:24 – 01:20:50:28

Speaker 1

But also we are asking ourselves, this actually matters, what our vision for the world is, and whether we're going to like take the first offer from an elected official to like, Oh yeah, we'll build a trans prison, or whatever terrible, non-abolitionist idea is being floated. It's that the principles matter a lot and there's room for people to come to them.

01:20:50:28 – 01:21:06:25

Speaker 1

And I think that that's a really interesting question when thinking about these kind of critiques of the state. Like, how to connect with people who don't believe all the same things as each other and also be like, Yeah, I'm willing to take a stand about what I believe in and why, and I want to try to influence you and convince you to join me and this is where I think we're going.

01:21:07:09 – 01:21:33:04

Speaker 1

We only have 7 minutes left. We have to end on time for our wonderful

interpreters' workday to end appropriately. But this, and there are so many great questions in the chat, thank you to everybody who posted them. We will send them out with the followup email about this event in case you want to look at the questions. But I wonder if you two would each just give a little bit about this question about scale. In this world in which we don't imagine the state is what redistributes things people need at scale,

01:21:33:15 - 01:21:50:23

Speaker 1

how do we think stuff would work? Like just, this is could be a little bit of a utopic vision for you or it could be that you're going to reach into something historical. But that is really a big question that's kind of woven throughout some of the audience questions. William, do you want to start us on that and we'll just try to end right at 530?

01:21:51:24 - 01:22:12:20

Speaker 3

WILLIAM: Yes, sure. I would say that there is no answer to that question. Because again, what I was just saying at the end of the little rant I just kind of went on is that there is no one size fits all radicalism. And I think that a lot of times when we are approaching these conversations, people want to say, well, what is this going to look like?

01:22:12:20 - 01:22:49:24

Speaker 3

Tell me what the end result is going to be. And I actually really appreciate and have been inspired by a lot of the work of Cedric Robinson. And it's helped me to rethink how I approach the question of liberation with regard to the fact that we can't name and we can't pronounce and have a definitive picture of something that we can't imagine because we're struggling to get towards it.

01:22:49:24 - 01:23:32:18

Speaker 3

We may not live to see what the better conditions that we're fighting for look like. So as I was saying, things change, conditions change. And everybody has different lives and different visions of what freedom and what liberation would look like to them. And so I think that historically, one of the problems that we've run into with a lot of Western radicalism in particular is this idea that some one can theorize and drop their idea of what liberation is onto people all around the planet, and that everyone's going to adapt to it and be free within that society according to this person, this leader, this politician, this party.

01:23:32:24 - 01:24:13:14

Speaker 3

And so, this military's vision of what liberation and freedom is, that does not always turn out how people think it's going to turn out. It oftentimes ends up turning into violence because then groups of people, again, the most vulnerable people, oftentimes Indigenous people, stateless people, poor people, dispossessed people, enclosed people, end up being oppressed even more, end up being cleansed, end up being pushed out, end up being deported because they are not adapting to what one person at the top who is an administrator says that everyone is supposed to adapt to for that state or for that society or for whatever the case may be.

01:24:13:14 - 01:24:27:28

Speaker 3

So I don't speak about things in that term. I don't have a totalizing program. I'm not trying to. That's what I'm trying to get away from. So that's how I feel about it.

01:24:27:28 - 01:24:46:21

Speaker 2

HARSHA: I would echo what William said. I mean, I think one of the ways in which we start to think like the state is the question of scale, right? The idea that scale has to be massive, which is not to say that there isn't question of scale, but I think inherent in that is the idea that scale has to be big.

01:24:47:25 - 01:25:10:28

Speaker 2

And I think one of the things that autonomous organizing teaches us, one of the things that abolitionist organizing teaches us, and one of the things that many radical traditions, including the Black radical tradition, Internationalism teaches us, is that there isn't one answer for all places. That's actually a problem, right? That flattens such diverse contexts and geographies and landscapes.

01:25:10:28 - 01:25:34:06

Speaker 2

I mean, we're literally in the midst of climate catastrophe, we need to tend to the ecosystems that we live in. We need to live based on the bio regions that we live in, amongst other things. But I think, you know, maybe what I can offer is that there are things that do tend to people at the scale that they're intended to.

01:25:34:06 - 01:25:56:14

Speaker 2

And if we look at, you know, I am based in Canada, there are a number of Indigenous land struggles, like the Wet'suwet'en land struggle, that tends to the scale that it is intended to, right? Which is that Wet'suwet'en peoples are defending their land against pipelines, are asserting their governance, asserting their jurisdiction, and asserting their governance,

01:25:56:14 - 01:26:33:12

Speaker 2

I'll bring back this question of governance, in ways that are fundamentally anti-state, right? That a form of governance that is anti-state. You know, it's been one year of the anniversary of the farmers protests in what is known as India, predominantly Punjabi farmers, but not exclusively. And those protests were built to scale, to literally house for almost eight months, to take care of, to tend to, to school, to cook for, to provide safety for, to organize, to mobilize, to do laundry for, and on and on and on for over a million people.

01:26:33:12 - 01:26:51:17

Speaker 2

And that is not a one-off thing. That is because of forms of organization. For example, in the Sikh community, I won't go into it, but the gurdwara and ideas of seva and langar within our community, means that there are forms of governance. These are imperfect. I'm not suggesting any of these are perfect. You know, we have models in Chiapas that we've learned from the Zapatistas.

01:26:51:17 - 01:27:23:25

Speaker 2

We have forms of Kurdish struggle in Rojava which are multiethnic. You know, there are so many examples that we can go on and on about. They are imperfect, but I think they remind us that there are ways of governing ourselves that account for care, that take into account questions of scale as needed, that take into account most fundamentally how we build relationships with each other and how we be together through the process of struggle and through the process of building, right? Through different forms of direct democracy.

01:27:24:24 - 01:27:50:08

Speaker 2

And of course, I want to emphasize, they are imperfect, but what is perhaps different about them is that unlike the state, which has baked into it exploitation and oppression, baked into it, which cannot be reformed, which William, you know, so beautifully has continued to emphasize through this conversation, in the same way that police can't be reformed, cops can't be reformed, borders can't be retreat, the state cannot be reformed.

01:27:50:08 - 01:28:10:13

Speaker 2

It has violence baked into it. But these experiments, which abolitionism teaches us, we need experiments. All of these experiments of resistance and struggle and how we build life together are trying to subvert relationships of violence. Right? Even if they're not always achieving it. And those are those are a constant process of

struggle, you know, and which you know,

01:28:10:13 - 01:28:37:09

Speaker 2

and, of course, various forms of social oppression need to be tended to. But those are the attempts and the experiments that I think matter. And I think again, you know, that relationality is more important to me than scale, because scale will build to the place it is intended to based on the relations that it accounts for. And I think that's the starting question and scale comes after, if that makes sense.

01:28:38:14 - 01:28:59:00

Speaker 1

DEAN: Thank you both so much. I mean, I just, just to pick up on something, William said, trying to do things at a scale where you do something over a whole territory or people the same way through authority is the thing all of our resistance movements are trying to stop, you know. And so I think the assumption that the proper scale of distributing wellbeing in life is something that comes from the top,

01:28:59:22 - 01:29:16:15

Speaker 1

and strangers make decisions about your life for you, is exactly what, decide whether or not our community has a dam, decide whether or not you have food, decide whether you work in a wage labor system, decide whether people can be put in cages. This is what we're fighting against. So I really appreciate what you both just said and there's so much more.

01:29:16:26 - 01:29:53:19

Speaker 1

So grateful to BCRW for hosting this event. So grateful to you, Harsha and William, for all of your work. And very grateful to the interpreters and captioner. And I'm glad that this video will live online for people to use. And I hope we can find lots of ways to keep having these conversations in our own abolitionist community projects, and reading, you know, all these beautiful books that people have been linking in the chat, and just diving into this together to figure out how to survive as much as possible through what we are going through. I look forward to seeing you all again in the future.

01:29:54:21 - 01:29:56:18

Speaker 2

Thank you so much for this.

01:29:56:18 - 01:29:58:02

Speaker 3

Appreciate you. Thank you.

