

State Terror, Resistance, and Community Solidarity

Dismantling the Police

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Introduction¹

This chapter considers some of the antecedents to the current demands to dismantle/defund the police, specifically in the US, Britain, and Australia. I do this for several reasons. Perhaps the most obvious is the ubiquity of targeted policing against Black and Indigenous people and people of colour. More important, however, for contemporary political strategies is the focus, in earlier movements, on solidarity-making in the community and the connections made with an abolitionist vision for the future. From the late 1960s, the activist movements against police violence linked their work against police terror with organizing and providing services for local communities. Many had an outward vision that was focused on oppression more generally and was internationalist in outlook. I write this from the perspective of someone who is neither Black nor Indigenous, who grew up in an Australian working-class environment where police and prison were ubiquitous, who worked in community organizations during the 1980s and who has been active in various campaigns around police violence, prison, and deaths in custody in both First Nations and working-class communities.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement today draws on earlier campaigns in recognizing the importance of replacing police with:

community-based services that meet basic needs and advance safety without using methods of policing, surveillance, punishment, and coercion. It is also about investing in cultural life, arts, recreation, and the things that make and strengthen community and our dreams for our future.

(Movement for Black Lives [M4BL], n.d.)

The call to ‘defund the police’ advocates to both *divest* from police and *invest* in “jobs, education, housing, health care — all the elements that are required for a productive and violence-free life”, according to US abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore (as cited in Kushner, 2019, n.p.). Thus, the movement is “about presence, not absence” in the words of many abolitionists like Ruth Gilmore, Mariame Kaba (2021) and others. It is about building life-affirming institutions and creating a society that does not need to rely on force, violence, and mass incarceration.

The protest movements against police and security forces have been linked in many countries to broader abolitionist and decarceral strategies. As the M4BL succinctly states:

And while #DefundPolice focuses on law enforcement agencies, we are also calling for defunding of jails, prisons, detention centers, immigration enforcement, sites of involuntary commitment and incarceration of disabled people. We are also calling for defunding the military-industrial complex.

(M4BL, n.d.)

It is a challenge to the carceral and colonial society which embeds a logic of state violence, repression, and forced confinement as necessary, morally justified, and of benefit for the protection of citizens. Patrisse Cullors, a co-founder of the US BLM movement, recognizes that “we live in a police state, in which the police have become judge, jury and executioner. They’ve become the social worker [...] the mental health clinician [...] they’ve become anything and everything that has to do with everyday life” (as cited in Heatherton, 2016, p. 36). The targets of all this punitiveness remain depressingly familiar: the poor; the marginalized; racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; Indigenous peoples; refugees; immigrants; and people with disabilities who fill the police lock-ups, courtrooms, prisons, and other carceral sites in countries around the world.

The abolitionist project confronts the violence and oppression that are at the heart of how police, prison, and other carceral institutions operate, in both the wealthy, liberal democracies of the North and the countries of the Global South. Indeed, profound class, gender, racial, dis/ableist, and other social divisions and inequalities replicate the targets of police and carceral institutions internationally with repressive and coercive state institutions enforcing these relational divisions and spaces of oppression. The political strategies that directly challenge police and security forces are often local and place based, with campaigns, for example, against individual state murders; however, they necessarily confront the global intersections of state repression and maintain an internationalist vision that recognizes the multidirectional flows of techniques of state domination. Witness, for example, the repressive police strategies practised by the Israeli state against Palestinians, which are then exported as training to US cities (Schrader, 2019, p. 18).

The international uprisings against state violence in 2020 had roots in the longer anti-colonial struggles to dismantle the institutionalized frameworks of control – these roots were common across the Global North and South. Contemporary police and security forces had their origins as tools of colonial repression for poor, marginalized, racialized, and oppressed peoples globally. There is an international dimension to the opposition to the police, which links to the longer histories of imperialism, colonization, slavery, and settler colonialism – from the development of the police as a colonial force for pacification in the early nineteenth century to the contemporary role of policing in wielding the direct violence of the colonial state, whether as, for example, the Israeli state against Palestinians, Latin-American states against Indigenous peoples, or African states using colonial-style police forces for ruthless internal suppression.

Underpinning these contemporary demands is the long history of policing as the violent arm of colonialism and imperialism in its various forms. However, there is also the more recent history of the struggle against police violence which arises in the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In the Global North, the anti-imperialist struggles against the American war in Vietnam and opposition to its interventions and support for dictatorships in Latin America and elsewhere, the anti-apartheid movement, the civil rights movements, the rise of workers’ and students’ militancy, and the women’s and gay rights movements brought a generation of

people into direct contact with the ferocity of state violence. Many of the popular movements were not simply oppositional – they were concerned with responding to the needs of communities in accessing healthcare, education, housing, and safety, and they were concerned with building community solidarity. The historical fragments I provide below reflect some pieces of this much larger mosaic of struggle. I draw on them to consider wider reflections of what might be learnt from these experiences.

Intersecting Stories of Activism

Confronting state violence was central to the radical politics of the Black Panther and First Nations liberation movements in the US and Australia from the late 1960s. The formation of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in Minneapolis, the Black Power movement in Australia, and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in the US reflect the struggle for autonomy, self-defence, and self-determination which emerged alongside protecting local communities from police terror. In short, the struggle against police violence and racism was one of the defining features of modern First Nations and Black radical political movements in both Australia and the US and began in both countries at similar moments.

The movements understood that colonialism was a core structure that underpinned police violence. The Black Panther Party was formed in 1966 and initially involved direct resistance to policing. Activists like Stokely Carmichael and Bobby Seale linked the contemporary position of Black people in the US with the history of domestic colonialism and the US imperialist war in Vietnam. The work of Frantz Fanon was used as a point of analysis in the Panthers' writings, and police violence and killings were constant themes. According to Seale (1967), "the racist military police force occupies our community just like the foreign American troops in Vietnam" (p. 7). The Black Panthers' Ten Point Program (1972) was inclusive. It called for an end to "police brutality and murder of Black people, other people of color, and all oppressed people inside the United States" (p. 2). It was internationalist and called for an "end to all wars of aggression" by the US. The Ten Point Program addressed education, housing, employment, and health care. The Black Panthers (1972) were abolitionists.

We want freedom for all Black and oppressed people now held in U.S. federal, state, county, city and military prisons and jails [...]. We believe that the many Black and poor oppressed people [...] have not received fair and impartial trials under a racist and fascist judicial system and should be free from incarceration. We believe in the ultimate elimination of all wretched, inhuman penal institutions, because the masses of men and women imprisoned [...] are the victims of oppressive conditions which are the real cause of their imprisonment.

(p. 1)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, First Nations political activists in Australia understood that the contemporary position of Aboriginal people was created by colonial oppression. They had connections with Māori activists in Aotearoa New Zealand, the Polynesian Panthers in the Pacific, both the American Indian Movement and the Black Panthers in the US, First Nations people in Canada, and the Caribbean Black Power movement. They were also involved in the opposition to apartheid in South Africa and Australia's involvement in the American war in Vietnam. The more radical activists were influenced by a range of international writers from Frantz Fanon and Sartre to Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and James Baldwin. They saw their position within the context of colonialism and imperialism and as part of the international Black Power

movement (Foley, 2001; see also Attwood, 2003, pp. 318–349). A leading activist at the time, Denis Walker, stated “when I say I’m first black and then Aboriginal [...] I see behind it the link that can go on with black people to the north of us, black people in Africa, black people in India” (as cited in Foley, Schaap & Howell, 2014, p. 131).

In late 1971, Black Power activists established the Black Panther Party of Australia. Key members included Denis Walker, Sam Watson, Gary Foley, Paul Coe, Gary Williams, and Billie Craigie. Their platform had some similarities to the US Party, except that it contained some important and specifically Indigenous provisions for land rights, restitution, and a United Nations supervised plebiscite for Aboriginal people to determine “the will of black people as to their national identity” (as cited in Attwood & Markus, 1999, pp. 252–254). Concerning the police and prisons, their platform demanded “freedom for all black men held in prisons and jails” and “an immediate end to police brutality, murder and rape of black people”. This could be achieved by giving “communities control of the police” (as cited in Attwood & Markus, 1999, p. 253). Other Aboriginal activists, such as Bruce McGuinness, saw the establishment of the Black Panther Party in Australia not as a copy of the US but as part of an international movement and an international philosophy – it was akin to what Fanon had advocated for – a Third World movement (see Foley, Schapp & Howell, 2014, p. 136).

The First Nations and Black movements were never merely negative protests. Like the BLM movement and calls to defund the police today, they were quintessentially focused on positive interventions for community protection, advocacy, and the building of community-led initiatives to support Black, Indigenous, and oppressed peoples. In the US Black Panthers, Huey Newton recognized the necessity to connect with communities and their needs. Thus began the provision of the Panthers’ many survival programmes, including free breakfasts for children, food packages, schooling, legal and social security advice, free ambulances, free clothing, free bus transport for prison visits, housing, and medical treatment (Newton, 1973; PBS, 2002). So, while the Black Panther Party set out to protect the community from police violence, they also provided community services and support that otherwise could not be accessed. They developed a wide-ranging commitment to addressing social needs. As Mary Bassett (2019) writes, “the Black Panther Party evolved from an organization focused on armed self-defense against police brutality to one that framed police violence as part of broader social violence” (p. 352). The provision of community-based health care is an example. Utilizing the assistance of health activists, the Panthers set up free community-based medical clinics beginning in Chicago in 1969. In the early 1970s, there were free health clinics established by the Panthers in 13 American cities and a national sickle cell screening programme (Bassett, 2019). By 1972, the Ten Point Program of the Black Panthers (1972) called for “completely free health care for all Black and oppressed people” (p. 2). The Panthers pursued a community healthcare model: they linked ill health with poverty and racism and had a holistic approach to healthcare – health and social justice were intertwined. A similar model was developed by AIM in the US and Black Power activists in Australia. It has had a lasting impact on the provision of community health care to poor and oppressed people ever since.

The American Indian Movement began in Minneapolis in the summer of 1968. A group of Native American activists led by George Mitchell, Dennis Banks, and Clyde Bellecourt called a community meeting to address the issue of extensive police violence, brutality, and racism experienced by First Nations people in the city – as a result, AIM was formed. It was “born out of the dark violence of police brutality and the voiceless despair of Indian people” (Ikche, 1993, n.p.). It established the Minneapolis AIM Patrol to actively monitor police violence and brutality against First Nations people, particularly around public housing projects. Growing from the initial patrol, a national network of AIM patrols was established in 16 cities and

communities facing similar problems across the country. The following year, AIM established the Indian Health Board of Minneapolis, which was the first Native American urban-based health care provider in the US. In 1970, the Legal Rights Center opened in Minneapolis with the support of AIM, Black and other activists who were committed to addressing the criminalization of First Nations and Black people, and people of colour in the criminal legal system (see LRC, 2022). The Legal Rights Centre still operates in Minneapolis today and continues its fight against police violence and racial and culturally based oppression. AIM continued with its activism, advocacy, and demands for self-determination, participating in the 19-month occupation of Alcatraz Island, the establishment of Indian Survival Schools to provide culturally based education for First Nations children and the Trail of Broken Treaties march on Washington DC in 1972, which resulted in the occupation of the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs. It engaged in a range of other community-based and national initiatives from local food and employment programmes to national strategies for fighting racism in sports and the media. The AIM was instrumental in establishing the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) in 1974, which still operates today with a membership of Indigenous peoples from the Americas, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. It continues to support Indigenous anti-colonial struggles for Indigenous rights and environmental justice.

In Sydney, Australia, concern over deaths in police custody and constant police violence, brutality, harassment, and racially discriminatory arrests of Aboriginal people led to the establishment of the first Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS). During the 1960s, the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship and the NSW Council for Civil Liberties were involved in several important legal cases over police killings, assaults, and the abuse of police powers. However, a group of young Black activists took more direct action. In 1969, Gary Foley, Paul Coe, Gary Williams, Billie and Lyn Craigie, and others decided to establish a patrol to observe and collect information on police violence and harassment in the Redfern area. The group was aware of the Black Panthers' establishment of the 'pig patrol' in Oakland, California to counteract police violence and intimidation, and similar patrols were also established in Brisbane by Aboriginal activists including Denis Walker (Foley, 2001). Developing from the pig patrol and with support from volunteer lawyers, in early 1970 the ALS opened its doors as the first free shopfront legal assistance service in Australia. It still operates today.

The Black Power movement in Australia was politically committed to the process of empowering community action. As Black activist Roberta Sykes stated, "concerted effort on behalf of the entire community, and with the assistance of the entire community, creates a force and a power in itself [...] which will propel the people towards a better way of life" (as cited in Howell, 2014, p. 72). Gary Foley (2001) observed that "the establishment of the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service was to create a resurgence of pan-Aboriginal nationalism" (p. 3). In July 1971, the Redfern Aboriginal Medical Service was established based on the same model of community control as the ALS. Similarly, the Aboriginal Housing Company was established as a community housing provider in Redfern. A breakfast programme was established for local Aboriginal children in Redfern in 1972 that later became a community-run childcare centre named Murawina (meaning Black woman). The National Black Theatre was also established. Over subsequent years, Aboriginal-controlled legal, medical, housing, and childcare services were to spread throughout Australia. The model of community-run legal and medical services was to influence the establishment of similar service delivery initiatives in broader society. Today, the peak bodies for First Nations legal and medical services – the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service Secretariat and the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organization – are two of the most influential bodies representing the interests of First Nations peoples in Australia.

In Minneapolis, Redfern, and Oakland, First Nations and Black organizations, born from the struggle against police violence, were fundamentally concerned with fighting for sovereignty, self-determination, and community control. In 1972, both the AIM's march on Washington DC and the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra were powerful anti-colonial symbols of unrelinquished Indigenous sovereignty and nationhood. The struggle against police brutality and the use of the prison system against Black, Indigenous, and other oppressed peoples were important; however, they were always part of the development of broader strategic political platforms, including sovereignty, self-determination, restitution/reparations, and land rights. Furthermore, while organizing and fighting against police violence was an immediate response to the need for survival, First Nations and Black organizations pushed those demands further through the provision of focused projects in areas of health, education, housing, legal assistance, community safety, and other forms of support. These initiatives were part of the broader process of building community solidarity and deepening the political understanding of the causes of racism, poverty and oppression.

The Black Power movement in Australia and the Black Panther Party and AIM in the US were subject to covert surveillance, active intervention and violence by law enforcement and security agencies. The FBI's Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) targeted the Panthers and AIM as well as other groups and aimed to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralize" their activities (Harcourt, 2018, pp. 136–138). It led to the killing of the chairman of the Chicago chapter of the Black Panthers, Fred Hampton (Harcourt, 2018). In Australia, the federal Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and state police Special Branch operatives had been monitoring Aboriginal activists since the early 1950s. In the following decades, they targeted the rise of the Black Power movement using surveillance, phone taps, and informants; some activists were listed as threats to national security (Foley, 2011). Fifty years later, in 2017, the FBI developed the term "Black Identity Extremism" to describe the BLM movement and Black activism. It was grouped with White Supremacy Extremism as posing an equivalent threat of racially motivated violent extremism. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw (2020), "these allegedly equivalent tendencies were treated as a threat on par with ISIS, justifying a major program of surveillance, investigation, and infiltration" (p. 15).

Policing Britain's Internal Colonies

One of the most important commentaries on policing, race, and the politics of law and order in the Global North was *Policing the Crisis*. Stuart Hall et al. (1978) showed how racism, authoritarianism, and state violence were enabled through the figures of dangerous young Black men and the crime of 'mugging'. The 'problem' of Black and Asian immigration was defined through Black youth and crime while policing and the maintenance of law and order became attached to an appeal to the 'British Nation'. The policing of Britain's internal colonies – to use Hall's term – increasingly involved arbitrariness, violence, and strident levels of racism. Racist violence and Black and Asian resistance to police harassment and abuse were evident throughout the 1970s in places like Notting Hill, Stockwell, Southall, and Brixton in London, and elsewhere in England including in Manchester and Birmingham (Gilroy, 1987). As Sivanandan (1990), another key Left intellectual who was the Director of the Institute of Race Relations and the founding editor of the journal *Race and Class*, recognized, "the story of black struggles in the 1970s has almost always been the story of confrontations with the police" (p. 135).

During the 1970s, paramilitary police units began to play a more repressive role, including the Special Patrol Groups (SPGs) and the Police Support Units (PSUs). These units actively policed/harassed Black communities and were used to intimidate and disrupt anti-racist and

anti-fascist demonstrations such as Rock Against Racism and Anti-Nazi League protests during the 1970s. Several anti-racist demonstrators were killed in London in SPG baton charges, including Kevin Gately in 1974 and Blair Peach in 1979 (Gordon, 1985). In the case of Peach, it took 31 years to release an internal police report which found that Peach was “almost certainly” killed by an SPG officer (Chaudhary, 2019, n.p.). Forty years after his death, in 2019, there were renewed calls for a public investigation into his killing and why it had been covered up for so long (Chaudhary, 2019).

The Black British academic and activist Paul Gilroy (1987) articulated, in the early 1980s, an important insight for abolitionists and those calling for dismantling the police today: it is “fruitless to search for programmatic solutions to ‘discriminatory police behaviour’ in amendments to [police] training” (p. 109). For Gilroy, the problem was seeing racism as a product of individual bias, rather than a structural condition of oppression in which policing played a strategic role. Gilroy (1987) argued further that the war in Northern Ireland had affected policing in the rest of the UK through the adaptation of operational techniques and methods of surveillance. Foreshadowing current arguments (see Harcourt, 2018; Rodriguez, this volume; Schrader, 2019), he observed that domestic policing was changing through the influence of counter-insurgency planning and growing militarization. Likewise, ‘community policing’ was never more than a complementary strategy to militaristic police interventions (Gilroy, 1987).

In 1980, Stuart Hall (1980) followed up the themes of *Policing the Crisis in Drifting into a Law and Order Society*. He wrote: “We are now in the middle of a deep and decisive movement towards a more disciplinary, authoritarian kind of society [...]. This drift into a ‘Law and Order’ society is no temporary affair” (pp. 257–258). The authoritarian state was aimed at controlling those who were seen as ungovernable: the ‘scroungers’, the ‘enemy within’ – to use then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s popularized phrases. It was the corollary to the recalibrated capitalist free market and the retraction of the welfare state that was inevitably and simultaneously driving social conflict and class polarization. For Hall (1980), the police had become “the disciplinary arm, the shock troops of the Law and Order society” (p. 265). He noted the highly visible and aggressive role of policing in industrial disputes and in the policing of Black communities, which he referred to as the “war of attrition” between the police and Black people (Hall, 1980, p. 266). Hall (1980) also identified the militarization of the police, which was particularly evident in the saturation policing of Black areas and the use of discriminatory stops and searches. His analysis was prescient to the urban uprisings of 1981 and 1985 and the policing of the British miners’ strike in 1984.

The summer of 1981 saw anti-police riots across many English cities involving mostly but not exclusively Black youth, sparked by aggressive policing, discriminatory stop and searches, and saturation policing. The most intense clashes were in parts of London, Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, and Leeds (Cowell, Jones & Young, 1982). As a result of the conflict, police received more riot training and equipment, including CS gas and plastic bullets. Meanwhile, the public face of policing continued with a community policing profile – multiagency initiatives, racial awareness training, neighbourhood watch, and so on (Sim, Scraton & Gordon, 1987). The urban uprisings were closely followed by overt class warfare. The British miners’ strike began in March 1984 after the Thatcher government closed collieries they regarded as uneconomical. The ensuing strike was reportedly the longest in British history. It was met by a massive and violent police response. Arthur Scargill (1986), the president of the National Union of Mineworkers, described the outcome of the policing of the miners’ strike:

We had 11,000 people arrested during the course of the dispute, including myself. We had 7,000 people injured, many of them hospitalised... We also had in the region of 200 jailed.

We also had, tragically, eleven people killed during the miner's strike... The police also did something that was more blatant than we'd ever seen before. They fabricated evidence, they deliberately lied in the witness boxes, they forged documents.

(p. 16)

The violence of the police coalesced with broader government support for more aggressive policing. Comparing the experience of the miners with unrestrained state terror to that of racialized policing, Arthur Scargill commented, "police tactics in this dispute have revealed clearly to us what black and Asian communities throughout Britain mean by 'police harassment'" (as cited in Gordon, 1985, p. 161). In September and October 1985, there were further violent confrontations between young people and police in Brixton and Tottenham (London) and Handsworth (Birmingham). All of these were sparked by police violence and brutality: the police beating of a Black woman in Handsworth, the police shooting of a Black woman in her home in Brixton, and the death of a Black woman in her home in Tottenham after a police raid. Sivanandan (1990) noted at the time that this was life in Britain's Gulags.

The confrontations with police through the 1970s and 1980s gave rise to new forms of community-based organizations and resistance. Some of these interventions used the legal system to advance political struggle through, for example, using criminal trials as a political platform, while, at the same time, mobilizing community support and protest outside the legal system. As Paul Gilroy (1987) explained, "this combination of tactics and the synchronization of protest inside and outside the law provided a model which was to become central to the political repertoire of black activism up and down this country" (pp. 125–126). The campaigns and struggles included self-defence groups against racist violence, defence and support groups for particular people victimized by police and the justice system, and local groups established to monitor police (Sim, Scraton & Gordon, 1987). There was also the use of independent, community-driven inquiries after serious confrontations and killings by police. This was a direct response to the limitations of official inquiries or the refusal by the state to hold any inquiry. After the SPG killing of Blair Peach, the National Council for Civil Liberties established its own inquiry into his death and the policing of Southall during the anti-fascist demonstration of April 1979. Sim, Scraton and Gordon (1987) noted: "the Inquiry documented a chilling picture of uncontrolled state violence towards legitimate demonstrators whose primary motivation was to protect their community from a racist presence on their streets" (p. 32). During the 1980s, local councils also established independent inquiries into policing, for example, in London and Birmingham. These inquiries documented people's experiences with the police. In Tottenham, witness after witness spoke, "of the indignities which they suffered at the hands of the police officers for no other reason than that they were Black. The bitterness of their experience was shared by old and young, men and women, professional people and unemployed" (as cited in Sim, Scraton & Gordon, 1987, p. 34).

A key moment, in the 1990s, was the racist murder of Black teenager Stephen Lawrence in London in 1993. He was killed by a white racist gang known for other attacks in the area. The events following Stephen's murder included the establishment of the Stephen Lawrence Campaign and the subsequent Macpherson Inquiry, which reported in 1999 (see Elliot-Cooper, 2021), concluding that there were fundamental police errors in the murder investigation, which was "marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership by senior officers" (Macpherson, 1999, para 46.1). The effects of police corruption, incompetence, and racism in responding to the racist killing of Stephen Lawrence were to reverberate for decades. In 2012, two of the five perpetrators were convicted of murder. The legacy of Stephen Lawrence's death lived on in other ways. In 2013, Peter Francis, a

former police officer with the Special Demonstration Squad, revealed that, while working undercover in an anti-racist campaign group, his superiors constantly pressured him to find ‘dirt’ and ‘disinformation’ that could be used to smear the reputations of the Lawrence family and supporters and to undermine their campaign. Senior officers also withheld information from the Macpherson Inquiry about his undercover role (see Evans & Lewis, 2013). In the longer term, the importance of the Stephen Lawrence Campaign was critical. Adam Elliot-Cooper (2021) acknowledges that the campaign was both a search for justice by the family, and “also a movement of resistance which took on the most powerful state institutions, forcing London’s Metropolitan Police to concede publicly their own institutional racism in the face of irrefutable evidence” (p. 57). The campaign resulted in a range of community outcomes, including the Stephen Lawrence Centre in South London and the Stephen Lawrence Trust focused on education.

There are two final points in this discussion on the recent history of policing in Britain. One is the debate, which emerged in the 1980s among the Left, on questions of reformism and abolitionism which, while bound by their historical milieu, is still relevant today in the discussions of defunding/dismantling the police. Those who adopted a liberal, reformist position on policing emphasized that crime was a problem for working-class and Black communities which needed to be addressed, and that reform of the police and criminal justice system was capable of achieving that outcome. Those on the Left who understood the limitations of reform were disparagingly described as abolitionists and “idealists” (Sim, Scraton & Gordon, 1987, pp. 39–59). Yet, the reformist position failed to address the profound impact of institutional racism and the intersections of class and race. Despite the weight of historical evidence, the extreme state violence evident in Britain during the 1980s, and the social and political authoritarianism of the Thatcher Conservative government, reformists argued that the police could be made accountable to the community, that increasing militarization could be stopped and public confidence restored. History was not kind: New Labour came to power in 1997 with a further strengthening of the carceral agenda through its ‘Tough on Crime, Tough on the Causes of Crime’ programme.

The second point concerns community activism. I have drawn from the analysis of the Stephen Lawrence Campaign by Elliot-Cooper (2021) and his observation that “almost every campaign calling for justice following a Black death at the hands of the police is led by a woman” (p. 57), a mother, a partner, a sister. He makes the point that Doreen Lawrence and her campaign for justice for her son was to influence how subsequent campaigns approached grassroots community building, protest, the court system, and the mainstream media. Elliot-Cooper (2021) acknowledges the role of Black feminism in seeing the family as a potential source of strength, as a space or site of resistance against racism rather than primarily as a site of oppression. We see something akin to this in the role First Nations women and families (including, e.g., Helen Corbett, Rose Stack, and Alice Dixon) played in the public campaigns over police killings in Australia from the 1980s onwards and the more recent role of Black and First Nations women in the BLM movement in the US (including, e.g., Patrisse Cullors and Alicia Garza). It is also a demonstration of the strength of Black and Indigenous people and people of colour and working-class familial relations that runs counter to the dominant racialized (media, academic, and political) discourses of dysfunction, violence, and criminality.

Conclusion

The idea of drawing lessons from the past is always problematic, if for no other reason than the changing political, social, economic, and historical contexts. Having said that, we can at least

identify some considerations that are relevant today. The struggle against state repression highlights what we need to do to build solidarity within the community and across communities of difference. So much of the lasting work of the movements in the late 1960s and 1970s has been in the role of community-based organizing to meet basic needs: medical, housing, legal, and so on. In other words, it has been about *presence* in the community.

The building of solidarity across groups has also been fundamental, if not always easy. Thirty years ago, Angela Davis and Elizabeth Martinez (1994) warned that building alliances needed to avoid what they referred to as the “oppression Olympics” (n.p.). Building coalitions for challenging state power requires a focus on the common interests and connections that exist, rather than emphasizing hierarchies of oppression. Today, Dean Spade (2020), for example, speaks of the need to develop “a multi-issue and solidarity-based approach because [...] lives are cross-cut by many different experiences of vulnerability” (p. 15). The recent history also shows the importance of multifaceted political strategies, from strategic use of the legal system to public protest; it has also involved the use of international forums from UN committees and complaints mechanisms to international human rights organizations.

Finally, the history of the struggle against state violence and terror has highlighted many of the current debates between abolitionism and reformism. The limitations of police reform through community relations and training were articulated 40 or more years ago. Yet, we still see the same solutions presented. With the hindsight of decades of so-called police reforms, we are in a better position to understand the limitations of these approaches, and perhaps articulate more clearly the difference between those reforms which simply work to strengthen police and carceral systems and those which diminish police power. This is perhaps the most important task. As Ruth Gilmore and others argue, abolitionism is a long-term goal *and* a practical policy programme that requires investment in social goods that enable a productive life: “It’s obvious that the system won’t disappear overnight [...] no abolitionist thinks that will be the case” (Gilmore as cited in Kushner, 2019, n.p.). Reforms are needed but they need to be reforms that actually change the order of things.

Note

- 1 With authorization from the publisher (Bristol University Press), this chapter draws from an earlier work by Cunneen (2023).

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