

The necessity of abolition

Matt Sandler

The interlocking crises of contemporary global capitalism remind us that abolition has always been central to freedom

If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.¹

Frederick Douglass, 1857

In early September 2020, as fires raged across the western US, California governor Gavin Newsom signed into law an obviously desperate act of criminal justice reform. Assembly Bill No 2147 allows ex-inmates of the state prison system who have worked in fire camps during their incarceration to apply to have their records expunged on an expedited basis, thus permitting them to seek employment certification at various state agencies, so that they might be employed as firefighters upon their release. The news went out with an apocalyptically absurd photograph of Newsom, hair gelled and rugged jacket unzipped just so, signing the bill at a picnic table in an ash-blanketed outdoor scene, orange-red sky in the background. Some reports of this event noted that the Covid-19 pandemic had severely depleted the ranks of the Conservation Camp Programme, which typically employs over 3000 imprisoned labourers as firefighters. The pandemic's acutely brutal effect on overcrowded prisons and jails has even led some corrections departments to turn to decarceration.² The meagre and compromised nature of these reforms exemplifies the

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shortcomings of the US carceral state in response to the interlocking character of the current crisis. But it also draws attention to the pressure for change emerging from seemingly unprecedented historical conditions. Between the fires and the pandemic, one might be tempted to argue that nature is an abolitionist.

The ways in which the current crisis has forced the partial crumbling of punitive neoliberal policy bears some striking resemblances to the end of US chattel slavery. To see this clearly, it helps to turn to W.E.B. Du Bois's magisterial revisionist history *Black Reconstruction* (1935), which famously documents the role of Black people in liberating themselves and in forging the promise of what he calls 'abolition-democracy'. A less well understood but still crucially important part of the book is Du Bois's account of how white Northerners, with no intention of ending slavery or of living as political equals with free people of colour, nonetheless came to appreciate the *necessity* of Black freedom. This improbable reversal, accomplished through what Du Bois calls the 'weird magic of history', turned on a concept of necessity which - as this essay will suggest - was then and is now as important to abolitionism as the concept of freedom itself.³

The point of focusing on this aspect of abolition history is not so much to draw attention to the psychology of elite white men like Newsom, but rather to outline the historical forces which led 'abolition-democracy' to power, and thus to better understand the surprisingly widespread adoption of abolitionism in the present. Thinking abolition as necessary, through philosophical debates about freedom and necessity, clarifies the relation between abolition and liberalism; its intermittent appearance across the last two centuries of history; and its applicability across a range of contemporary political struggles, from the fight against mass incarceration in the US to global climate activism.

In our own moment, when abolition has improbably flashed up as a guiding principle for political action, we might productively return to what made it necessary in the past. Frederick Douglass wrote, in the 1857 speech cited above, 'Power concedes nothing without demand'.⁴ From the vantage of the present, that demand appears both human and ecological.

Necessity and abolition-democracy

The words 'necessity' and 'necessary' appear all over *Black Reconstruction*, both in Du

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Bois's own analytical language and in his lengthy citations from nineteenth-century political leaders. In the pages where he lays out the idea of 'abolition-democracy', Du Bois quotes from a speech given by Charles Sumner in the Senate in early 1866 in support of Black suffrage:

Twice already, since Rebel Slavery rose against the Republic, [necessity] has spoken, insisting, first, that the slaves should be declared free, and, secondly, that muskets should be put into their hands for the common defense. Yielding to necessity, these two things were done. Reason, humanity, justice were powerless; but necessity was irresistible. And the result testifies how wisely the Republic acted. Without Emancipation, followed by arming the slaves, Rebel Slavery would not have been overcome. With these, victory was easy.

At last the same necessity, which insisted first upon Emancipation and then upon arming the slaves, insists with the same unanswerable force upon admission of the freedman to complete equality before the law, so that there shall be no ban of colour in court-room or at the ballot-box, and government shall be fixed on its only rightful foundation, the consent of the governed. Reason, humanity and justice, all of which are clear for the admission of the freedman, may fail to move you; but you must yield to necessity, now requiring these promises to be performed.⁵

The conscription of fugitives from slavery into the Union war effort was widely understood as a military 'necessity', but here the concept seems to have a more conceptual density. Twenty-first century historians, with a clear view of colonialism and ecology, now recognise the role of soil exhaustion in the Upper South motivating the ultimately disastrous territorial ambitions of Southern slavery. So ecological pressures certainly played a role in the downfall of the Southern plantocracy, but Sumner's usage suggests a rangier theoretical sense of this 'irresistible' necessity.⁶ Where does its force originate? Necessity appears pre-political: legal freedom seems to come as a result of its power. How does necessity work where the ideals of 'reason' and 'justice' have failed? How does it remain consistent, the 'same', from historical moment to moment, and yet only occasionally determining? To what extent is it a phenomenon of nature?

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The prophetic dimensions of Du Bois's historical masterpiece, the connections it made between the crises of the mid-nineteenth century and the 1930s, rely on a conception of necessity as a historical force.⁷ In the heading of a later chapter, he writes:

The price of the disaster of slavery and civil war was the necessity of quickly assimilating into American democracy a mass of ignorant laborers in whose hands alone for the moment lay the power of preserving the ideals of popular government; of overthrowing a slave economy and establishing upon it an industry primarily for the profit of the workers. It was this price in the end America refused to pay and today suffers for that refusal.⁸

Where, during the war, the recognition of military necessity had been crucial to the liberation of the enslaved, in its aftermath, the deferral of the freed people's enfranchisement constituted a denial of political-economic necessity. What Du Bois calls the 'counterrevolution of property' - the dismantling of Reconstruction in the rapprochement between Northern industry and Southern Bourbonism - was a 'refusal' of Black liberation. Because the necessity of 'abolition-democracy' went unmet, inequality became a structuring fact of US life that long outlived the historical moment of abolition. Consequently, the prospect of Black liberation haunts US national history and Western modernity as an unacknowledged, repressed need.

It should then not be surprising that, like Du Bois and the heroes of *Black Reconstruction*, present-day prison abolitionists make regular recourse to the language of necessity. Prison abolitionists have argued against the prison-industrial complex on the basis of its failure to meet real human needs. Dan Berger, Mariame Kaba and David Stein write in a 2017 *Jacobin* piece: 'To us, people with a combined several decades of experience in the prison abolition movement, abolition is both a lodestar and a practical necessity.'⁹ Necessity likewise frames Ruth Wilson Gilmore's account of abolition across decades of activism and scholarship. Rachel Kushner's 2019 profile of Gilmore in the *New York Times*, a landmark moment in the mainstreaming of prison abolitionism, makes clear in its title the terms of her thinking: 'Is Prison Necessary?'.¹⁰ Thinking in these terms involves a subtle but transformative cognitive leap in the context of neoliberal ideology: prison abolition asks audiences to imagine collectives, communities and societies which experience need together - needs besides protection from largely mythic forms of criminality.

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Gilmore's *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (2007) demonstrates that the US prison system functions as a scheme for land use; since its publication, a whole range of abolitionist geographies have followed.¹¹

In this view, the political ground of prison abolition is not just the freedom of the imprisoned to sell their labour as firefighters, but also the necessity that surrounds that freedom, the physical communities which are on fire.

Necessity in modern political thought

Du Bois's recourse to necessity prompts both historical and theoretical questions which extend beyond the expansive scope of *Black Reconstruction*. For instance, what had been the role of necessity in the coalescence of liberal ideology in the US prior to the war? What earlier conceptions of necessity did men like Sumner draw on? In thinking and advocating in terms of necessity, abolitionists then and now have addressed immediate political considerations, but they have also intervened on a centuries-old philosophical debate. Political philosophers have long defined human freedom through closely argued, densely elaborated and fundamentally ambivalent concepts of necessity.

As early as in the work of St Augustine, necessity encapsulated the worldly effects of providence and predestination, which acted as constraints on human freedom. From the outset of modernity, philosophers began to think of necessity in secular and scientising terms, as the laws of nature. To exercise free human agency required becoming habituated to the inescapable requirements of the material world. Francis Bacon put it simply: 'one does not have an empire over nature except in obeying her'.¹² In this formulation, human freedom acts within conditions set by the necessities of nature. This premise lay at the heart of some of the most crucial philosophical developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hobbes's theory of the state took off from a conception of individual freedom as shaped by necessity. Spinoza and Hume took necessity as a point of departure for elaborating the notion of causality. As philosophical debate developed, the strict divides between 'man' and nature, and thus freedom and necessity, began to blur. Hegel repeatedly characterised the relation between freedom and necessity as dialectical, finding the two concepts irresolutely and reciprocally linked in any grounded experience of the world: 'A freedom that has no necessity within it, and a mere necessity without freedom, are determinations that are abstract and hence untrue ... neither of them

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has any truth if separated from the other'.¹³

In the age of political and industrial revolutions, the dynamic of freedom and necessity became critical. While its theological and ecological origins never fully disappeared, necessity increasingly became visible as a set of social facts. The coalescence of classical liberalism around what Isaiah Berlin famously called (in his 1958 essay of the same name) 'the two concepts of liberty', especially 'negative liberty' - freedom from harm and constraint - had the effect of sealing off conceptions of freedom from the interventions of necessity. Berlin acknowledged the historically masculine and Euro-American limitations of freedom as an organising concept. Since then, it has become clear to researchers across a range of disciplines that liberalism, despite its basis in ideas about freedom, was paradoxically dependent on slavery and colonialism at its peripheries, on the unpaid labour of women at home, and on an inexhaustibly exploitable natural world in general.¹⁴

By the mid-nineteenth century, Marx had arrived at the notion that capitalism was yielding new forms of necessity, a 'second nature', which would throw up new and ever more complex obstacles to freedom. In this vision, the necessity of producing surplus value was a form of oppression, a yoke to be cast off. In *Capital*, Volume 3, Marx boiled down centuries of deliberation into the problem of the length of the work day: 'In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases.'¹⁵ Freedom here takes place after necessity is satisfied. Crucially, however, if capital could produce necessity, so too could the people - hence Du Bois's account of the 'general strike' of the enslaved during the Civil War. The revised theory of revolutionary practice found in *Black Reconstruction* involves enslaved people perceiving the necessity of abolition. This perspective requires thinking abolition, and human agency, across the historical dialectic from freedom to necessity.¹⁶

Necessity in the early US and in Black Abolitionist rhetoric

In the early US, the problem of freedom and necessity had held significant interest long before the Civil War era. The eighteenth-century Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards wrote several treatises working through a distinction between 'moral' and 'natural' forms of necessity. During the American Revolution and its aftermath, the Founders often framed the expedience of sustaining the institution of slavery in terms of the doctrine of necessity. This premise dovetailed with assumptions about

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people of African descent as less than human and thus as a part of the natural world which white colonials were fated to control.

Among the enlightened leaders of the early Republic, slavery was a 'necessary evil'.¹⁷ In an oft-cited passage, Thomas Jefferson weighed the dangers to the Republic posed by slavery and abolition: 'We have the wolf by the ears; and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.'¹⁸ As the decades wore on, white Southerners unapologetically argued for slavery as necessary to protect the South from the evils of 'wage slavery'. They had begun to fear competing visions of necessity, in the form of violent abolitionist rebels like Nat Turner and John Brown, as well as in the market competition of Northern industry.

By the 1840s, Northern liberals like Ralph Waldo Emerson saw the 'moral revolution' of abolition as a part of the 'blessed necessity by which the interest of men is always driving them to the right'.¹⁹ In Emerson's vision, abolition would advance the inevitable progressive development of the US toward a state of moral and political perfection. The period's Black abolitionists saw more clearly the political obstacles between idealism like Emerson's and the actually existing US. But they too had their rhapsodic moments, in which the necessity of abolition emerged from the spirit of the age. Charles Lewis Reason imagined a call for revolution emanating from the land, in a poem entitled 'The Spirit Voice; or Liberty Call to the Disenfranchised' (1841):

Come! rouse ye brothers, rouse! a peal now breaks
From lowest island to our gallant lakes:
'Tis summoning you, who long in bonds have lain,
To stand up manful on the battle plain,
Each as a warrior, with his armor bright,
Prepared to battle in a bloodless fight ...
A voice goes up, invoking men to prove
How dear is freedom, and how strong their love.²⁰

The poem draws together free people of colour in the North, then struggling to maintain access to voting rights, and enslaved people in the South, as collective auditors of a call to political radicalism. Militant abolitionist rhetoric consistently framed Black revolt in terms of the inevitability of natural law, as a volcano, a

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whirlwind, or a flood. Even engaged in the particulars of regional conflict, Black abolitionists viewed the end of slavery as an iteration of Romantic revolution, prophetically resonating across the Atlantic. At the same time, they understood that abstractions like freedom and necessity required careful handling in the context of local movement politics, with its fractious solidarities between wealthy white Northerners, free people of colour, and fugitives from slavery.

One of the most sophisticated Black artists and intellectuals of the nineteenth century, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, deployed the concept of necessity in the abolition struggle with pointed accuracy. In an 1859 essay entitled 'Our Greatest Want', she addressed, like Reason, an audience of free Black Northerners, chastising their bourgeois aspirations:

The idea if I understand it aright, that is interweaving itself with our thoughts, is that the greatest need of our people at present is money, and that as money is a symbol of power, the possession of it will gain for us the rights which power and prejudice now deny us. - And it may be true that the richer we are the nearer we are to social and political equality; but somehow, (and I may not fully comprehend the idea,) it does not seem to me that money, as little as we possess of it, is our greatest want ... We need men and women whose hearts are the homes of a high and lofty enthusiasm, and a noble devotion to the cause of emancipation, who are ready and willing to lay time, talent and money on the altar of universal freedom. We have money among us, but how much of it is spent to bring deliverance to our captive brethren? Are our wealthiest men the most liberal sustainers of the Anti-slavery enterprise? Or does the bare fact of their having money, really help mould public opinion and reverse its sentiments? We need what money cannot buy and what affluence is too beggarly to purchase. Earnest, self-sacrificing souls that will stamp themselves not only on the present but the future.²¹

Harper moves balletically between 'lofty idealism', the everyday matter of money-getting, and the grinding intra-racial class divisions of the inhospitable North. She represents the matter of necessity as a contested question, split between materialism and the 'altar of universal freedom'. Seeking to disentangle necessity from capital, Harper argued the necessity of abolition for the fate of the free Black North. What

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Du Bois would later call 'abolition-democracy' would be the result of a 'labour revolution'. But even its most ardent proponents did not always see so clearly its political-economic dimensions: how abolition would redistribute planter wealth and transform the means of production via enslaved labour.²² Thinking in tandem with Marx across the Atlantic, Harper writes her way to an abolitionist anti-capitalism.

In the aftermath of the war, Harper took up the cause of radical Reconstruction, and became embroiled in the controversy over the suffrage. In an extraordinary speech at the Eleventh National Women's Rights Convention in 1866, she argued for the continued necessity of 'abolition-democracy' after the end of legal slavery. After telling the story of how white Northerners had exploited her financially as a widow, Harper turns to generalisation: 'We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving a curse on its own soul.'²³ The notion of restraint here, of being 'bound up together' is hardly incidental; it hints at a collective asceticism in contrast to the vicious indulgences of Southern slavery. Harper consistently aims her arguments against racist and sexist 'selfishness' and towards ideals of collectivity as necessary. The Black abolitionists were keenly aware of the limits of the period's liberalism, and saw with prophetic acuity the ways that racism and possessive individualism would continue to bedevil the premise of equality and the realisation of 'abolition-democracy'.

Necessity in the neoliberal era

The tragic irony of early US liberalism was that planters in the South and settlers in the West exercised their freedom by enslaving Black people and removing Indigenous people. Taking stock of the chequered legacy of liberalism in the twenty-first century, Chandan Reddy argues that Euro-American freedom came inexorably 'with violence'. In a similar vein, Elizabeth Anker calls 'ugly freedoms' those expressed as domination, colonialism, enslavement, dispossession and the despoiling of nature.²⁴ In the accelerating neoliberal crises of the twenty-first century, these critiques of liberal freedom have become urgent. Extractive industries lay claim to nature via the rights of corporate personhood; officials justify the over-policing of Black people on the basis of protecting property rights. Following abolitionists past and present, we ought to hear the call of necessity in, through and against freedom so used.

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In conventional histories of liberal governance, abolition has long been treated as a peripheral phenomenon, which took place at the threshold of modernity, to be forgotten or discarded once a settled political freedom was achieved. What if, instead, we begin to see abolition as made perennially necessary by the function of liberalism? What if abolition was not a precondition of freedom, but instead had to be periodically resurrected to combat freedom unethically or harmfully enacted?²⁵

Think for a moment of what it might mean to plug abolition into Hegel's dialectical framing of freedom and necessity: 'A freedom that has no [abolition] within it, and a mere [abolition] without freedom, are determinations that are abstract and hence untrue.' What if, instead of rote readings of Hegel as a teleologist, we thought through the necessarily cyclical or recursive dialectic of freedom and abolition? What if freedom calls forth abolition, of necessity, as a part of its nature? What if we took this as an implication of Du Bois's compound, 'abolition-democracy'?

One last example from the European tradition, from a writer Du Bois knew well and quotes in *Black Reconstruction*: the Romantic poet Percy Shelley, who declaimed in his long poem *Queen Mab* (1813), 'Necessity! thou mother of the world!'.²⁶ This vision frames necessity in terms of genealogy and desire; its enthusiastic address is a pregnant reparation. Would a less ugly freedom tend more carefully to social reproduction? What might a world look like with abolition as its mother? Or do we already live in such a world and risk forsaking her?

The decarceral and environmental reforms with which this essay began were only undertaken in response to urgent eco- and bio-political pressure. Yet perhaps they offer evidence of support for a more general premise: abolition is a necessity. It is not something that we might do, could do, or should do. It is not ultimately a matter of political capability or morality. It is something about which there is no choice. To think in terms of choice is to delay its inevitability. Abolition is necessary in perpetuity, as long as we live in a society which takes freedom as a core value. As long as some people are 'free' to distribute harm in the service of their own interest, the people must be capable of abolition: this is a requirement of the premise of human freedom. Abolition is a politically necessary conceptual tool we must have with us at all times, but especially to engage with the excesses of neoliberalism.

A quick survey of the current US political landscape begs abolition in an iterative form. It is not just the practice of policing that demands abolition, but the system

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of mass incarceration as a whole. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) likewise must be abolished, as so too must the unaccountable system of migrant detention proliferating behind it. The metastatic Department of Homeland Security, recently deployed to quash protest in American cities, needs abolishing, and likewise does the expansive array of government offices and agencies involved in the tragically ruinous 'War on Terror'.

As agents of what Rob Nixon calls 'slow violence', the industries that have irreparably damaged the global climate demand an immediate abolitionist approach.²⁷ Again, iteratively, we must abolish not just plastic straws, but the combustion of fossil fuels, and the sooner the better. This is hardly a comprehensive list of long-entrenched practices, institutions and systems which now stifle human flourishing in the decline of US global hegemony. The forms of liberal governance designed to support the looting of the commons must ultimately meet abolition. The pandemic, the protests of police murder, the fires in the West and the storms in the South have demonstrated that the US state as constituted is catastrophically inadequate to the needs of its own citizens, let alone the many others over whom it claims authority.

Conclusion

The contexts in which 'we' might deliberate these matters are limited. The political difficulty for abolitionists of all kinds is to enlist others in the recognition of its necessity. But the long history of necessity as a philosophical concept suggests it has an individual, subjective dimension. That 'we' as activists and intellectuals might think and feel the necessity of abolition does not at all necessarily mean that other members of our communities think and feel the same way. The use of 'we' should draw renewed attention to the uneven stakes of abolition. The activist spaces and intellectual outlets in which 'we' live and think vary in size and composition in ways which must frame any deployment of the power of necessity. The Black abolitionists of the nineteenth century, like Harper and Reason, knew well that the promise of locating 'our greatest want' derived from an acute sensitivity to who we are, and how we are different from moment to moment and from place to place. Though the idea of abolition has begun to appear in a wide range of conversations with astonishing rapidity, its traction as a form of politics depends on its address to specific groups and occasions.

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The best early histories of US abolition focus on this problem of tracking the shape and composition of abolitionist collectives. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* splits its focus between the voices of political leaders and the 'mass of slaves' who register as the book's real protagonists. In this respect, Du Bois departed from his earlier emphasis on a Black vanguard 'Talented Tenth'. His later contemporary, C.L.R. James, was fascinated by Du Bois's capacity to represent the people as a collective. In James's mid-century draft manuscript for a synoptic history of the US, published posthumously as *American Civilization*, he reflected on the role of abolition in the story of American freedom. In a Black left slant on American exceptionalism, James argues that 'Abolitionist intellectual[s] ... embodied an American anticipation of the most radical political action that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have known'.²⁸ He was more pessimistic about twentieth-century US intellectual elites, whom he saw as woefully professionalised and self-involved: 'The American intellectuals have nothing to say that is new. They will make no special contribution to the future of American society, they formulate no new doctrine, reactionary, progressive or otherwise.' In counterpoint, he sees the labour movement's successes of the 1930s and 1940s as a revival of nineteenth-century radicalism: 'The great masses become abolitionist now; themselves to wipe away the conditions of their own slavery. These cannot be abolished by anyone else.'²⁹

This last line sounds loud and clear some seventy years after its composition. Long-time activists in the prison abolition movement expressed surprise at the scale and intensity of the protests through the summer of 2020. The images of Angela Davis at the Port of Oakland work stoppage in solidarity with the movement for Black lives on Juneteenth are indelible. Davis's achievements indicate substantial transformations in US intellectual life since James's grim appraisal of the mid-twentieth century. Historians, literary critics and political theorists have begun to prioritise conceptions of abolition in reassessing Euro-American conceptions of freedom and liberalism.³⁰ The 'propaganda of history' that Du Bois saw as having repressed the promise of 'abolition-democracy' has begun to crumble; what C.L.R. James called the 'conspiracy of silence' around the historical importance of abolition struggle has broken.³¹ Now, in the era of neoliberalism, as freedom is enacted more destructively than ever, the 'spirit voice' of abolition has also, and all of a sudden, been heard by masses of people. One might be tempted to hope that the intellectuals have joined James's 'masses become abolitionist'.

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If so, intellectuals have a complex role to play, as the foregoing examples of abolitionist interventions from the nineteenth century to the present suggest. Constant broadcasts about the police murder of Black people in the US and the consequences of global climate collapse seem to have little effect on that power, which, in Douglass's words, 'concedes nothing without demand'. The old theoretical questions of man and nature, freedom and necessity, positive and negative freedom, immediate or gradual abolition, the passions and the interests, needs and wants, all seem quaint in the context of neoliberal society, effectively rendered an oxymoron. Following Harper, abolitionist intellectuals and artists must get involved in the aesthetic and ideological contestation around 'our greatest want'.

Neither the crumbling fustian piles of Neo-Gothic debt-machine universities nor the point-scoring blood-sport of the social web would seem to make ideal contexts for working through the dynamics of freedom, necessity and abolition. A barrage of bad news defines the hum-drum everyday of academic and intellectual life online. Little victories provide little light to guide the way. On the other hand, perhaps the combination of out-of-touch elites, inadequate institutions and digital hyper-exploitation is exactly the prerequisite for an abolition that will unlock the cages and plug the oilwells. Maybe late capitalism is making a new abolition necessary. The summer of 2020 made clear we will either wander alone in a ruined landscape or among the masses become abolitionist. Recognising the necessity of abolition that will determine the future is a collective intellectual responsibility.

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Notes

1. Frederick Douglass, *Two Speeches, One on West India Emancipation ...*, Rochester, NY, O.P. Dewey, Printer, American Office 1857, p22. Thanks to Janet Neary for insisting on this passage and for her comments on this essay, which was also generously read by Manu Chander and Courtney Thorsson.
2. The Prison Policy Initiative has been tracking these releases; their most recent reports suggest that the main source of reduction in the prison population over the past year is lowered admissions rather than releases: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/virus/index.html>.

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3. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, New York, Free Press 1998, pp182-90, 252.
4. Douglass, p22.
5. Du Bois, p193.
6. For the environmental aspects of the plantation system, see Walter Johnson's *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*, Cambridge, Harvard UP 2017.
7. Du Bois's conception of abolition-democracy emerges from his orientation as a philosopher of history. For readings of Du Bois as a philosopher, see Robert Gooding Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*, Cambridge, Harvard UP 2011; and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London, Verso 1993, pp111-145.
8. Du Bois, p325.
9. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/08/prison-abolition-reform-mass-incarceration>.
10. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html>.
11. For work specifically focused on the nineteenth century, see Judith Madera's *Black Atlas: Geography and Flow in Nineteenth Century African American Literature*, Duke UP 2015; and Martha Schoolman's *Abolitionist Geographies*, Minnesota UP 2014.
12. Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP 2000, p100.
13. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, trans Henry Siltou Harris, Théodore F. Geraets and Wallis Arthur, Suchting, Indianapolis, Hackett 1991, p73, §35.
14. For this account of liberalism, see Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Durham, Duke UP 2015.
15. Karl Marx. *Capital Volume 3*, trans David Fernbach, London, Penguin 1993, p959.
16. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, pp55-83. For the idea of necessity in Marx, see Moishe Postone, 'Necessity, Labor, and Time: A Reinterpretation of the Marxian Critique of Capitalism', *Social Research*, Vol 45 No 4, Winter 1978, pp739-788; and Herbert Marcuse, 'The Realm of Freedom and the Realm of Necessity: A Reconsideration', *Praxis*, Vol 5 No 1, 1969, pp20-25. For Marx and environmental critique, see John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, New York, Monthly Review 2000. For a much more detailed examination of the idea of necessity in political thought than can be provided here, see David James, *Practical Necessity, Freedom, and History: From Hobbes to Marx*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2021. For an argument which runs counter to the one represented here, see Roberto Manghiabiera Unger, *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy*, London, Verso 2004.
17. This formulation recently reappeared in Republican senator Tom Cotton's arguments against the *New York Times* 1619 Project. For historical context, see Greg Grandin's *The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom, and Deception in the New World*, New York, Picador 2014; and David Waldstreicher's *Slavery's Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2010.
18. Jefferson, letter to John Holmes, 22 April 1820, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol 15, 1903, pp248-50.

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19. Emerson, *Emerson's Anti-Slavery Writings*, ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, New Haven, Yale 2002, pp26, 33.
20. Reason, 'The Spirit Voice', collected in *African American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Joan R. Sherman, Chicago, University of Illinois Press 1992, p42.
21. Harper, *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, New York, The Feminist Press 1993, p103.
22. Du Bois, p25.
23. Harper, p218.
24. For Anker, see *Ugly Freedoms* (forthcoming Duke UP, 2022); and for Reddy, see *Freedom With Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* (Duke UP, 2011).
25. This point is distinct from arguments made by figures as diverse as Thomas Haskell, Robin Blackburn and Saidiya Hartman about historical abolition in the Anglo-Atlantic world as a precondition for specifically capitalist and liberal forms of freedom. I mean something more like: despite the diminished role of abolition in the long history of political theory, it predates liberalism as a political ideology, and will be present at its end, at the advent of the next incarnation of political freedom.
26. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Queen Mab*, London, R. Carlile 1822, p58.
27. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP 2013.
28. C.L.R. James, *American Civilization*, ed. Anna Grimshaw, London, Blackwell 1993, pp90, 87. For James's thoughts on Du Bois, see 'Lectures on *The Black Jacobins*', *Small Axe*, September 2000, pp83-98.
29. James, pp225, 276.
30. Some of the most exciting developments in this context lately have been in the emergent field of African American intellectual history (for which see the efforts of the recently founded African American Intellectual History Society), and in the increasing attention paid to Black political theory (for which see Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner's edited collection *African American Political Thought: A Collected History*, Chicago, Chicago UP 2020).
31. Du Bois, pp711-730; James, p48.