

Abolition as method

David Gordon Scott, ed., *Abolitionist Voices* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2025). 324pp., £90.99 hb., 978 1 52922 403 0

David Gordon Scott and Emma Bell, eds., *Envisioning Abolition* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2025). 360pp., £90.99 hb., 978 1 52923 477 0

In May 2025, Lord Chancellor Shabana Mahmood announced that the UK was facing ‘a total breakdown of law and order’. The cause? In Mahmood’s analysis, a prison estate that has failed to grow at the rate of the incarcerated population, which has nearly doubled since 1990. Her solution? The most significant programme of prison building and expansion since the Victorian era.

For some arms of the state, the size of a population clearly determines the scale of infrastructure required to serve it. In this, Mahmood riffs on an intuitive theme: just as young people need places in nurseries and classrooms and the elderly need access to healthcare, in her account, the incarcerated need spaces in prisons. But ageing is different from criminality. One is an inevitable process; the other is just a very effective idea. The category of crime is a moveable one, and the responses it prompts are similarly unfixed. Yet when Mahmood projects growth in the prison population – to some 100,000 by 2029 – she does so in the register of the inevitable. The timely publication of *Abolitionist Voices* and *Envisioning Abolition* invites us instead to think in the register of the provisional.

These texts are a welcome addition to the fast-growing literature on prison abolition. Though released together, each volume has a distinct aim. *Abolitionist Voices*, edited by David Scott, is the more general of the two. Through theoretical and practical chapters that cover figures from Friedrich Nietzsche to Angela Davis, geographies from Argentina to Canada, and methods from phenomenology to eco-criticism, its contributors offer access to abolitionist perspectives both established and emergent. The key structuring idea for this volume is, in Scott’s terms, the ‘abolitionist rhizome’ – a decentralised, horizontal network of interplay, independence and exchange. While *Abolitionist Voices* takes on this expansive view, *Envisioning Abolition*, co-edited by Scott with Emma Bell, homes in on a single nodular cluster: libertarian socialist thought between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though thematically targeted,

the expertise collected in the volume is, once again, vast. Focussed on Europe and the United States, its contributors re-examine activist-theorists of socialism, communism and anarchism, bringing historical writings and case studies into conversation with contemporary analysis. Both volumes have much to offer us at this moment.

Where Shabana Mahmood so confidently deploys the category of the incarcerated criminal, *Envisioning Abolition* operates in a historical context where large-scale imprisonment was still in a primordial state of strangeness. It offers the reader access to a time before crime and punishment had solidified in the imagination. This defamiliarisation is, I feel, the volume’s greatest achievement. Take, for instance, Ruby Tuke’s excellent chapter on William Godwin, a contemporary of two more high-profile figures in the history of British incarceration, Jeremy Bentham and John Howard. Tuke’s chapter shows us that, at a point remembered for that divide between punitive and reformatory models of the prison, Godwin was forming a wider critique: first, that legal and political institutions not only define crime, but produce it, and second, that punishment is not a resolution to harm, but a recapitulation of it. On the prison specifically, Tuke describes how Godwin ‘finds it almost impossible to imagine how offenders could be improved by removing the care and positive influence of others’. This remains a striking critique, further explored in the contemporary feminist literature by figures like Gwenola Ricordeau and Mariame Kaba. A compelling guide through Godwin’s thought, Tuke leaves the reader with a sense of the criminal justice system as made rather than simply received.

While those interested in contemporary abolitionist work may have encountered the shapes of Godwin’s critiques elsewhere, *Envisioning Abolition* will also introduce such readers to new lines of inquiry. The impressive chapter from Federico Testa, on nineteenth-century philosopher Jean-Marie Guyau’s critique of sanction, is especially interesting in this regard. With clear and effectively structured writing, Testa introduces us

to Guyau's moral critique of punishment, a welcome addition to abolitionist studies which tend to be, for good reason, sociological and contextual. Central to Guyau's thought, Testa describes, is a division between *will* and *sensibility*. While it's tempting to link together chains of vice and suffering, goodness and pleasure, Guyau argues that moral conduct and bodily or emotional feeling are separate. As Testa explains, Guyau understands legal punishment, being directed towards the body, as affecting only a tool rather than the will of the subject who controls it. Legal sanctions, then, do not reach their necessary target: an individual's centre of moral deliberation. Ineffective, punishment of this kind can only be gratuitously cruel. Testa's analysis of Guyau's moral vocabulary stands out among the many excellent chapters as a particularly incisive contribution.

The goals of *Envisioning Abolition* seem aimed in two directions. The first are historical; the second, coalitional. Let's consider each in turn. There is a certain energy to be drawn from the longstanding (or forgotten) abolitionist critiques of the past. And yet, these historical examples leave us with a vexing question: if abolitionist critiques have persisted and resisted for centuries, why, then, do prison systems continue to expand? Penny A. Weiss' chapter on Emma Goldman makes this frustration clear:

We know what oppression does to some and what privilege does to others. We know what capitalism wants from its workers, as we know what patriarchy demands of each sex. We do not know what we might become if such things, including prisons, were to disappear as our commitments grow to human rights, freedom, individuality, equality, and the satisfaction of basic human needs. Yet, this is what Goldman dared to imagine.

Chapters like Weiss' show us that critics have long known the prison to be a failure, whether measured against either its own aims, or those of an equitable and flourishing community. While the volume offers many moving calls to action, critique and connection, I feel it could have been enhanced by engaging the question of why abolitionist thought has not – in neither these historical contexts, nor today – acquired more widespread political traction. In fairness, one answer to this problem is suggested by the volume's second, coalitional aim. In Scott and Bell's words, this collection advances the idea of 'libertarian socialism' by presenting 'visions of

freedom and justice that reach across the divide between anarchists, Marxists and democratic socialists'. While perhaps a factor, division on the left does not seem to me a fulsome explanation for abolitionism's lack of widespread popularity. This aside, the collection's 'abolition in red and black' has its own internal rifts. Its unity is most convincing when undertaking abolition's critical tasks, and less so for its constructive ones. In other words, the volume effectively critiques incarceration but is less persuasive when imagining ways forward without it. While many chapters offer compelling (yet also sensitive and thoughtful) treatments of their material, some interventions may come across to the reader as combative and ideologically heavy-handed. That both *Envisioning Abolition* and *Abolitionist Voices* include chapters on the life and writings of anarcho-communist Pyotr Kropotkin is an interesting editorial quirk. But more interesting still are these chapters' distinct approaches. While I found Ruth Kinna's contribution on Kropotkin constructive and enriching, Robert D. Weide's framing of contemporary abolitionism – as suffering variably from the 'myopia' of foregrounding chattel slavery in the American context, the 'glaring deficiency' of not referencing Kropotkin in general, and the possibility of Marxist scholars 'intentionally excluding Kropotkin's work' – came across as unnecessarily hostile. This somewhat antagonistic approach seemed out of step with the 'rhizomic' ideals of the volume.

In aiming to bring together a scattered political cluster, there is more than one point of tension in the project. A key disagreement within 'libertarian socialism' as gathered here is over the role of government, with the anarchist contributions tending to be quite absolute: prison abolition entails state abolition. This argument runs through much of the volume, but it would perhaps need to be more clearly developed to sway a reader not already committed to anarchist thought. Those chapters advocating for an abolitionism aimed at both state and prison did not convincingly connect the two ideas, nor flesh out how they might be made material. Though Scott and Bell offer some commentary on this disagreement over the state in their opening chapter, I remain unconvinced that the difference can be, as they suggest, transcended. The volume would have been enhanced by a fuller treatment – perhaps by building further on Davide Turcato's illuminating description of Errico Malatesta's

‘anarchy as method’ – as to how ‘libertarian socialism’ can proceed in the constructive tasks of abolition without consensus on this issue.

The diverse contributions to *Abolitionist Voices* provide a satisfying counterpoint to the focus of *Envisioning Abolition*. Again, there are a number of excellent chapters to digest. Lisa Guenther’s chapter on phenomenology is an extremely sophisticated methodological piece, and Joy James reflects compellingly on the contradictions and challenges of movement-building. Other chapters offer valuable points of entry into specific critical lenses, with Hannah Bowman’s chapter on Christianity and Thalia Anthony and Harry Blagg’s on colonial carcerality both providing a thought-provoking balance of breadth and depth. Nathan Stephens-Griffin and Andrew Brock’s chapter on eco-abolition is a welcome inclusion alongside Valeria Wegh Weis’ grounded analysis of Southern abolitionist feminism. Though rich with ideas, *Abolitionist Voices* is not without its peculiarities. In its selection and interpretation of sources, unusual

definitions of key terms, and lack of examples pertinent to the abolitionist context, I felt that Michael Dellwing’s chapter could have benefitted from further methodological and argumentative scrutiny in the editorial process. At times, Dellwing’s text veers into the conspiratorial (see discussion of the Uyghurs’ persecution in China as an American ‘invention’), and its argument is unevenly applied (as in its discussion of a programme screened on the state outlet *Russia Today*, despite arguing throughout against state media in general). I would encourage the reader to approach the sources and debates Dellwing invokes with a critical eye.

Where contributions to *Envisioning Abolition* tended to place high faith in the ability of anti-capitalist structures to dramatically reduce social harm, *Abolitionist Voices* reminds us that anti-capitalism, while important, will not solve everything. Sexual, racial, gender-based and anti-queer violence, for instance, could well endure in a world without capitalism. As Viviane Saleh-Hanna’s chapter emphasises, profit fuels violence but



does not fully explain it. Both our capacities to hurt and the reach of state punishment exceed the logics we use to understand them. Having breadth of analysis is, then, imperative. Though containing many excellent and highly developed chapters, I wonder if *Abolitionist Voices*, as a general text, might have benefited from some further contributions to give the reader a wider sense of the ‘rhizome’ it addresses. For those interested in exploring further, the *Routledge International Handbook of Penal Abolition*, edited by Michael J. Coyle and David Scott (2021), has a broad geographic reach and some highly instructive, if

shorter, contributions from approaches less represented in *Abolitionist Voices*, including from critical disability, incarcerated and queer theorists.

At a moment in which the powers of state punishment are expanding through both familiar and newfound techniques, *Envisioning Abolition* and *Abolitionist Voices* make timely and thought-provoking interventions. Effectively countering the politics of punishment while offering their readers numerous avenues to explore further, these volumes promise to enliven many an abolitionist imagination.

Isabella Gregory

Minor premises

Andrés Saenz de Sicilia, *Subsumption in Kant, Hegel and Marx: From the Critique of Reason to the Critique of Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2025) 260pp., £120.00 hb., 978 9 00471 382 6

The term ‘subsumption’, literally meaning ‘taking under’, first emerged in thirteenth-century scholastic philosophy to describe the logical subordination of a particular to a universal. In the syllogism, *All human beings are mortal; I am a human being; therefore, I am mortal*, the minor premise, ‘I am a human being’, thus represents the ‘subsumption’ of a particular term (me) under a general one (humanity). How, then, did ‘subsumption’ also come to describe the processes whereby a peasant family agrees to spin consignments of wool for a local merchant, or a team of graphic designers gets laid off when their firm invests in image-generating software? Moreover, what are the stakes of grasping the connection between this logical operation and such economic processes as more than some baroque metaphor or etymological coincidence?

As Andrés Saenz de Sicilia argues in his new book *Subsumption in Kant, Hegel and Marx*, Karl Marx’s appropriation of the term ‘subsumption’ to describe capital’s control and transformation of commodity production was premised on the profound reconfiguration of this concept within post-Kantian philosophy. What is ultimately at stake for Saenz de Sicilia in this conceptual history is a deeper understanding of the ‘logic’ of capital and a clearer sense of how it might be overcome. The book accordingly has a double aim: first, to retrace

subsumption’s theorisation and problematisation within Immanuel Kant’s and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s systems in order to contextualise Marx’s deployment of the concept; and second, to elaborate a more comprehensive theory of subsumption as a dynamic of social reproduction, going beyond Marx’s narrower account of capital’s subsumption of the labour process. For Saenz de Sicilia, Marx’s account has continually led to reductive interpretations of capital’s logic as being or having become non-contradictory and self-identical, which in turn have occasioned various ‘moralisms of the abstract/concrete’ that repudiate the very terms of dialectical thought as oppressively all-subsuming. He therefore seeks both to address misunderstandings of the concept and to redress the limitations of Marx’s account that inspire such forms of dogmatic speculative closure and naïvely terminological resistance.

The first chapter traces the development of the notion of subsumption in Kant and Hegel’s thought. Kant takes the structure of judgment in a syllogism’s minor premise as ‘the model for [his] entire theory of rational cognition’, yet crucially, subsumption here also becomes a process of ‘form-determination’ that actively shapes the representations and concepts that it connects. Even the universal categories of experience do not pre-exist this process but are only actualised through it. Accord-