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What could a European Abolitionism look like?

With the global surge of the Black Lives Matter movements, a renewed interest in the history, theory, and politics of abolitionism has emerged. I understand the intellectual aspect of the abolitionist intellectual project as one of writing a new global history and new genealogies of the struggles against the subjugation of people through racism and racialising technologies. This of course includes a close examination of how these technologies function, how they are adapted, how they are re-invented – and how they can be hacked. For the aim must be not to merely understand, but to overcome, quite literally to abolish these technologies and the institutions that are historically entangled with them.

At the very least, abolitionism demands of us to not think racism merely as prejudice and resentment. Rather, it forces us to consider the structural and institutional foundations and genealogies of racism with a view to a fundamental transformation of society. This makes abolitionism a literally radical project that goes beyond the tried and tested politics of anti-racism. Through its imperative, it allows us a different way of making sense of the world and the present we inhabit. It allows us to remember the different struggles, to celebrate the victories and mourn the losses – not as distinct episodes, but as part of a history of connected and related struggles that spans the globe and at least the past 400 years. I understand this to be something specific about anti-racism: It allows for global mobilisations, such as the various transatlantic movements against slavery or the global movement against Apartheid yet challenges us to re-think and re-evaluate our terms, our analysis and our struggles in local and regional settings.

In this vein, I would like to pose the question how the manifold anti-racist struggles in Europe can be included in a global abolitionist history. The histories of many of

these struggles have already been written, many more are still waiting to be uncovered. Yet, what interests me more at this particular moment is not only whether there are instances of abolitionist struggles in Europe – my answer is unequivocally yes. But rather than to look to the past, I would like to ask, with a view to the future: could there be a European abolitionism? Could there be an abolitionism that takes "Europe" as its frame of reference in order to interrogate its historical entanglement with racist projects of subjugation, to challenge racist conjunctures of the present, and to fundamentally transform it for an abolitionist future? An abolitionism that neither defaults to understanding Europe as a sum of nation states contained in a geographical continent, nor one that caricaturises it as a single, evil entity.

Currently, abolitionist theory mostly draws on the experiences in North America and the Caribbean, such as the struggle against slavery, the resistance during the Jim Crow era including the Great Migration and the manifold radical movements during the Civil Rights era. From this perspective, the institutions of the police and the prison emerge as central objects of abolitionist critique. This focus is due to the conjunctures of struggle, and thus an invitation to think about how the experiences from other parts of the world may add to such an analysis. But can this theory then simply be transposed to other regions of the world, such as Europe? To me, the answer is no, precisely because abolitionist theory is steeped in the concrete experiences of struggles, and can thus not be detached from its historical, social, and political contexts. But it also does not preclude the possibility of a global abolitionist dialogue. On the contrary: this is indispensable. In order to do so, many labours and steps of translation will be necessary.

With this post, I attempt one contribution to this dialogue on the theme of technologies of immobilisation. The critique of institutions in the U.S. does not translate to the European context that easily. But thinking through the European context with the themes of an American abolitionism can be productive (see also

Stierl 2019; Kasparek and Karamanidou 2021; Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2022). In the next section, I will revisit a particular struggle of European anti-racist and no border networks against a racist order. I will do so in a language that is evocative of American abolitionist history. But this is not a rewriting of history through a stylistic device. Rather, already at the time of the struggle, we were drawing on parallels to the abolition of slavery in the U.S. as part of a global struggle for the freedom of movement.



Pagani was one of the notorious migrant detention centres on the Greek Aegean islands. After many weeks of struggle, its gates were forced open. It was finally shut down in October 2009. picture credit: w2eu.net/Welcome to Europe.

Where is 'Canada'?

I remember vividly how around the end of the year 2010, we were searching for

'Canada'. We, i.e. various anti-racist and noborder networks from in and around Europe were looking back at a history of struggle against the emerging European migration and border regime dating back to the 1990s. The noborder camp on the Greek island of Lesvos in 2009 had successfully led to the closure of the local migration detention centre, a victory that still made a decisive difference in 2015 when Europe was fighting to regain control over migration. But there was a broader problem that not only everybody freed from that particular prison experienced: European law did not allow them to head/move northwards. And those who did were forcibly returned by the police.

So, we were looking for 'Canada' – but not in a literal sense. It was quite clear to us where that particular country was located. And of course, not in a general sense – we were quite aware of the colonial, racist and genocidal history of the country. We were looking for a country, or at least some kind of independent jurisdiction, that could play – for our cause – the specific role that Canada played before the abolition of slavery in the United States through the Civil War and the General Strike: A country where slavery had been banned earlier, but where even claims to ownership over humans were not recognised and where fugitive slaves would not be extradited and deported back to slavery. Translated to our European present: A country that could constitute an endpoint for movements of flight, a country that could provide lasting asylum.

Obviously, the issue we were concerned with was not slavery. In a way, it was the opposite. The institution of slavery sought to immobilise, and flight and escape were one strategy of resistance. We were confronted with the European asylum system which sought to hamstring and prevent the proper arrival and settlement of refugees in Europe and coerced them into a mode of hyper-mobility. At the core of the European asylum system was the so-called Dublin regulation, an arcane piece of European Union (EU) legislation that allowed the EU member states in the North to abdicate their international responsibility to provide asylum. The argument

enshrined in the regulation was that asylum applications were to be lodged immediately after the borders of the EU were crossed, i.e., in the vast majority of cases, at the Southern and Eastern borders of Europe. The applications were also to be processed there. Unsurprisingly, this created a split between the North and the South of the European Union concerning the question of how to deal with migration towards Europe.

In the South and East, conditions for asylum seekers deteriorated quickly – arbitrary detention, homelessness, violence, and lack of even the most basic social and medical support were common, and access to the actual asylum system was often impossible. The common-sense response was to move North through clandestine routes, to the different member states of the European Union and to lodge yet another asylum application. The Northern states however could rely on the rules of the Dublin regulation, disqualify the application on legal grounds, and deport those seeking shelter back to the South of the European Union. These forced journeys were often repeated, in the hope of finding a place in the North where settlement would finally be possible. This created the hyper-mobility that was – and still is – so characteristic of the European asylum system. People seeking shelter and refuge in Europe were thus constantly pushed around Europe. Their movements were at the same time scandalised as “irregular secondary movements”, legitimising demands for increased policing and the introduction of new tracking technologies. Hyper-mobility, then, was an unintended consequence of the encounter of migration and its government, and not the aim of the policy. Much to the contrary: The actual aim was confinement to and immobilisation in the South and East.

These politics of governing mobility towards and in Europe posed one of the major challenges that we faced in the 2000s. The new millennium had communitarised and Europeanised the policy fields of asylum, migration, and borders through the transfer of decision-making competences from EU member states to EU institutions. And we had found ourselves in this newly emerging, supra-national political space.

There, we encountered old and new movements of migration and learnt how they were challenging the new European mobility order. These struggles brought us to different sections of the European border, into squalid detention centres, but also into refugee camps – self-organised or state-provided – which were dispersed all over Europe. Sometimes, the struggles antagonistically engaged with the material infrastructures of bordering and detention, sometimes they took place in the legal arena to stop deportations. Political campaigns, strategic litigation, and awareness-raising intertwined with concrete support to help people move. Despite all this it was clear that we either needed a 'Canada' that would be beyond the reach of the Dublin system as well as a way to get there, or the outright abolition of the Dublin system of detention and deportation in Europe.



The detention centre was a former warehouse, with a few large halls. Hundreds of people were crammed into them. In the end, the government was forced to let the prisoners go. The white paper allowed them to move in Greece for 30 days. picture credit: w2eu.net/Welcome to Europe.

Reconstruction

In our analysis, Germany was one of the main driving forces behind these European policies. It was also one of the countries that benefited greatly from them, as it could turn tens of thousands of people away legally. It was thus an immense irony that in the Summer of Migration of 2015, Germany turned out to be 'Canada'. Even though Germany was not the only EU member state accepting many thousands of refugees, only the German government upheld its policy on principle. Notably, the principle was not a fundamental commitment to refugee rights, but to save the Schengen area where internal border controls were abolished (cf. Kasparek 2016).

The movements of migration across the borders of Europe and across its space since 2010 had created a veritable crisis of Schengen, i.e., the system of reinforced external borders that was supposed to repel the 'global unwanted' – to adapt a term from Michael Marrus (1985) – from outside and guarantee freedom of movement for European citizens within. However, the system was not functioning as its creators had hoped and this contributed to further divisions between North and South. In early 2015, more and more people started to move north, still in clandestine ways but in steadily increasing numbers. When Germany announced one day in early September 2015 that it would no longer enforce the Dublin system, the movements of people emerged from the shadows into which they had been forced by criminalisation, illegalisation, and repression. They started moving openly. For more than one million people, the Summer of Migration meant the freedom to finally arrive in a place of relative safety. It was a momentous event that fundamentally altered Europe.

Yet, summer came to an end. Just like many of the achievements of the abolition of slavery in the US were undone by Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era, a racist backlash followed the Summer of Migration. Since then, old and new right-wing movements and parties all over Europe have seized the topic of migration, painted it as a grave problem and a severe threat for Europe, and thrived on the continued scandalisation of human mobility. At the same time, the perpetuation of the problematisation of migration provides them an incentive to obstruct any kind of political reform of migration and asylum policies. For if migration ceased to be the problem, they insist it were, they would also lose their main mobilising potential.

However, a meaningful European debate on how to relate the continent to migration is absent. Technocratic discussions and legal manoeuvres on how to skirt obligations from international law dominate the day. The history of migration on the continent, a history that actually made the continent, is largely unacknowledged. In the absence of such a debate, let alone the will to translate the inevitable consequences of such a

debate into policy, violence and the deprivation of fundamental rights are flourishing at the borders of Europe. Physical violence perpetrated by national border guards against refugees and migrants at different sections of the European border have become common again. The sole aim of these pushbacks is to drive people back beyond the borders – despite their obvious entitlement to access the asylum system to at least voice their claim. The use of detention as a means to immobilise people on the move has also been rising again. Sometimes this implies European funds for the construction of closed centres, and sometimes it means re-purposing existing infrastructures for ad-hoc jails. Deprivation of freedom is rampant, as is the denial of fundamental rights. Access to the asylum system, or even to the judicial system to remedy these injustices, is often difficult to obtain. The borders of Europe, especially today, are characterised by violence and the deprivation of rights. This is not necessarily the outcome of an explicit policy. Rather, it seems that in the absence of an alternative art of governing migration, European states resort to their old and tested ways of national and sovereign violence against those crossing their borders.



The release of the prisoners and the closure of the detention centre came after weeks of hunger strike, demonstrations and an international media campaign. A video clip from a camera that had been smuggled into the centre went viral and was broadcast all over the world. picture credit: w2eu.net/Welcome to Europe.

Police and Prisons

How can we integrate this violent present in a genealogy of racism in Europe? And what kind of perspective does this open up in relation to state institutions? One of the more prominent examples that is often cited to showcase an abolitionist approach to the history of state institutions and their implication in racist projects is the genealogy of police forces in the U.S. Sally Hadden (2001) has shown how they have evolved from slave patrols, i.e., para- and proto-state police forces whose purpose was to hunt fugitive people. However, this example also hints at a challenge that comes with the resurgence of abolitionist theory: In her work, Hadden traces

this specific lineage for Virginia and the Carolinas, i.e. states that were part of the Confederate States. Other genealogies of police institutions, for example for New York or the West Coast, draw different lineages. This does not invalidate the argument that contemporary U.S. police forces are historically entangled with the project of slavery. Hadden's careful historical work can thus not be easily generalised, and the argument will obviously not carry in the European context. To me, this is a call for more such work to be done in order to arrive at detailed and careful genealogies that also take into account regional specificities.

I consider this especially important when trying to bring abolitionist thought to Europe. In their introduction to their recently published and seminal reader on abolitionism, Vanessa E. Thompson and Daniel Loick (2022) tentatively point to moments of abolitionist struggles in Europe. In this spirit, the book makes an important start in tracing an abolitionist history for Europe. It does so primarily through a series of historical examples that I believe not only need to be expanded upon, but can do more than merely suggest a generalisation of abolitionist critique. The strategy of taking up two dominant themes – police and prisons – and examining them in a European context is a first step, albeit an indispensable one. However, it is clear that the origins of prison systems in Europe and the complex and chequered history of policing differ from the history of these institutions in the U.S. – and that they also differ from nation state to nation state. The question of how to integrate their multi-layered genealogies and their interconnections with broader projects of control over newly emerging populations and workforces into abolitionist theory focused on racist institutions and resistance to them therefore remains to be fleshed out further.

Thinking about Europe, I find it increasingly difficult to clearly identify the racial order around which we could start to write an abolitionist history of Europe. This problem is of course intrinsically linked with the problem that racism, in Europe, historically takes many forms and expressions and comes with widely different

bodies of knowledge, legitimising discourses, and mechanisms of racialisation. By this, I do not only refer to antisemitism and the many varieties of legitimising rationalisations underlying the different colonial projects emerging from Europe. We also need to take into account all the other racisms that were the logical consequence of the realisation of the national project – i.e., the establishment of the nation and the nation state as the predominant form of social and political organisation – in Europe. We also need to account for anti-slavic racism, racism against Roma and Sinti, and above all how racist difference and knowledge was, time and again, used to govern mobile populations, mobile labour forces, and thus migration.

However, there is a reason why police and prison are dominant themes in abolitionism. If we understand human history as the struggle against the constant efforts to make governable living labour and its inherent mobility, then the police and the prison are pivotal institutions. Executive power and technologies of immobilisation are indispensable to govern living labour imbued with mobility. Slavery was one of the answers to this predicament of power. Yet again, the history of Europe has not produced just one form of unfree labour, but knows many different forms that are, at the same time, often infused with different racist orders.

The question of a European abolitionism is therefore, in my opinion, inseparable from the question if there is a European racism – in the singular. Historically, the answer is a clear no. But if we look at the history and present of the European project, that is the 'ever deeper' political Union developing on the continent, one could speak of a European racism that considers the figure of migration as its quintessential 'Other' and whose predominant, yet not exclusive, arena is the border, whose police is the border police and whose prisons are the many detention centres and deportation prisons at the edges of Europe.

"Is there such a thing as European Racism?"

In a series of texts and presentation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the

philosopher Étienne Balibar has explored the triangle of Europe, racism, and migration. Already in 1988, he asked the rhetorical question "Is there a 'Neo-Racism'?" (1991 [1988]), basing his argument on the clue that the category of immigration had started to function both as a substitute "for the notion of race and a solvent of 'class consciousness'" (20) and thus linking racism and migration. Later, particularly after the end of the block confrontation and the rise of nationalism and racist violence in Germany, he more explicitly linked the emergence of a European racism that has the figure of migration as its target with the difficulty of defining Europe, and with the crisis of the non-existent state that is Europe: "Is there such a thing as European Racism?" (2002 [1992]). His analysis was, as often, prescient. Migration today is still, or even more so, the category of racist mobilisation in Europe that articulates itself through the electoral successes of right-wing parties and movements. This means nothing less than that today, Europe as a whole is at stake. With the abject failure of Brexit, the secessionist cravings of the right-wing parties have clearly faded. Instead of departing from Europe, the new strategy of the right is to capture the European project and transform it into an authoritarian and neo-racist order.

What I appreciate in Balibar's writings is that he draws his arguments and theses from a clear and explicit discussion of the political conjunctures in Europe. If there can be such a thing as a European abolitionism, it will equally need to draw on such detailed and complicated genealogies and analyses of the present for us to understand how racism in Europe is transforming and at the same time perpetuating itself. There has been a recent tendency to explain racism in Europe, and in particular the racist character of Europe's border either through the empirical observation of who is dying at Europe's borders or as the lasting legacy and working of colonial mechanisms. The U.S. legal scholar E. Tendayi Achiume, to cite a prominent example, has presented an influential article titled 'Racial Borders' (2021) in which she discusses the racist character of European borders as her case study. More specifically, she asks how "facially [race] neutral legal and policy regimes

governing migration" (454) can still produce racialising effects. I believe that this is one of the pivotal questions we are facing today.

Achiume derives her argument about the racism of Europe's borders from a discussion of the racialisation inherent in the immigration policies of settler colonies in the 19th century – particularly Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, and the United States. But if we follow her argument on these origins of racial borders, two questions remain open. For one, how have these explicitly "racial technologies" turned "facially neutral"? And for the other, how have these "racial technologies" then returned to Europe in order to become part of the EU's 21st century border management policies? This quite substantial transformation and transfer is argued through a short reference to the work of Adam McKeown (2008) on Asian migration, whom she credits with having shown that these basic, racialising principles of border control became "universalized as the foundation of sovereignty and migration control for all states within the [international] system" (McKeown 2008, cited in Achiume 2021: 459). While I appreciate the discussion on the historical and legal intersection of "racial technologies" and the governance of migration and mobility, more work is still necessary to buttress such a strong claim. This would also imply not limiting the analysis to the context of British colonialism and its legacy. Achiume's discussion of the racial nature of European borders suffers from the fact that it refers mainly to the borders of the United Kingdom. That these are by no means paradigmatic of the borders of Europe or the EU – crucially, the UK was never part of the Schengen external border system – is negligently ignored, weakening the potential strength of her argument.

I highlight these paradigmatic attempts to come to terms with racism and racialisation in Europe and at its borders for several reasons. They tend to create a monolithic image of Europe. With reference to history, they describe Europe solely as a product of its colonial past, thus neglecting other and equally important developments that have taken place across the European space. For the present, it

re-creates the image of a Fortress Europe that we have already challenged 20 years ago: it did not account for the unstable dynamics within the EU due to its heterogeneous base. Finally, their über-empirical argument that Europe's borders simply must be racial since we can literally observe who is dying there may seem to be alluring. Yet it does not help us to understand and to explain the current conjunctures of racism in Europe and – more crucially – does not help us to develop a strategy to counter them. The question if there is racism at Europe's borders is a moot one. Merely stating and re-stating this painfully obvious observation will not help us to understand how racism – which, as Achiume correctly notes, has entirely disappeared from legal and policy texts governing Europe's borders – is still being reproduced as a system, and on a daily basis. Clearly, there is a racial substrate of the European order that manifests itself in today's violent border and migration regime, yet it cannot be explained merely through its discourses, rationalities, and knowledge apparatuses. Rather, we witness a re-negotiation of the relationship between citizenship, nationalism, and sovereignty in Europe today. Peripheral member states of the European Union negotiate their own inclusion into Europe, i.e., their citizens' right to European citizenship through a re-affirmation of a national sovereignty that seemingly legitimises violence along racist lines.

It is for these reasons that I am firmly convinced that one central aspect of European abolitionism must be the analysis of institutions of migration control, most prominently the border. Fortunately, I am not alone in this conviction (Mezzadra 2020; Walia 2021; Barry 2021; Bradley and de Noronha 2022). The endeavour of a European abolitionism then is to re-construct, through the genealogies of these institutions in Europe and through the history of struggles against them, this hidden substrate that today seems pivotal in the definition of an emerging 'Europeanism' that has as its primary target migration, and that defines Europe through a rejection of migration. This rejection plays out in large parts at the borders of Europe. These are prominent sites where the future of Europe and the question of who belongs to Europe are negotiated today.

More importantly, a European abolitionism then also implies the urgent need to develop an alternative vision for Europe: a Europe that is not delimited by borders and by closed categories of citizenship, but that redefines its relationship with the rest of the planet in appreciation of human mobility, in acknowledgement of the connectedness that is a consequence of the many colonial projects, and in the knowledge that we will only be able to solve the many global challenges we are facing if we do away with the racist orders of the past and the present.

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