

THE PRISON AND THEORY WORKING GROUP

10 KEY POINTS

1. **Accountability:** We are committed to supporting a community of people who think prison and theory together. This necessarily includes incarcerated people and their loved ones, prison activists, and theorists. We need this community so as to increase accountability in our thought and our work. This accountability involves creating and sustaining anti-racist praxis within the university as well as the carceral system.
2. **Prisons:** When we say prisons, we mean prisons, jails, immigrant & juvenile detention centers. We mean the prison industrial complex as well as the carceral logic undergirding institutionalized structures well beyond it. In speaking of the prison, moreover, we aim to identify the intersecting systems of sexism, racism, economic exploitation, and xenophobia that precondition these material buildings and practices.
3. **Theory:** When we say theory, we mean the practice of questioning and problematizing what already exists as well as imagining or creating new possibilities for existence. We also mean the practices of naming, identifying, and critiquing injustice and building capacity for resistance and resurgence. Theory is not the purview of the university or even the radical figure. It is the product of honesty. Philosophy is a form of theory which, while circumscribed by tradition and canons, itself antagonizes that circumscription.
4. **Prisons and Theory:** When we say prisons and theory, we mean theory about prisons produced from outside prisons, theory about prisons produced inside prisons, theory done in prison by prisoners, theory taught in prisons, the relationships between theory and prison activism, the role of theory in policy construction, etc. We mean the effects of incarceration on who gets counted worthy or capable of thought.
5. **Intersectionality:** We are very conscious of how axes of difference affect both prison and theory. These axes include race, ethnicity, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, etc. Our work will be intersectional throughout, and since these axes are always already intersecting and co-constituting each other in social reality, they must always be thought together. Such intersectional analyses can and must change our assessments of the education and prison industrial complexes.
6. **Abolition:** Mass incarceration is a legacy of the failure to achieve abolition democracy. We are thus committed not only to the abolition of the prison system, but to the abolition of whiteness, patriarchy, and colonization, as well as to dismantling sexism, transphobia, ableism, classism, etc. Abolition involves resisting “replacement” logic, whereby the status quo merely persists through permutation but is not transformed.
7. **Activism:** We are committed to activism in an expansive sense. We understand activism to include any abolitionist theory or praxis—that is, any activity that unmaskes carceral logic, de-centers whiteness and patriarchy, and unsettles the inside/outside binary. Such activism can occur in the university in everyday ways through the texts we read, the topics and figures we discuss, the people we hire, invite, mentor, etc.
8. **The Discipline & the University:** The norms of theory, philosophy, and the university operate according to the carceral logic—policing the boundaries of the legitimate, excluding or marginalizing divergent critical perspectives, traditions, and modes of theorizing as “non-philosophical” or “uncivil.” This means that what accounts for the vast underrepresentation in philosophy is related to the prison industrial complex. If we are to address philosophy’s climate issues, our analyses must extend to academic racism and to the physical use of force by university police departments and security.
9. **Dialogue:** One of the critical ways to promote abolitionist theory and praxis is through dialogue. Dialogue begins with listening. It does not posture or prescribe. Rather, it facilitates the corrosion of the barriers and boundaries of our thought, the walls and the gates of our institutions, and the limits of our imagination. It counteracts normative privilege at every level, especially when it is our own.
10. **Questions:** As an impetus to dialogue and therefore as part of a decarceral, anti-racist project, we are committed to questions. We want to raise questions as catalysts to more and better questions, rather than just (or only) in the pursuit of answers. Here, we want to begin asking a question that has been asked now for centuries and from innumerable places and vantage points but which must be asked again:

What is the relationship between prison and theory?

Join Us.

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