

# Abolition & the State

A Discussion Tool

HOW DO WE RELATE TO THE STATE?  
A REFLECTION + DISCUSSION TOOL  
FOR ABOLITIONIST ORGANIZERS

IC

## Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction                                  | 3  |
| What is the state?                            | 8  |
| What shapes our understandings of states?     | 18 |
| How do we navigate the state in the meantime? | 21 |
| Moving Within, Against, and Beyond the State  | 24 |
| What lies beyond the nation-state?            | 27 |
| How do our responses shape what we do now?    | 29 |
| Acknowledgements                              | 30 |

## Introduction

As movements to defund and divest from policing and invest in community safety expand in the wake of the 2020 Uprisings, abolitionist organizers are increasingly grappling with questions around the role of the state in abolitionist futures, including:

- **What do we imagine/advocate for instead of police and policing?**
- **What actions and behaviors do we think *should* be regulated by the state? *How* should they be regulated – who should be involved? What should they be empowered to do?**
- **How do we think resources should be distributed? By whom and how?**

These are not just theoretical questions - they shape the demands we make and the sites of struggle we choose. For instance:

- **Where do we want funds diverted from police budgets to go?**
  - Into other institutions currently controlled by the carceral state, to subsidize the creation of new state entities, or into community-based organizations?
  - For instance, do we want money from police budgets to be redirected to existing highly policed, low-quality, overcrowded public housing? To demand high quality publicly controlled, non-policed public housing? To subsidize the creation of social housing? To create community-land trusts? How might each of these options result in some form of policing of private and public spaces, as well as of hierarchy and exclusion in new forms?
  - How might seeking and accepting state funding require community-based organizations to engage in surveillance, policing, and collaboration with punitive institutions?
  - How do we imagine diverting police funding toward universal access to public goods like clean air and water, high quality accessible education, health care, libraries, green space, etc.?

## Introduction

- **How should we relate to participatory budgeting, government public safety task forces, and other “co-governance” models?**
  - What lessons can we learn from experiments in “co-governance” that might inform our occupation of institutions or building new institutions or other forms in an abolitionist future?
- **Can “community control” of police serve as a step toward abolition or does it inevitably re-legitimize and deepen investment in policing?**
- **Where should we turn to seek justice for police violence?**
- **What options are available to us now?**
- **What economic systems and forms and practices of governance could bring us closer to abolitionist futures?**



OUR ANSWERS TO  
THESE QUESTIONS PROFOUNDLY  
SHAPE OUR ORGANIZING  
OBJECTIVES + STRATEGIES, AND  
THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THEY UNFOLD.



## Introduction

The stakes of debates and decisions among abolitionists about how to relate to the nation-state, as well as to regional and municipal governments and institutions - and to state power as a whole - are high. In the U.S., abolitionist organizers are grappling with these questions in the context of Right wing efforts to seize control over public institutions like public schools in order to either dismantle or remake them in service of bringing into being a Christian theocratic state. These realities render abandonment of state institutions as a field of contestation a potentially dangerous proposition under current conditions, and can obscure the potential pitfalls of demands that inadvertently increase opportunities for privatization of social resources through community-based organizations such as private Christian schools.

**There are no universally agreed-upon answers or responses to these questions among abolitionists - to the contrary, there is a diversity of perspectives about which forms of governance and what relationship(s) to state power, state institutions, and levels of state government get us closer to the world we want.** We don't all have to agree - abolitionist frameworks, including the Dismantle. Change. Build. framework offered by Critical Resistance, create space to work on many different fronts to confront racial capitalist carceral states, change the way we think, organize ourselves, and relate, and to build new social and economic relations.

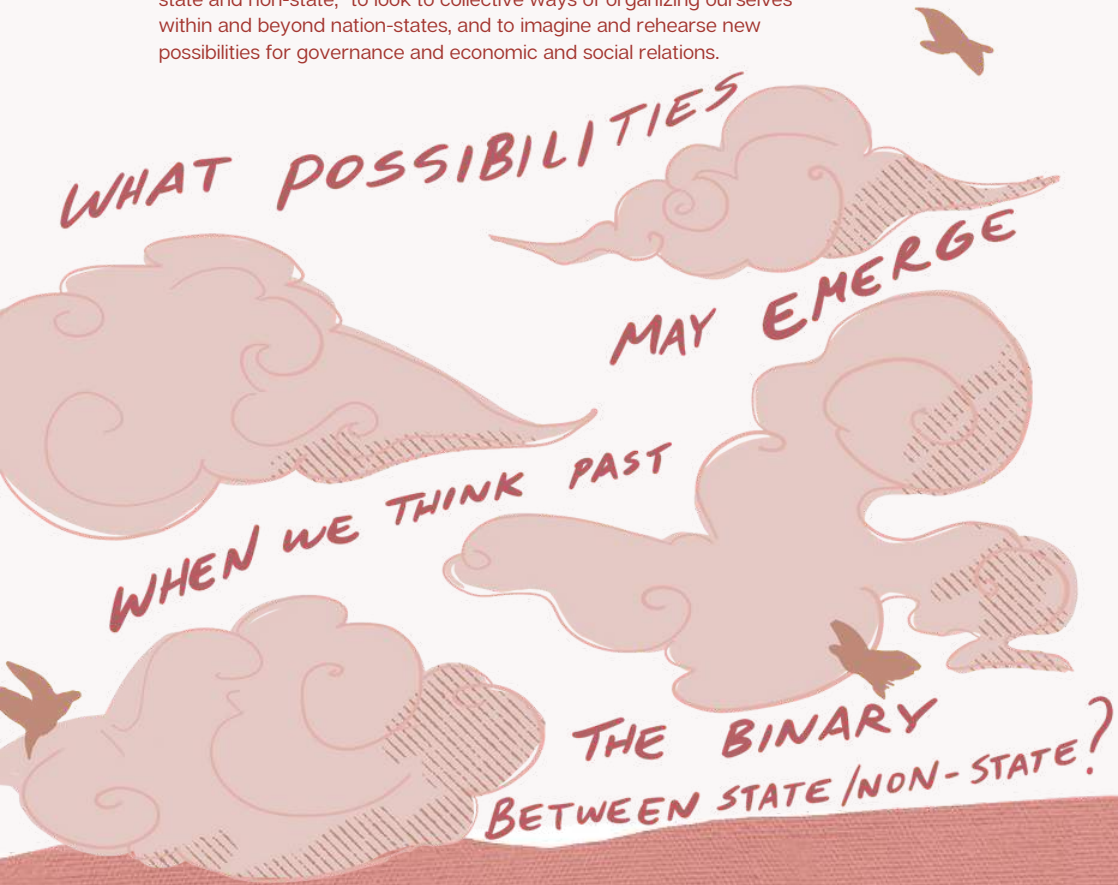
The goal of this tool is to move *beyond* debates between ideologies focused on:

**(1) seizing state power to transform state institutions under a traditional socialist approach, or to create conditions under which a capitalist state will gradually be replaced by communal forms of governance under a traditional communist approach, OR**

**(2) immediate and wholesale dismantling of nation-states under a traditional anarchist approach.**

## Introduction

It seeks instead to ask and explore generative questions that open up a multitude of possibilities both drawing from and moving beyond existing analyses and frameworks. It is an invitation, to paraphrase Robin D.G. Kelly, “to think beyond the binary between state and non-state,” to look to collective ways of organizing ourselves within and beyond nation-states, and to imagine and rehearse new possibilities for governance and economic and social relations.



“Revolution becomes a problem if we believe that the state is the site of struggle – we take the state and overturn social relations. We have learned that this is not necessarily the case. We need a new way of thinking... an independent way of thinking that the state is the problem, there is clear evidence of that. What does revolution mean in a discourse, in a framework in which we are questioning the state as the primary or the sole source of actually making things happen?”

– Robin D.G. Kelly

## Introduction

*“[W]e ask ourselves what additional possibilities emerge if we move beyond the dichotomy of capturing or dismantling the modern Western state. What if our goal is not to seize the carceral state in an effort to transform it, but to seize power and resources from the police state to create conditions under which new economic systems and forms of governance can emerge?”*

– No More Police: A Case for Abolition

*“We can think about other models at this time, and not only turn toward the past...”*

– Robyn Maynard, co-author of *Rehearsals for Living* (Haymarket 2022).

This tool is intended to help abolitionist organizers sharpen our analysis around these questions through individual reflection and collective study and discussion. It starts from the premise articulated in *No More Police: A Case for Abolition*:

1. the carceral, settler-colonial, state cannot be reformed or captured and repurposed; and
2. abolition and racial capitalism cannot coexist.

and invites us to explore the question of “*what then?*” alongside a diversity of responses drawn in part from conversations hosted by [Interrupting Criminalization](#) in the fall of 2021 and winter of 2022.

**This is the first in a series of pamphlets on this subject.** It is intended as an entry point into deeper conversations, collective study, and debate to inform how we move under current conditions and those to come, offering more questions than answers. Discussion prompts are intended to be used for individual study and reflection, as well as to spark and support collective conversation. **You are invited to form study groups with fellow organizers to grapple with these and other questions about the state(s) relevant to your abolitionist organizing, and to share your reflections and responses with us at [info@interruptingcriminalization.org](mailto:info@interruptingcriminalization.org).**

Please see the resource sections for further reading.

# What is the state? - - - - -

## I. Begin by journaling in response to the question:

### How do you define “the state”?

- How is a nation-state distinct from a nation?  
How does this distinction matter?
- How is a racial capitalist state distinct from a socialist state?
- What is a carceral state?
- How is the state distinct from government(s)?
- What is governance and how is it distinct from government?

Then, review the definitions below - which ones resonate with you? Why?

*“A state is a territorially bounded set of relatively specialized institutions that develop and change over time in the gaps and fissures of social conflict, compromise, and cooperation.” – Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore, authors of “Restating the Obvious,” [in](#) Abolition Geography: Essays Toward Liberation*

*“Analytically, states differ from governments: If states are ideological and institutional capacities that derive their legitimacy and material wherewithal from residents, governments are animating forces - policies plus personnel - that put state capacities into motion and orchestrate or coerce people in their jurisdictions to conduct their lives according to centrally made and enforced rules.” – Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore, authors of “Restating the Obvious,” [in](#) Abolition Geography: Essays Toward Liberation*

*“the condensation of a relationship of forces”*  
– Nicos Poulantzas

*“centralized political governance: a privileged group makes the decisions for everyone else and upholds those decisions with military and police forces, the judiciary, and prisons.”*  
– Klee Benally, ([kleebenally.com](http://kleebenally.com))

*“A technology of extraction”*  
– Dean Spade, author of *Mutual Aid*



### What is the state?

*“A parasitic form of governance...[that] extracts from poor and working-class people of color through policing, fee and fine farming, the privatization of public goods, the fining of welfare applicants, and the siphoning of public money into the financial sector.”*

– Jacqueline Wang, author of *Carceral Capitalism* (MIT Press 2018)

*“A collection of institutions and practices that is shaped by people who inhabit and enact them, as well as by the historical moment, place and conditions in which they evolve, rather than a fixed structure disconnected from the people who make it up.”*

– No More Police

*“..states interact with individuals and with other types of institutions (for example, religious, familial, corporate, union), while at the same time seeking to maintain, through consent or coercion, supremacy over all other organizational forms in the social order”*

– Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore, authors of *“Restating the Obvious,”* in *Abolition Geography: Essays Toward Liberation*

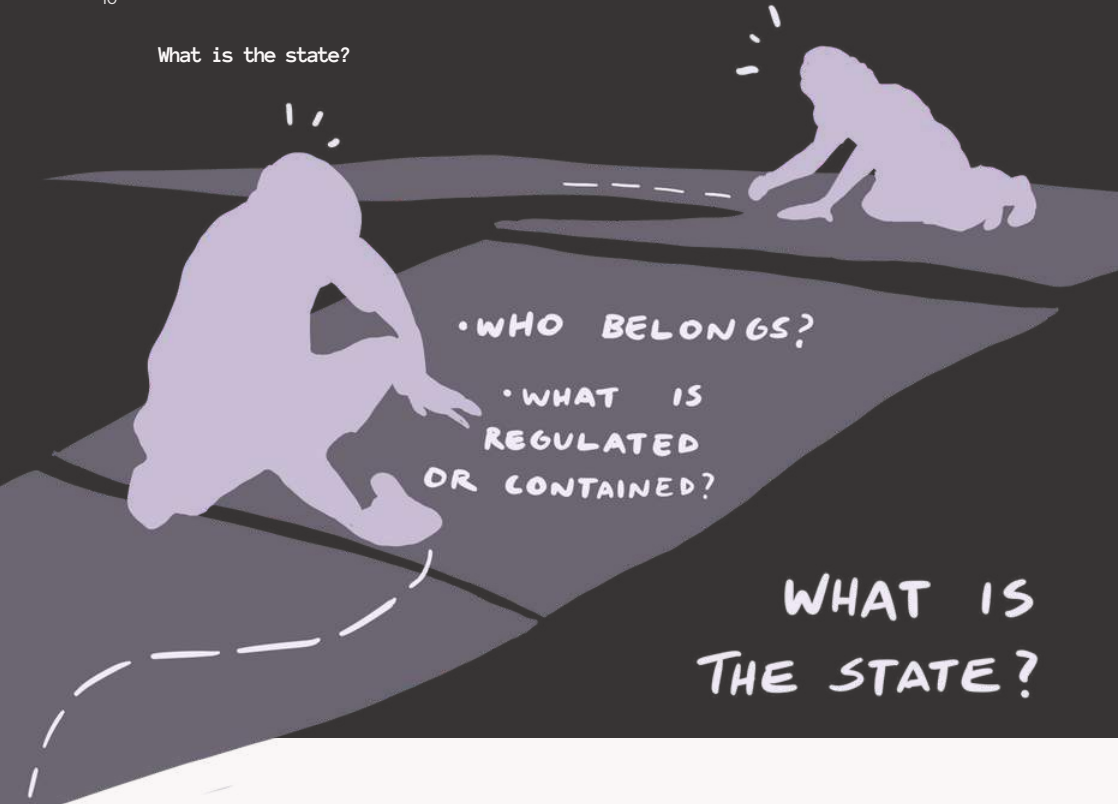
*“The nation-state requires the dispossession of Indigenous peoples’ lands and lives; it requires the destruction of Black peoples’ lives, our flesh, our personhood, our timelines of otherwise.”*

– Robyn Maynard, co-author of *Rehearsals for Living* (Haymarket 2022)

*“A weapon whose design mandates oppression”*

– William C. Anderson, author of *Nation on No Map: Black Anarchism and Abolition* (AK Press 2021)

What is the state?



- *“the state is both a manager of relentless violence and ... a mechanism for the redistribution of hoarded life.” – Eric Stanley, author of Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable (Duke University Press, 2021)*
- *“The nation-state is an impossible container for us to liberate ourselves within - it has a necessary border to maintain who belongs and who does not belong. We need a transnational way of thinking about freedom, not a bordered one.” – Robyn Maynard, co-author of Rehearsals for Living (Haymarket 2022)*
- *“The carceral state...[is]...the multiple and intersecting state agencies and institutions (including not-for-profits that do the regulatory work of the state) that have punishing functions and effectively regulate poor communities: child and family services, welfare/workfare agencies, public education, immigration, health and human services, and more.” – Erica Meiners*

## What is the state?

- "The state is built within particular political economies to manage particular economic and political demands of the ruling bloc of society. It does not exist outside of that political economy context. Which begs the question about what kind of state from below could be produced by replacing the economic system of racial capitalism with the economic system of 21st century socialism? What kind of new social relations and governance structures would new economic arrangements and economic logic make possible?" – N'Tanya Lee, co-founder and National Secretary of LeftRoots.
- "The state is not something that can be destroyed by a revolution, but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently." – Gustav Landauer
- "the state is a contradictory object and subject of struggle. We should be wary of fetishizing the state. Fascists fetishize the state for a whole set of purposes; and anti-fascists tend to fetishize the state as well. The state does not think and do. People in various configurations of power (including from below) enliven states to think and do." – Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Making Abolition Geography in California's Central Valley



## What is the state?

### The Cliff Notes\*:

Nations are cohesive groups of people who share common values, practices, languages, histories.

States are sovereign, territorially bounded entities that monopolize certain functions (use of violence, creation of money, regulation, distribution of resources and information) within the territory they control and create bureaucracies to implement their objectives.

A nation-state is a sovereign territorially bounded entity that is formed, populated and governed by a group of people who share a common national identity (i.e. a nation)

Governments staff state institutions and enact state functions.

*\* We recognize that these summary definitions do not capture nuances and differences in how these terms are understood across time and space within different political economies.*

### Resources for further study and discussion:

- Ruth Wilson Gilmore & Craig Gilmore, *Restating the Obvious*, in *Abolition Geography: Essays Toward Liberation* (Verso Press 2022).
- [State, an Introduction](#), libcom.org (with links to additional resources)
- Jacqueline Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (MIT Press 2018), see excerpt at [thenewinquiry.com/carceral-capitalism](https://thenewinquiry.com/carceral-capitalism)
- Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule* (Haymarket Books 2021)
- Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living* (Haymarket Press 2022)
- William C. Anderson, *Nation on No Map: Black Anarchism and Abolition* (AK Press 2021)
- [Abolition Beyond the State](#), Apr 7, 2021 with Eric Stanley, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, Zoé Samudzi, and Sadie Barnette.
- [Seizing the State](#) with Ruth Wilson Gilmore, September 14, 2022



## What is the state?

- How have we become disconnected from each other and the skills and relationships we need to support each other directly to survive individually and collectively? What have we delegated to the state? Why?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

- Is a nation-state possible without a border and a prison?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

- What is power? Can we be there for each other without holding power over one another?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

- What is the scale at which we are thinking? How can we build the solidarity and community that we need to scale?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

- What ways can we organize and make decisions that are in harmony with our diverse lifeways?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## What is the state?

"Through the exercise of centralized rulemaking and redistribution, a state's purpose (at whatever scale - municipal, county, national and so on) is to secure a society's ability to do different kinds of things: such as tax, educate, support, connect, exclude, criminalize, segregate, equalize, make war, and make profits."

– Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore, authors of "Restating the Obvious," in *Abolition Geography: Essays Toward Liberation*

Part of me believes the state will always be repressive and should be overthrown ... part of me thinks that if we are stuck with the state, we should demand Medicare for all, social housing, free college, the cancellation of student debt, and so forth. The anarchist part of me thinks we should abolish the family. The pragmatist thinks that cash payments to families could go a long way in ending child poverty. The pragmatist thinks a federal-jobs guarantee could help a lot of people, the anarchist retorts that we should abolish work itself. The anarchist part of me believes that mutual aid is necessary for building collective social bonds, for experimenting with new forms of life, and modes of being together, modeled on community and care. The pragmatist replies that not everything can be solved with mutual aid, given the level of investment required to address environmental racism and upgrade our crumbling toxic infrastructure. For me the ultimate aim is the abolition of the state as it currently exists...At the same time, I support the organized provisioning of public goods, though I reject the surveillance component of the welfare state.

– Jacqueline Wang, author of *Carceral Capitalism* (MIT Press 2018)







What is the state?

*"Does the state have an essence, or is it a field of contestation open to revision?" – Jacqueline Wang, author of *Carceral Capitalism* (MIT Press 2018)*

*"Is there an abolitionist form of "stateness"? What might a state look like if it's unyoked from the system of racial capitalism and explicitly organized around abolitionist priorities? Can we shape the state in a way that's consistent with abolitionist values, transforming it into what Angela Y. Davis and the authors of *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, building on the work of W.E.B. DuBois, calls a present-day "abolition democracy"? – No More Police*

*"The border is less about a politics of movement per se and is better understood as a key method of imperial state formation, hierarchical social ordering, labor control, and xenophobic nationalism." – Harsha Walia, author of *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Haymarket Press 2021)*







What shapes our understandings of states?

*“non-statist forms of governance are actually alive today, even within nation-state structures”*

– Harsha Walia, author of *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Haymarket Press 2021)



**Resources:**

- Paula X. Rojas, *Are the Cops in Our Heads and Hearts*, [Scholar and Feminist Online](#).
- Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Haymarket Press 2021)





## How do we navigate the state in the meantime?

"It's important to think about the state less as a consolidated monolith and more as a terrain of struggle. How do we imagine exploiting the internal contradictions of the state against itself in order to meet our goals? How do we pit parts of the state against one another as part of an inside/outside strategy to ensure that resources do NOT go to more cops, more jails and more prisons, and to erode their power? That in and of itself is a victory."

– Woods Ervin, Communications Director, Critical Resistance

"If we are stuck with the state form for the time being, then we should do everything in our power to move resources away from the military and prison industrial complex and toward social programs that would enable people to flourish."

– Jacqueline Wang, author of *Carceral Capitalism* (MIT 2018)

"We need to make demands on the state that will have maximum mobilizing effect and make more people into active participants who have the capacity to co-govern our lives and work"

– Dean Spade, author of *Mutual Aid* (AK Press 2021)

HOW DO WE  
NAVIGATE THE  
STATE TO CARE FOR EACH  
OTHER IN THE MEANTIME?



### Resources:

- So is this Actually an Abolitionist Proposal or Strategy? [bit.ly/OrganizingBinder](https://bit.ly/OrganizingBinder)
- The Demand is Still Defund the Police, [bit.ly/DefundPoliceUpdate](https://bit.ly/DefundPoliceUpdate)
- What's Next? Safer and More Just Communities Without Policing, [bit.ly/WhatsNextGuide](https://bit.ly/WhatsNextGuide)
- Navigating Public Safety Task Forces, [bit.ly/NavigatingTF](https://bit.ly/NavigatingTF)

# Moving Within, Against, and Beyond the State



We can learn from frameworks, elaborated by organizers in the Global South resisting neoliberalism and most recently popularized in the U.S. by the group Mijente, which focus simultaneously on:

- contesting for power **within** the state,
- defending our communities **against** the state, and
- dreaming **beyond** the state to create more conditions of possibility, to imagine new forms of governance that bring us closer to abolitionist futures, to create fertile ground on which to practice them, and to build the skills, relationships and infrastructure needed to increase our collective chances of survival and well-being.

In the video *Building Power Sin, Contra, y Desde el Estado* (Building Power Without, Against, and Beyond the State), Mijente defines these simultaneous approaches as follows:

## BEYOND THE STATE

“Moving without the state [means] understanding in our bones that the state is not a legitimate mediator between us and the land, each other, our livelihoods, or our belonging.”

## AGAINST THE STATE

“Defending our wins and the dignity of our people.”

## WITHIN THE STATE

*“Using the tools and resources that exist within the state to benefit the many, and not just the few...bring back the tools for our people, who are often excluded from government, to participate and lead. Using the mechanisms of the state to protect and build the power of the people.”*

*“We are not just waiting for the state to meet our demands, we are taking what is rightfully ours..We need what they’re taking, and more, to get their damn boots off our necks and to get the support for our lives we need.”*



## Moving Within, Against, and Beyond the State

**This approach problematizes the state, and the corporate interests it represents, and the system of racial capitalism it upholds, without limiting the field of contestation or exercise of power to the state, and intentionally creates spaces to experiment, practice, and expand our capacity to collectively govern ourselves beyond the nation-state.**

It invites us to draw on the best thinking of multiple political tendencies and understandings of the state, and to focus more specifically on the process of transition to the world we want - how do we meet our individual and collective needs now? How do we expand our imaginations and experiment with different approaches to governance? How do we extract power and resources from the state to make them real? How do we defend our communities? How do we organize ourselves into the societies we want?

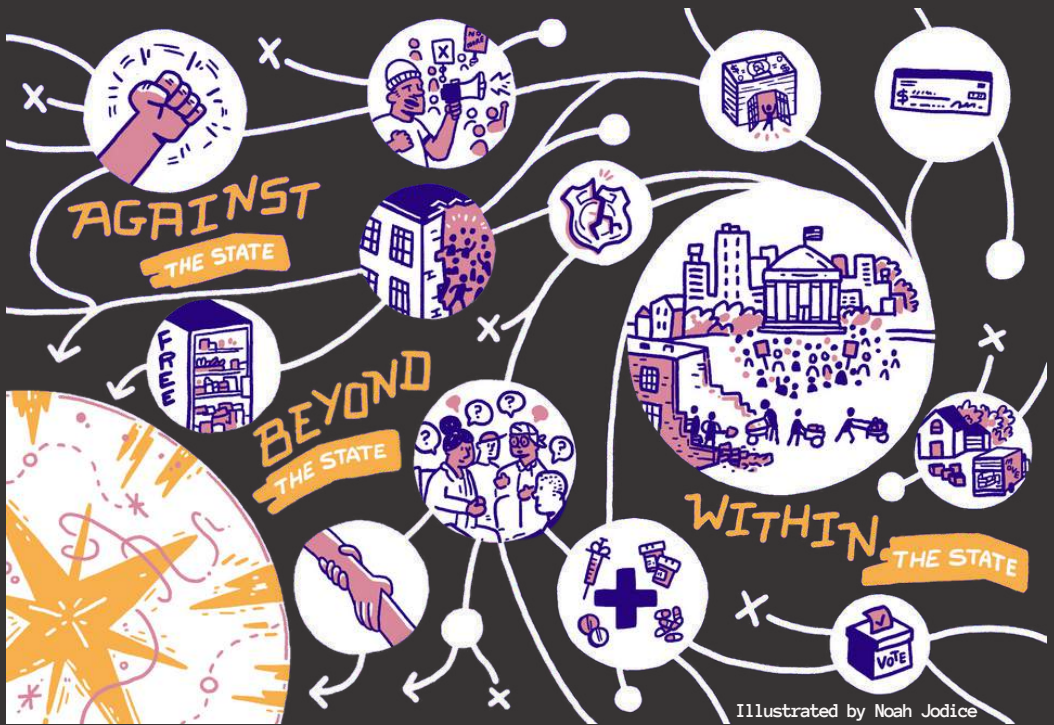
And, it is essential that we deploy these strategies in close coordination - otherwise, it is possible that organizing *within* the state can undermine or operate at cross-purposes to organizing *against* and *beyond* the state, including by creating conditions that make it more difficult to practice and experiment with new forms of governance beyond the state. For instance, organizing within the state can:

- Legitimize harmful practices like surveillance, policing, punishment, family regulation and separation, exclusion of non-citizens, and restrictive conditions on social benefits and entitlements;
- Create categories of people who can and can't engage in certain kinds of activities. For instance, legalizing marijuana under state regulation can create conditions under which individuals operating beyond state-approved institutions and regulations are criminalized. Strict regulation of health care provision has excluded traditional midwives and doulas.
- Create bureaucracies that interfere with our ability to adapt and meet people's needs directly in ways that reflect their particular needs and conditions.

WITHIN · AGAINST · BEYOND!



Moving Within, Against, and Beyond the State



Illustrated by Noah Jodice

**Resources for further reflection:**

- Paula X. Rojas, *Are the Cops in Our Heads and Hearts*, [Scholar and Feminist Online](#);
- Mijente, Building Power Sin, [Contra, y Desde el Estado](#) (Building Power Without, Against, and Beyond the State)
- Mijente, [Sin El Que?](#)

# What lies beyond the nation-state?

**What forms of governance make abolitionist futures more possible?  
How are we practicing/can we practice them?**

- What possibilities lie in engaging the state at regional and local levels?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

- How might municipalism offer new paths forward? To what extent do we see actors within municipalist movements in Jackson, MS or Barcelona, Spain working against the nation-state? To what extent are those efforts compromised, or even doomed from the beginning?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

- How can we practice new forms of governance beyond the state through organizing, collective care, mutual aid and transformative justice?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

What lies beyond the nation-state?



"Defund campaigns can be places to build power to liberate resources from the state and to practice governance and liberation at the same time."

– Jamel Campbell-Gooch, Black Nashville Assembly

"How do we prepare for the life we want to live? What is the work of liberation? What is the psychic work, the relational work, the institutional processes that need to take place in, around and between us for that liberation to manifest? What kind of schooling and skilling or readying is necessary to practice self-governance? What do we need to make way for liberatory relationships?"

– Kelly Gillespie and Leigh-Ann Naidoo

#### Resources:

- "The Municipalist Moment," *Dissent*, [www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-municipalist-moment](http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-municipalist-moment)
- The People's Movement Assembly, [www.peoplesmovementassembly.org/](http://www.peoplesmovementassembly.org/)
- Black National Assembly, [www.blacknashvilleassembly.org/](http://www.blacknashvilleassembly.org/)
- Jackson People's Assembly, <https://jxnpeoplesassembly.org/about/>
- Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid* (AK Press 2021)
- MST (Movimento Sin Terra), <https://mst.org.br/english/> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgZj4YgYqsc> ( Portuguese)

## How Do Our Responses Shape What We Do Now?



**Make a list of your current organizing strategies and demands.  
How do they align with your responses to the questions above?**

A series of horizontal dashed lines for writing, providing space for the user to list organizing strategies and demands.



## Acknowledgements

This discussion tool was developed and drafted by Andrea J. Ritchie in collaboration with Mariame Kaba, drawing from their co-authored book *No More Police: A Case for Abolition* and a series of conversations hosted by Interrupting Criminalization in 2021 and 2022 on the role of the state in abolitionist futures.

Deep gratitude to everyone who took the time to review and offer comments on it, including Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore, Trishala Deb, Woods Ervin, Jacinta Gonzalez, Mimi Kim, N'Tanya Lee, Dean Spade, Maria Thomas, and Harsha Walia, Kelly Gillespie, Leigh-Ann Naidoo, and Lewis Raven Wallace, and to all of the brilliant thinkers whose wisdom is quoted in it, and to Eva Nagao (creative direction) & Emma Li (design) for making it beautiful.

