

# Politics of Peace: An Abolitionist Analysis of Peace as a Tool of Social Control in Settler Colonial Societies

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes how peace, defined as the absence of violence, is utilized as a tool of social control in the US, a settler colonial society (Valliancourt 1991). The US is structured around white supremacy and cis-heteropatriarchy suggesting the acts of peace and violence are influenced by oppressive structures. This analysis is influenced by my lived experience as a Black woman abolitionist, along with my sociological and criminological knowledge. To explore this perspective, I examine the social positions of Black MaGes (marginalized genders), children, and incarcerated individuals and how their (lower) positionality within a white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal society impacts their violent interpersonal interactions. The historical context of imperialism and colonialism enables violence to maintain the US's oppressive social structure. Additionally, institutions like the criminal justice system enable violence through its agents and within interpersonal interactions. I suggest that peace is expected from individuals with lower social positions, even as they experience structural and interpersonal violence from oppressive institutions and their agents, with little to no accountability. Comprehensive discussions that engage the acts of peace and forgiveness, should consider the social positioning of individuals due to the oppressive social structures in which we live and how positionality affects views on peace and forgiveness.

**Keywords:** Social control, violence, peace, abolition, white supremacy

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## Introduction

Analyzing the presence of peace and forgiveness within criminology feels like a necessity. The more I have learned from my experiences as a person with intersecting marginalized identities, a member of a local abolitionist community, and an academic, I'm not sure the right questions are being asked in discussions focusing on peace and forgiveness. In a society like the US founded on violence, good starting questions to ask are: Who is engaging in violence and why? Who is expected to be peaceful and why?

To take matters further, we must begin with the ways I define the following concepts: forgiveness, power, violence, and peace. This paper will explore the presence of these concepts and how social positioning impacts the relationship(s) between them. The concept of *forgiveness* entails absolving individuals and structures of the harm they caused. *Power* refers to an institution or individual's ability

to enact their will upon you. One of the methods to assert power is through *violence* which is defined as behavior that is intentional, unwanted, nonessential, and harmful. This definition allows for the inclusion and exclusion of behaviors such as child abuse and self-defense (Hamby 2017). Finally, Vaillancourt's (1991) definition of *peace*, the absence of violence, is utilized in this paper to provide the necessary context for an analysis of how peace is used as a tool of social control.

The US itself was founded on the genocide of Indigenous people and the enslavement of African people (now referred to as Black), in conjunction with the ongoing systemic oppression of other marginalized groups (LGBTQIA+, disabled, women, etc.). I would label the US as a white supremacist, cis-heteropatriarchal society. This descriptor simply means that the experiences, perspectives, and beliefs of individuals who inhabit the dominant social

positions in this societal structure (which includes white, cisgender, heterosexual, non-disabled, and men) are protected at an interpersonal and structural level. Anyone who does not hold one of these dominant social positions is not afforded the same protections and is more vulnerable to harm.

For example, as a Black woman sociologist, my social position is at minimum dually marginalized by my gender and race, so my analysis of sociological and criminological phenomena is influenced by this. The erasure of the experiences of Black women in a Eurocentric curriculum within academia is a demonstration of this marginalization. As a social scientist, I had to search for analyses that included the perspectives of people who share my experiences as they are not always included in core curriculums in the US.

One of the concepts I came across that demonstrates to me how violence is allowed for those with power is the trap of loyalty, which refers to the “cultural and emotional exploitation of Black women’s allegiance to their loved ones to ensure community loyalty” (Ritchie 1985). My research concludes the presence of this trap of loyalty when Black women and other marginalized genders (MaGes) are expected to ignore their gender and sexual orientation to focus on Black, cisgender, heterosexual men’s issues (Dixon 2015). This pattern of erasing and ignoring intersecting marginalized perspectives makes sense when you understand the social positioning of individuals under the US’s white supremacist ableist cis-heteropatriarchal society.

Outside of my experiences as a person with intersecting marginalized identities, I also hold an abolitionist perspective, which posits that the criminal justice system (CJS) is inherently harmful so alternatives to its function to maintain social control should be utilized instead of reforming the current system of harm. The question “Are Prisons Obsolete?” which is also the title of Angela Davis’ (2003) abolitionist text was the beginning of my shift from a reformist perspective of the CJS to one based on abolitionist principles. Since then, my knowledge, observations, and work within the abolitionist community have also demonstrated to me the hypocrisy in asking for peace and forgiveness from individuals while they still experience violence at interpersonal and structural levels.

Before I even had the language to describe interpersonal and structural violence, I knew that it didn’t make sense to place more focus on reactions to violence and not the initial violence. For instance, previous media attention focused on how residents of Ferguson, Missouri responded after the state-sanctioned murder of Mike Brown, and not why residents were so upset. Within this coverage was

also the implicit message of the expectation for protests against police brutality to be peaceful, while violence from the police could be used against protestors. This case (and many others) along with the history of police brutality in the US led me to an additional question. If peace is the absence of violence, how can there be a call for peace when one side is legally sanctioned to use violence at their discretion, while those they harm are not allowed to protest against it, or even react to it?

Sociological and criminological research supports the lived experiences of violence from the incarcerated individuals from whom I have had the privilege to learn. For example, during a film screening with a panel I facilitated hosted by a local abolitionist community in NC, I was able to engage with formerly incarcerated individuals who shared their experiences of being denied healthcare and other necessary amenities while incarcerated. One of the films, “Calls from Home,” described how a local radio station call-in line was the only way some incarcerated individuals in approximately 8 prisons within the Appalachia area could contact their loved ones due to the cost of phone calls in prison (Ryerson 2022). The film screening also included a documentary called, “What These Walls Won’t Hold” by filmmaker Adamu Chan. Chan’s film explores how the COVID outbreak at San Quentin was a combination of apathy towards incarcerated individuals and their healthcare disadvantages (Chan 2023). If violence is used against the inmates by denying them basic resources and the ability to communicate, would that be considered a denial of peace to these incarcerated individuals? And if they are being denied peace, why is it requested from them?

While mainstream prison reform posits that different procedures and training can address the abuses within the CJS, abolition names the institution itself as the harm and requires individuals to rethink what alternative forms of social control may look like. Reform of the CJS system allows violence to continue at a structural level, which provides the structures necessary for interpersonal violence. Conversely, abolition requires us to rethink the current system (of harm) by focusing on “life-affirming” institutions as described by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a noted abolitionist (Highline College Library 2024).

Below I explore the idea of peace as a tool of social control from an interpersonal and structural perspective. The interpersonal analysis will focus on how the social positioning of marginalized individuals is exploited to maintain a false peace with those who wield more power within the social hierarchies in the US. I follow with a structural

analysis that will explore the ways imperialism shapes the US's social structure and how that structure influences who is enabled to use violence, and who is expected to be peaceful. The paper concludes by analyzing the relationship between interpersonal and structural violence and how they are used to maintain the status quo of the US, which is a white supremacist ableist, cis-heteropatriarchal society.

## Interpersonal Analysis

In this section, I will discuss how the social positioning of individuals in a white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal society contributes to the idea of peace being used as a tool for social control at the interpersonal level. Black MaGes, incarcerated individuals, and victims of abuse are included to explore how peace as a method of social control is utilized.

### *Trap of Loyalty*

Black MaGes is short for Black marginalized genders to include inclusive language around gender that does not erase the experience of individuals who are not Black cisgender women but have a lower social position in a cis-heteropatriarchal society (Black Feminist Project n.d.).

As mentioned earlier, the trap of loyalty is a concept coined by Beth Richie (1985) to describe the exploitation of Black MaGes loyalty to their community. One of the qualities of the trap of loyalty is the expectation for Black MaGes to endure their abuse in silence. Although my research has documented this experience in contemporary society (Dixon 2015), its presence has existed for centuries. The experience of Harriet Jacobs, an enslaved Black cisgender woman from NC, provides an example. Jacobs "chose" to be sexually assaulted by the white man who enslaved her to protect her younger sister from the same fate. Put another way, Jacobs sacrificed her peace for the safety of another member of her community. Such an interaction could only be possible in an oppressive system, one where Black MaGes are not seen as people and have no right to protection from their abuse. Denial of victimhood for Black MaGes reproduces the status quo and restructures society around white supremacy and cis-heteropatriarchy.

Another quality of the trap of loyalty is the expectation of buffering the family from racism, which intersects with enduring abuse in silence. Black MaGes and specifically Black cisgender women are considered traitors to their race for speaking out against abuse by cis-het Black men in their community, again sacrificing their peace for someone

else's safety. Black cisgender women are more likely to be sexually assaulted than a Black cisgender man being falsely accused (Ritchie 1985). Given the structure of US society, cisgender people and men, even with marginalized identities, often hold higher social positions, which can contribute to their maintenance of the status quo. The existence of the brute and jezebel caricature notes this.

The Brute caricature, which posits Black men as "hypersexual and rapists of white women" is a dangerous stereotype that has encouraged white supremacist violence against Black men historically and currently. The Jezebel caricature posits Black women as hypersexual, another dangerous stereotype that has contributed to the erasure of Black women as victims of (sexual) abuse. The hyper-sexualization of individuals marginalized by race, gender, and sexual orientation is often used to justify violence against them (Dixon 2015, Noble 2022).

Even with the existence of these caricatures, being marginalized by one social identity does not negate that you may have a higher social positioning in another way, such as cis-het people, Black men, and white women. Within racially marginalized communities (like the Black community), the social positioning of those marginalized by gender, sexual orientation, and other marginalized social identities is often ignored to prioritize racial issues. This erasure of issues involving intersecting marginalized identities reproduces the cis-heteropatriarchal status quo of US society, within the Black community. Two qualities from the trap of loyalty, enduring abuse in silence and buffering the family from racism, are occurrences of peace being sacrificed by MaGes to protect the Black community from white supremacist violence, even as they experience interpersonal cis-heteropatriarchal violence via abuse within the Black community.

### *Abuse*

Although the abuse Black MaGes experience reflects the status quo within society, we can also look at how abuse is generally handled to examine how the social positioning of individuals impacts who is punished for abuse. Millions of people in the US experience abuse, indicating the presence of a social problem (NCADV n.d.). Because social problems and those impacted correlate to the way society is structured, it stands to reason that those who are the most marginalized will experience the most violence with the expectation of maintaining peace. A recent study found that approximately 90 percent of women in prison for killing their partner were abused by the same man (Zamouri 2023). This conclusion demonstrates how the choice to not remain peaceful, even amid direct harm, still has consequences.

Black trans women are also killed at higher rates than their cisgender counterparts, and the violence they face is often presented with the idea that cis-het men's violence is due to men being tricked into having sexual relationships with trans women. The existence of an LGBTQIA+ panic defense, which justifies violence against people who are not cisgender or heterosexual, exposes the hypocrisy of who is allowed to engage in violence, and who is expected to be peaceful as no law exists to enable violence specifically against cis-het people (LGBTQ+ Bar Association 2019).

One of the responses from persons who engage in abusive acts is DARVO [Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender]. This concept describes a reaction that individuals may employ after being held accountable for their (abusive) behavior. Abusers engaging in this reaction will deny their behavior, attack the person holding them accountable for harm, and then victimize themselves so the person experiencing harm is treated as the offender (Freyd 1997). I observed the presence of this phenomenon in my research on the trap of loyalty. It was present in the supporters of disgraced singer R. Kelly who blamed his victims for their abuse and used his racial marginalization to present him as the "real" victim in an effort to avoid accountability. An important piece of context is that Kelly specifically targeted Black women and girls, a social group that has lower social positionality in US society, with his abusive behaviors for decades (Dixon 2015). The DARVO reaction to abuse is an example of the importance of noting how differences in an individual's social positioning and the corresponding power differences influence people's perceptions of and responses to violence. To better illustrate who is expected to be peaceful in an abusive interpersonal relationship, let us look at a couple of types of abusive interpersonal relationships.

Child abuse is another interpersonal interaction where violence against children is structurally sanctioned. The authority figure (i.e., parents, adults, or other guardians) with a higher social position, is granted legal authority over children, which creates circumstances for abuse to potentially occur. While there are currently debates on whether spanking children to discipline them is abuse, what is clear is research noting violence towards a child contributes to more harmful outcomes than positive (Gershoff 2020). The lower social position of children also allows their perspectives to be ignored if they don't agree with spanking, whereas children engaging in violence against parents, or other adults, is seen as taboo.

Another example is apparent among incarcerated individuals and the official custodians granted legal authority over them in prisons and jails. Evidence of abusive sexual relationships between guards and

incarcerated individuals exists, but guards are rarely held responsible for their abuse even when reported, whereas incarcerated individuals can receive longer sentences or have additional state violence sanctioned against them for fighting back (Jones 2019).

As noted, white supremacy and cis-heteropatriarchy empower and devalue individuals in society based on their social positioning. Naming these structures and the hierarchies they produce helps to explain the relationship between who is expected to be peaceful and who is enabled to engage in violence and peace as tools of social control to maintain the status quo.

The trap of loyalty demonstrates how the dual marginalization of Black women and other MaGes under this oppressive system denies them victimhood, which renders their violence invisible and complicates the acts of peace and forgiveness. Additionally, the expectation of peace from marginalized and vulnerable individuals experiencing interpersonal violence, even as systems empower individuals to engage in that violence, demonstrates the expectation of peace does not flow both ways. Parents are still allowed to abuse their kids, while kids are expected to forgive the parent. Black MaGes, incarcerated people, and various other victims of abuse carry similar expectations in that they are blamed for the initial violence and punished if they retaliate or protest against it.

The violence in interpersonal relationships appears to be perpetrated by individuals with greater social positions in society, partly because those belonging to the social groups with higher social positions are granted more structural resources to engage in violent behavior at the interpersonal level. In the next section, I explore how interpersonal violence is influenced by structural resources and social positioning.

## Structural Analysis

In a white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal society, interpersonal violence against marginalized individuals based on their social positioning is utilized to maintain the social "order." These interpersonal interactions would not be possible if the institutions within society did not also enable violence against marginalized groups. This section will discuss how the CJS utilizes systemic violence and resources sanctioned by the state to maintain calls for social order and the ways imperialism shapes the US's social structure.

*The Criminal Justice System (CJS)*

The CJS's function in society is to enforce social norms, and like all institutions, it is influenced by and influences interpersonal violence within society. When examining this institution, I find it necessary to also consider the prison industrial complex (PIC). The PIC is a term used by abolitionists to describe the ways the government and other institutions' interests intersect to utilize surveillance, policing, and imprisonment to address social problems (Critical Resistance n.d.).

The US CJS is an institution rooted in white supremacy, historically and presently. The impact of its racist origins is reflected in the way the CJS is structured to enable legal violence against racially marginalized individuals, especially Black people. The history of the US is violent, which includes the genocide of Indigenous people for their land and the enslavement of African (Black) people to provide free labor for English (white) colonizers (Wolfe 2006). This history begins to provide relevant context to the current US racial hierarchy.

For instance, Southern police departments in the US originate from slave patrols. The patrols were tasked with capturing slaves who escaped bondage. Similarly, the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the US Constitution made slavery illegal, except in the case of a criminal conviction. An outcome of this loophole has been incarcerated individuals being forced to provide free labor for various industries, including companies like Walmart and Victoria's Secret (Duvernay 2016).

The white supremacist origins (and structure) of US society suggest that racial social positioning determines how you will be treated within it, especially in matters relevant to state-defined crime. Understanding this history further helps to establish a motive to incarcerate individuals for their labor and provides an explanation for institutional racism reflected in laws.

Within the CJS laws that disproportionately impact marginalized people are enforced. Individuals who occupy dominant social positions can weaponize these laws against marginalized groups. For instance, in the US we have ongoing debates about how laws criminalize pregnant people (anti-abortion laws), trans people (anti-trans healthcare laws), and immunocompromised people (anti-masking). Drug laws have also been long shown to target racially marginalized people (e.g., Dollar 2019). In every case, structural resources available to individuals with higher social positions are utilized against these marginalized groups.

The PIC requires the examination of relationships between institutions, such as education and healthcare, to further examine how "non-criminal" structures

influence interpersonal violence. The school-to-prison pipeline, for example, is utilized to outsource student misconduct from administrative oversight to carceral punishment (SOEO 2021). The age-, race-, and gender-related social positioning of individuals matter here as they do in the above examples. Black and Brown students are referred to law enforcement at higher rates than their white counterparts by teachers (American Bar Association 2023). Similarly, the existence of abortion, anti-trans, and masking laws illustrate the relationship between healthcare and the CJS.

The CJS also grants actors within the institution authority and resources to enact legal violence during interpersonal interactions. Police brutality is an example of state-sanctioned violence and demonstrates why social positioning matters. While the police can engage in violence against citizens, citizens are expected to react "peacefully" amid the violence. If a civilian reacts in a way deemed otherwise, by an agent of the CJS, s/he/they can be seriously injured or killed with relative legal impunity.

Out of approximately 9000 police killings from 2013 -2021, only 104 received criminal charges. Of those charges, over 50% involved the deaths of non-white individuals (Matthews 2021). Although police are allowed to utilize violence against individuals, even when the violence is not justified, they are rarely held accountable indicating a power difference between agents of the criminal justice system and everyone else (Matthews 2021). By institutionalizing racism with laws and pathologizing Black people (and other marginalized individuals with relatively low social positioning) as criminals, the CJS justifies the white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal hierarchy and continues the status quo violence that marginalized individuals experience at both the interpersonal and structural levels.

*Imperialism*

The white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal structure of the US is a consequence of imperialism and colonialism. While these two concepts are often used synonymously, I will utilize Edward Said's (1993) definitions of imperialism and colonialism. Said (1993: 8) distinguished between the two concepts by noting that "'imperialism' refers to the theories, practices and attitudes of an outside society, country, etc. dominating a distant territory, whereas 'colonialism', is the implanting of settlements on distant territory". It should also be noted that Said presented colonialism as a common consequence of imperialism.

Within settler colonial societies like the US, in addition to the violent origins that include genocide

and slavery, racially marginalized groups were also forcefully assimilated into the colonizers' social order. The use of colonial violence ensured the acceptance of new social positions under a racial hierarchy, where white people inhabit the highest (racial) position. Non-white people were not viewed as equals within this system, but they were expected to adhere to the cultural expectations of the white settler colonizers. This is evidenced by the existence of Indian reservation schools which were tasked with "civilizing" Indigenous children, by stripping them of their culture (language, spiritual practices, gender identities) and requiring them to learn within a Eurocentric education system (NMAI 2020).

Colonial violence was also utilized to enslave Africans under the legal institution of slavery. The US government was structured using white supremacy, a violent ideology that justifies the social positioning of racialized individuals and other social identities. The influence of white supremacist ideas from settler colonizers can be examined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, as the founding documents did not recognize women, MaGes, the enslaved, or the individuals Indigenous to the land as people. Still today, legal documents are used to maintain these historical social positions (Dixon 2015; Duvernay 2016; Smith 2016). Smith (2016) posits that the US presents itself as a democracy, but colonial violence such as genocide has always been the law of the land. The US could not exist without it. She notes that democracy is the cover-up for US imperial control over Indigenous lands.

The impact of colonialism and imperialism are relevant to note when discussing the social order of US society as they both influence the social positions of individuals across all structures in US society, including those who benefit from violent and peaceful interactions. The white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal label used to describe the US is the result of historical imperialism and colonization by European (specifically English) settlers. Societies, like the US, which are maintained using imperialism and settler colonialism are generally maintained using violence and structured around the ideas of the settlers who have colonized them (Said 1993; Smith 2016).

The connection between imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy, and cis-heteropatriarchy cannot be separated from how violence and peace are utilized as tools of social control. White supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal societies utilize various institutions to enact structural violence upon marginalized groups. Those who occupy lower social positions, because of the racialized and cis-heteropatriarchal hierarchy, for example, are exposed to more of the violence at a structural and interpersonal level. Individuals with higher social positions have

greater resources to engage in violence while the lower social positions are more likely to experience violence and be asked or required to forgive and react peacefully. As with interpersonal violence, groups disproportionately harmed by structural violence are expected to prioritize peace leaving the structural harms unaddressed. Structural violence maintains the status quo and is reflected in interpersonal violence trends.

## Conclusion

The idea of peace in criminological inquiry resonates with me because of how my sociological and criminological knowledge combine with my experiences with an abolitionist community. In asking if and how we can incorporate peace into criminology, I thought about questions surrounding the enactment of violence and why it exists.

In the midst of writing this paper, I have been observing recent student protests against the genocides in Palestine, Congo, Sudan, and other occupied territories around the world. Students, faculty, and other community members have been peacefully protesting against genocide with encampments providing teach-ins, food, and prayer areas for participants. At UNC - Chapel Hill, protestor demands included cutting contracts with any company benefiting from the "ongoing genocide in Gaza" (Brighton 2024).

The response to the peaceful protestors at UNC and other student encampments, as reported by various news outlets, was university administrators calling the police on students and faculty to clear the encampments for violating school policies. Various media outlets and videos on social media showed student protestors being met by police in riot gear, pepper spray, and rubber bullets. In addition to the police presence, administrators utilized other resources such as suspensions and denial of degrees to sanction protestors (Al Jazeera 2024; CBS News 2024; Martinez-Beltran 2024). The violent administrative and police responses to students asking for transparency from their institutions while taking a moral stance against genocide, reminds me of my original questions: Who is engaging in violence and why? Who is expected to be peaceful and why?

The interpersonal violence protestors experienced is possible due to structural resources provided to those with higher social positions, as indicated by university administrators utilizing campus and local police forces to quell the protests. The amount of force utilized against students reminded me of the violence against Black Lives Matter (BLM) protestors. Such recent observations support the arguments I make herein about peace as a form of social control.

Violence against students is utilized because they are questioning the structures of society and the violence they inflict. The threat of protestors, such as the pro-Palestinian, anti-genocide, and BLM protests, even peaceful ones, disrupts the “social order.” The usage of violence by those with higher social positions (administrators, police, cisgender people, parents/adults, etc.) against those holding a lower social position (students, non-white people, trans people, etc.) provides the controls to maintain the white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal social order of the US.

Analyses of peace and forgiveness that do not consider the relationship between oppressive structures, ideologies, and social positioning obscure the societal expectation that individuals with lower social positions must be peaceful while enabling the violence of state agents and individuals in higher social positions.

The understanding of imperialism and colonialism's influence on the structure of society helps to provide a necessary framework that is used to explore the use of violence and peace based on an individual's social positioning. Persons who are white, cisgender, heterosexual, and/or men hold higher social positions in society than individuals who are non-white, LGBTQIA+, or women, due to the latter's lower social position within society. In interpersonal interactions, individuals with higher social positions are allowed to engage in violence against those in lower social positions. Those who inhabit a lower position must not only be peaceful but accept the violence.

Abolitionists recognize the reform of social institutions like the CJS does not negate the expectation of peace from incarcerated individuals and others with lower social positions in society, while the system(s) of harm are allowed to continue their structural violence, just in ways that are less visible like the prison as an extension of slavery (Duvernay 2016). This suggests to me the expectation of peace, in oppressive societies, falls on those who are victims of the violence even though the violence used against them maintains existing social conditions. Abolitionists prioritize the replacement of violent institutions and structures with life-affirming institutions that do not require violence to maintain an oppressive social order (Critical Resistance n.d.).

Future criminological and sociological discussion and research that focus topics on peace and forgiveness should prioritize the perspectives of individuals in lower social positions as the structure of society and social positioning influence who experiences peace and violence without repercussions in oppressive societies.

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Her public sociology has been featured in podcasts and articles like *Impakter* and the Children's Defense Fund, drawing upon abolitionist principles and sociological knowledge for analysis. In addition to her social science background, Toya is also a member of Triad Abolition Project, a grassroots abolition community based in NC.