

Left of Death: The Socialist Case Against the Death Penalty

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On January 10, 2017, white supremacist and mass murderer Dylann Roof was sentenced to death by a jury of his peers in federal court. He was deemed competent to stand trial multiple times, despite serious questions regarding his mental stability. He was afforded what, by all means, appeared to be a competent legal team to defend him against the charges stemming from the shooting of ten (killing nine) Black church-goers at Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Church in South Carolina on June 17, 2015, though Roof decided to abandon legal counsel at several points in the legal process. Roof was 21 years old at the time of the attack—barely old enough to legally consume alcohol and not old enough to even rent a car. He has expressed nothing resembling regret for his crimes, and in fact has remained steadfast in his justification for them. Assuming the psychological experts are right and Roof lacks any kind of relevant mental illness, I have no sympathy for Roof nor should anyone else. I even understand the visceral desire to want to see Roof suffer the ultimate penalty for his crimes.

If anyone deserves the death penalty, it is Dylann Roof.

What is most often missing from such pronouncements like this “If anyone deserves it, it is...” is this: No one deserves the death penalty. If anyone deserves the death penalty it is Dylann Roof, and despite his crimes, complete lack of remorse, and that he was afforded all the legal opportunities to defend himself in court, no one deserves the death penalty—not even Dylann Roof. While there are good liberal and conservative reasons to oppose the death penalty, this essay will expound an explicitly socialist case against this most horrific legal institution.

If socialism means the replacement of the private ownership of the means of production and marketized access to basic goods and resources with democratic control over the same, there seems to be no reason to think that so long as our laws are genuinely democratically decided upon that the death penalty would be inherently inconsistent with socialism. If the people come together and decide that for certain crimes where there are confessions and evidence that proves the crime beyond a shadow of a doubt, why should this practice be disallowed?

We could start with the perhaps more well-known response rooted in how the death penalty is actually carried out in the countries where it is still practiced like the US, Iran, China, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan. The argument here is that the death penalty is unjust because people are executed for political reasons, through racially-biased processes, and in absence of the kind of evidence that we imagine should be necessary to carry out such a final, unalterable punishment. The consequence of this argument is that if the process were to be made more just and fair, the penalty

would then be acceptable for the most heinous of crimes. I reject this argument, and I think all socialists should as well.

Before proceeding to the socialist case against the death penalty, I want to state firmly, that despite the fact that I reject the “process” argument overall, this rejection should not be taken as a rejection of the important fact that the critique of the process is accurate. The process involved in carrying out the death penalty, even in the US where there are far more legal protections for the accused than in the other countries that allow capital punishment, is unjust—most egregiously due to racism. I support those working to abolish the death penalty for these reasons, though my reasons—the same reasons I consider myself a socialist—differ.

Put simply, I support the dignity of life. Dylann Roof is a human being, and should not be killed. He was arrested, charged, tried, and convicted for killing people—people he believed deserved to die. He is wrong, and so are the jurors who unanimously voted to execute him. Some people think that the poor deserve to be poor because they lack a strong enough work ethic to improve their circumstances. As socialists, we know they are wrong. I—we—oppose capitalism because it harms and kills people.

The discourse of personal responsibility pervades all kinds of justifications for capitalism, the prison-industrial complex, war, and the death penalty. I support life and I want to live in a society that values all life, even life that we hate—even life that we disagree with.

Capitalism is based on and perpetuates a culture of suffering and death, shrouded in the most superficial narratives of freedom, equality, and justice for all. While socialists should still value personal responsibility, all good socialists understand that even personal responsibility is a social project. As socialists, we want CEOs and business owners to take personal responsibility for their exploitative, oppressive, self-aggrandizing practices, whether they are entirely within the law or not. We need to understand that personal responsibility and social responsibility are inseparable.

Dylann Roof did not invent murder. He did not invent nor build the gun he used to kill those parishioners. He did not invent white supremacy. He was conditioned by a society that justifies all kinds of killing: in “self-defense,” by police, by soldiers in war, by pharmaceutical companies who profit off limiting access to life-saving drugs, and by courts that sentence people to death—often incorrectly as we’ve found out many times after executions have been carried out. Dylann Roof was conditioned into a society with a thirst for guns and violence. He was conditioned into a society that is pervaded by white supremacy—a white supremacy whose standard-bearers have once again found their way into the White House.

Opposing the mentality that justifies and naturalizes capitalism and all systems that reproduce unjust, preventable suffering means opposing the death penalty, even for someone like Dylann Roof, who commits heinous acts against life. Being genuinely pro-life should have nothing to do with policing women’s bodies and choices; instead, it means supporting all life: human, animal, ecological, and even the accused or convicted criminal’s life. Even if I or you want Dylann Roof to die, it is my—it is our—personal and social responsibility to oppose the death penalty (and inhumane prison sentences and prison conditions more broadly, by the way). The death penalty—like capitalism—is sustained by people systematically giving-in to their basest fears and desires and codifying them into law. We should oppose all laws, whether democratically determined or not, that violate life in any of its forms. This is the strongest case—the socialist case—against the death penalty.

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