

Against Libertarian Brutalism

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Why should we favor human liberty over a social order ruled by power? In providing the answer, I would suggest that libertarians can generally be divided into two camps: humanitarians and brutalists.

The humanitarians are drawn to reasons such as the following. Liberty allows peaceful human cooperation. It inspires the creative service of others. It keeps violence at bay. It allows for capital formation and prosperity. It protects human rights of all against invasion. It allows human associations of all sorts to flourish on their own terms. It socializes people with rewards toward getting along rather than tearing each other apart, and leads to a world in which people are valued as ends in themselves rather than fodder in the central plan.

We know all of this from history and experience. These are all great reasons to love liberty.

But they are not the only reasons that people support liberty. There is a segment of the population of self-described libertarians—described here as brutalists—who find all the above rather boring, broad, and excessively humanitarian. To them, what's impressive about liberty is that it allows people to assert their individual preferences, to form homogeneous tribes, to work out their biases in action, to ostracize people based on “politically incorrect” standards, to hate to their heart's content so long as no violence is used as a means, to shout down people based on their demographics or political opinions, to be openly racist and sexist, to exclude and isolate and be generally malcontented with modernity, and to reject civil standards of values and etiquette in favor of antisocial norms.

These two impulses are radically different. The first values the social peace that emerges from freedom, while the second values the freedom to reject cooperation in favor of gut-level prejudice. The first wants to reduce the role of power and privilege in the world, while the second wants the freedom to assert power and privilege within the strict confines of private property rights and the freedom to disassociate.

To be sure, liberty does allow both the humanitarian and the brutalist perspective, as implausible as that might seem. Liberty is large and expansive and asserts no particular social end as the one and only way. Within the framework of liberty, there is the freedom to love and to hate. At the same time, they constitute very different ways of looking at the world—one liberal in the classical sense and one illiberal in every sense—and it is good to consider that before you, as a libertarian, find yourself allied with people who are missing the main point of the liberal idea.

Humanitarianism we understand. It seeks the well-being of the human person and the flourishing of society in all its complexity. Libertarian humanitarianism sees the best means to achieve this as the self-ordering social system itself, unimpeded by external controls through the violent means of the State. The goal here is essentially benevolent, and the means by which it is achieved put a premium on social peace, free association, mutually beneficial exchange, the organic development of institutions, and the beauty of life itself.

What is brutalism? The term is mostly associated with an architectural style of the 1950s through the 1970s, one that emphasized large concrete structures unrefined by concerns over style and grace. Inelegance is its main thrust and its primary source of pride. Brutalism heralded the lack of pretense and the raw practicality of the building's use. The building was supposed to be strong not pretty, aggressive not fussy, imposing and not subtle.

Brutalism in architecture was an affectation, one that emerged from a theory robbed of context. It was a style adopted with conscious precision. It believed it was forcing us to look at unadorned realities, an apparatus barren of distractions, in order to make a didactic point. This point was not only aesthetic but also ethical: It rejected beauty on principle. To beautify is to compromise, distract, and ruin the purity of the cause. It follows that brutalism rejected the need for commercial appeal and discarded issues of presentation and marketing; these issues, in the brutalist framework, shield our eyes from the radical core.

Brutalism asserted that a building should be no more and no less than what it is supposed to be in order to fulfill its function. It asserted the right to be ugly, which is precisely why the style was most popular among governments around the world, and why brutalist forms are today seen as eyesores all over the world.

We look back and wonder where these monstrosities came from, and we are amazed to discover that they were born of a theory that rejected beauty, presentation, and adornment as a matter of principle. The architects imagined that they were showing us something we would otherwise be reluctant to face. You can only really appreciate the results of brutalism, however, if you have already bought into the theory and believe in it. Otherwise, absent the extremist and fundamentalist ideology, the building comes across as terrifying and threatening.

By analogy, what is ideological brutalism? It strips down the theory to its rawest and most fundamental parts and pushes the application of those parts to the foreground. It tests the limits of the idea by tossing out the finesse, the refinements, the grace, the decency, the accoutrements. It cares nothing for the larger cause of civility and the beauty of results. It is only interested in the pure functionality of the parts. It dares anyone to question the overall look and feel of the ideological apparatus, and shouts down people who do so as being insufficiently devoted to the core of the theory, which itself is asserted without context or regard for aesthetics.

Not every argument for raw principle and stripped-down analytics is inherently brutalist; the core truth of brutalism is that we need to reduce in order to see the roots, we need sometimes to face difficult truth, and we need to be shocked and sometimes to shock with seemingly implausible or uncomfortable implications of an idea. Brutalism goes much further: the idea that the argument should stop there and go no further, and to elaborate, qualify, adorn, nuance, admit uncertainty, or broaden beyond gritty assertion amounts to a sell out or a corruption of purity. Brutalism is relentless and unabashed in its refusal to get beyond the most primitive postulates.

Brutalism can appear in many ideological guises. Bolshevism and Nazism are both obvious examples: Class and race become the only metric driving politics to the exclusion of every other

consideration. In modern democracy, partisan politics tends toward brutality insofar as it asserts party control as the only relevant concern. Religious fundamentalism is yet another obvious form.

In the libertarian world, however, brutality is rooted in the pure theory of the rights of individuals to live their values whatever they may be. The core truth is there and indisputable, but the application is made raw to push a point. Thus do the brutalists assert the right to be racist, the right to be a misogynist, the right to hate Jews or foreigners, the right to ignore civil standards of social engagement, the right to be uncivilized, to be rude and crude. It is all permissible and even meritorious because embracing what is awful can constitute a kind of test. After all, what is liberty if not the right to be a boor?

These kinds of arguments make the libertarian humanitarians deeply uncomfortable since they are narrowly true as regards pure theory but miss the bigger point of human liberty, which is not to make the world more divided and miserable but to enable human flourishing in peace and prosperity. Just as we want architecture to please the eye and reflect the drama and elegance of the human ideal, so too a theory of the social order should provide a framework for a life well lived and communities of association that permit its members to flourish.

The brutalists are technically correct that liberty also protects the right to be a complete jerk and the right to hate, but such impulses do not flow from the long history of the liberal idea. As regards race and sex, for example, the liberation of women and minority populations from arbitrary rule has been a great achievement of this tradition. To continue to assert the right to turn back the clock in your private and commercial life gives an impression of the ideology that is uprooted from this history, as if these victories for human dignity have nothing whatever to do with the ideological needs of today.

Brutalism is more than a stripped-down, antimodern, and gutted version of the original libertarianism. It is also a style of argumentation and an approach to rhetorical engagement. As with architecture, it rejects marketing, the commercial ethos, and the idea of “selling” a worldview. Liberty must be accepted or rejected based entirely on its most reduced form. Thus is it quick to pounce, denounce, and declare victory. It detects compromise everywhere. It loves nothing more than to ferret it out. It has no patience for subtlety of exposition much less the nuances of the circumstances of time and place. It sees only raw truth and clings to it as the one and only truth to the exclusion of all other truth.

Brutalism rejects subtlety and finds no exceptions of circumstance to its universal theory. The theory applies regardless of time, place, or culture. There can be no room for modification or even discovery of new information that might change the way the theory is applied. Brutalism is a closed system of thought in which all relevant information is already known, and the manner in which the theory is applied is presumed to be a given part of the theoretical apparatus. Even difficult areas such as family law, criminal restitution, rights in ideas, liability for trespass, and other areas subject to case-by-case juridical tradition become part of an a priori apparatus that admits no exceptions or emendations.

And because brutality is the outlying impulse in the libertarian world—young people are no longer interested in this whole approach—it behaves the way we’ve come to expect from seriously marginal groups. Asserting the rights and even the merits of racism and hate, it is already excluded from mainstream conversation about public life. The only people who truly listen to brutalist arguments, which are unconvincing by design, are other libertarians. For that reason, brutality is driven ever more toward extreme factionalism; attacking the humanitarians for attempting to beautify the message becomes a full-time occupation.

In the course of this factionalism, the brutalists of course assert that they are the only true believers in liberty because only they have the stomach and the brass necessary to take libertarian logic to its most extreme end and deal with the results. But it is not bravery or intellectual rigor at work here. Their idea of libertarianism is reductionist, truncated, unthoughtful, uncolored and uncorrected by the unfolding of human experience, and forgets the larger historical and social context in which liberty lives.

So let's say you have a town that is taken over by a fundamentalist sect that excludes all peoples not of the faith, forces women into burka-like clothing, imposes a theocratic legal code, and ostracizes gays and lesbians. You might say that everyone is there voluntarily, but, even so, there is no liberalism present in this social arrangement at all. The brutalists will be on the front lines to defend such a microtyranny on grounds of decentralization, rights of property, and the right to discriminate and exclude—completely dismissing the larger picture here that, after all, people's core aspirations to live a full and free life are being denied on a daily basis.

Further, the brutalist believes that he already knows the results of human liberty, and they often conform to the throne-and-altar impulses of times past. After all, in their view, liberty means the unleashing of all the basest impulses of human nature that they believe the modern state has suppressed: the desire to abide in racial and religious homogeneity, the moral permanency of patriarchy, the revulsion against homosexuality, and so on. What most people regard as modernity's advances against prejudice, the brutalists regard as imposed exceptions from the long history of humanity's tribalist and religiously based instincts.

Of course the brutalist as I've described him is an ideal type, probably not fully personified in any particular thinker. But the brutalist impulse is everywhere in evidence, especially on social media. It is a tendency of thought with predictable positions and biases. It is a main source for racist, sexist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic strains within the libertarian world—at once denying that this sentence is true while asserting with equal passion the rights of individuals to hold and act on such views. After all, say the brutalists, what is human liberty without the right to behave in ways that put our most precious sensibilities, and even civilization itself, to the test?

It all comes down to the fundamental motivation behind the support of liberty itself. What is its overarching purpose? What is its dominant historical contribution? What is its future? Here the humanitarians are fundamentally at odds with brutality.

Truly, we should never neglect the core, never shrink from the difficult implications of the pure theory of liberty. At the same time, the story of liberty and its future is not only about the raw assertion of rights but also about grace, aesthetics, beauty, complexity, service to others, community, the gradual emergence of cultural norms, and the spontaneous development of extended orders of commercial and private relationships. Freedom is what gives life to the human imagination and enables the working out of love as it extends from our most benevolent and highest longings.

An ideology robbed of its accoutrements, on the other hand, can become an eyesore, just as with a large concrete monstrosity built decades ago, imposed on an urban landscape, embarrassing to everyone, now only awaiting demolition. Will libertarianism be brutalist or humanitarian? Everyone needs to decide.

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