Deconstructing the Supervillain Fallacy

Spooky

July 27th, 2021

When we think of post-capitalist societies, there's often a nagging impulse to solve current social ills. Anti-statists are asked how they would deal with billionaires without taxation, anti-capitalists get grilled on how cities would get built without workplace hierarchy, and police abolitionists get asked how they would respond to high crime rates without prisons – all fallacious lines of inquiry based on the idea that currently existing problems are inevitable in scale and prevalence. It's no mystery that the present structure of our global economy and political landscape is largely the product of repression, imperialism, and seemingly perpetual war, yet these "necessary evils" are held to no burden of proof, while radical alternatives must prove they can do everything the current system does *and more*. What I'm describing isn't new, and while it's a very effective device for masking reactionary views, it's often the result of passive ignorance. The extension of this logic I'm about to deconstruct, however, is almost always deliberate and revealing.

Let's consider a familiar scenario: your centre-normie friends ask you, a state abolitionist, how "crime" would be handled without cops or prisons. You might start with a brief outline of restorative justice and other victim-centered models of conflict resolution – but they clarify that the concern is with "the really bad ones" who wouldn't cooperate. At that point, you could explain how institutions designed for punishment are susceptible to perverse incentives and power problems that, in combination with other issues, make them ineffective, costly responses to harmful behavior. The conversation then shifts to a specific situation in which a **serious** offense was committed, one that might result in the death penalty or a life sentence in current day America. You point out the inefficacy of the current system, reminding them that individual cases exist in vastly different contexts – to which they specify further that this person will *definitely* re-offend, is *absolutely* intent on harming others or their previous victims, and will stop at *nothing* to satisfy their urges. The conversation could end here with an admission that yes, sometimes confinement or straight up shooting someone could serve a practical purpose in which it would be appropriate, which is usually taken as an admission of defeat.

So you're telling me the worst of the worst offenses might warrant carceral treatment or lethal force? No shit! This whole discussion was meaningless, and though I'm severely truncating this hypothetical exchange, I hope I've illustrated how truly empty this response to abolition is. Instead of recognizing abolition as an opportunity for experimentation via the removal of coercive institutions, people hear "abolition" and think we're selling "Justice System 2.0, Everything We

Have Now but Better." Those averse to libertarianism often act as if we believe that freedom and safety are opposite ends of a spectrum and reject safety; in the case of "crime," many folks assume that less authority (safety) will lead to more danger (freedom), therefore concluding that prison abolitionists require a systematic response to the dangerous people who would thrive in a free world. Without prisons, what is to be done with the truly evil?

This type of goalpost-shifting constitutes what I call the "supervillain fallacy," the notion that motivated bad actors can be so harmful that carceral institutions become morally legitimate and practically necessary. Key to this framework is the idea that justice systems (courts, prisons, and police) do proportionally less harm than offenders en masse, or aren't harmful at all, constituting a net benefit to general safety. Abolitionists, therefore, must reckon with the inevitable existence of supervillains; this leads abolitionists to reluctantly accept carceral means as a last resort, shift their focus to "rehabilitation," or excuse the behaviors of supervillains through active apologia. To clarify what I mean, the common response to abolitionism is based in the belief that serial killers are a greater threat than armed cops and that prisons are the best means for containing violent criminals. Explaining the new world to people who refuse to understand the present one, unsurprisingly, doesn't result in productive mutual exchange.

Debunking these specific premises, while a great exercise in keyboard warriorship (and, if you're lucky, genuine critical thinking), is insufficient. To defend statist violence as a proportionate response to individual wrongdoing, one necessarily has to avoid empirical evidence and abandon good faith engagement, resulting in frustrating quasi-arguments that go nowhere. This is the primary purpose of the supervillain fallacy: controlling the conversation[1]. When abolition skeptics open with a bunch of leading questions, we reflexively go into self-defense mode – we're being backed into rhetorical corners, after all. Playing defense doesn't look or feel like winning[2], and to an authoritarian audience, the person who asks short questions and receives long answers looks like the intellectual victor. For the abolitionist, however, this dynamic primes them to think like authoritarians, endorsing the existence of hypothetical evils worthy of execution or accepting the rare utility of confinement in desperate attempts to forfeit the conversation.

Since these exhausting conversations often happen soon after folks initially become "radicalized," many passively accept certain carceral narratives to maintain close relationships with non-radicals. Between tense, draining conversations with people we care about and keeping controversial opinions to ourselves, many understandably choose silence over losing friends. The internalized notion that the supervillain fallacy constitutes reasonable, good-faith skepticism, combined with a "don't ask, don't tell" approach to certain radical positions, results in less people discussing abolitionism, pushing an urgently important discourse to the fringes of the overton window.

In case it wasn't already clear, this myopic focus on prevention and retribution completely disregards the needs of victims. Once a Kyle Rittenhouse is put behind bars, what happens to the marginalized communities in their immediate vicinity? How are the victims' survivors helped by a carceral solution? None of this matters in a carceral system because "law and order" isn't about mutual aid or repairing damage. "Law and order" is about bad behavior being punished, disorder

---

[1] Ian Danskin, *The Alt-Right Playbook: Control the Conversation*

[2] "...if you never look like you're losing, you can convince a lot of people that you're not. And, if you keep your statements short and punchy, people will remember what you said better than they remember the long explanation of why it's untrue. If done correctly, you might even convince yourself you know what you're talking about." – Ian Danskin, *The Alt-Right Playbook: Never Play Defense*

being corrected, and the right people receiving what they deserve. Old Left rhetoric pairs well with a focus on punishment, as a lot of anti-capitalism is framed as a righteous deliverance of justice upon the ruling class.

Our method, on the other hand, isn't compatible with this approach, since we recognize the role systems and institutions play in furthering exploitation, restrictions of autonomy, and disparities of power. Where others see danger in freedom, abolitionists see opportunities to experiment, arriving at better solutions to reduce violence and keep people safe – be that through competition, cooperation, or something entirely different. Punishing shitty individuals is an inefficient waste of time and resources that serves no purpose beyond mild catharsis for the most authoritarian individuals; abolishing systems that encourage shitty behavior, however, is a practical, scalable solution to violence and exploitation.

I do not know what specific systems such a society will have, all I can speak to is the general effect of abolition. This isn't so much a "non-answer" as it is a recognition of our general inability to predict the future. Nobody has *any clue* what the future holds beyond vague predictions and informed speculation. Yes, we *could* spend hours upon hours solving every single problem with the ethno supremacist police states we all live under, but to what end? A manifesto that'll age like spoiled milk? From personal experience, I can assure you it's a waste of time.

When you see this fallacy in action, know that it usually comes from deeply internalized authoritarianism, a lack of self-awareness, and an excessive faith in one's ability to predict the future. The best way to respond to this is to maintain control of the conversation:

- If victims aren't mentioned, bring them up

- If you're getting asked most of the questions, ask what their solution would be

- If "institutionalizing the mentally ill for their own good" is brought up by the other person, block them, they don't deserve your time

- Never be afraid to admit when you don't know something

This is only a short list of general tips for getting around the supervillain fallacy. By no means do I think it's universally applicable. No two conversations will be identical, but I hope my main point is clear: humility isn't a sign of weakness or ignorance and nobody has the solution to every problem. Rather than plan a predictable utopia, abolitionists should explore the possibilities of a spontaneous, imperfect future. To borrow a tweet from @LibertyCap1312:

> "Too many anarchists are committed to showing they can create a perfect utopia with no social problems. I think bullet biting is a lot more compelling: bad things will happen in a free society. We just think authority amplifies those things, rather than countervailing them."

Spooky
Deconstructing the Supervillain Fallacy
July 27th, 2021

c4ss.org