



Brutalism: The Next ‘Liberal’ Narrative of the 21st Century

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Abstract

Brutalism, a theoretical concept originally linked with architectural issues, can also be seen as having a political economy rendition. This article approaches the concept of brutalism, linking it to the crisis of liberal humanism and the structuration of neoliberal narrative’s extractive practices in the global south. Building on Mbembe’s theorization of brutalism, this article examines our living conditions, regarding various representations and the incremental violence inherent in the political economy. Under brutalism, life and liveability are no longer contingent on a democratic setup. Still, they are instead dictated by the exceptionality invested in the state-capital nexus, splitting the world into liveable and non-liveable zones, underpinned by the deep state’s exclusive, predatory rights. The brutal living conditions in peripheral zones are symptomatic of a quotidian reality that reinforces the notion of incremental violence – a kind of violence that does not come across as threatening or disabling – rather, it is in proportion to one’s absorbing capacity. It further links brutalism to the rapacious and self-serving nature of corporatism, identifying it as neofascism since the notions of freedom and security are constantly punctured.

Keywords: Brutalism, neoliberalism, global south, abstract violence, incremental violence

Introduction

Brutalism, a theoretical concept originally linked with architectural issues, can also be seen as having a political economy rendition. It stems from the idea that architecture is essentially a narrative that shapes our spaces of living; hence, the conditions, particularly the hegemonic and coercive ones, that define and control our living also need to be examined, debated, and dismantled. In other words, how do we think of our living spaces in the face of extractive regimes of power, operating both at the ontological and epistemological levels, linked as they are to different mutations of political economy? As Achille Mbembe asserts, “it is at the point of juncture of materials, the immaterial, and corporeality that we ought to locate brutalism.” (Mbembe, 2024, p. xi) While Mbembe restricts the theoretical purchase of brutalism to the categories of politics and architecture, I extend this argument by also

including the economy. After all, political economy includes the fundamental categories of labour, value, and commodity – tied intrinsically to what Tabish Khair suggests as the “push-in” (Khair, 2016 p.6.) factors of capitalism. In neoliberal times, the notion of “push-in” violence has become a perpetual reality. What makes the legitimization and institutionalization of such abstract forms of violence is the fact that this kind of violence does not appear to be acts of violence in the first place. Pointing to this abstract violence, Khair argues that such acts, “often do not even come across to us as violence per se” (p.6.)

This is essentially a conduit to brutality. What I want to wager in this article is that humanity is at the crossroads of decimation and structuration. How do we respond to the quotidian practices of fissures in forms of our social assets that keep becoming more fragile? The theoretical provenance of brutality is vital to understand as it makes us see such new methodologies of power and violence in our present times. “At the core of these questions”, Mbembe suggests, “are transformations of the human body and, more generally, the future of 'populations' and the technological mutation of species, human or otherwise.” (p. xii) The technological mutations will be discussed in some other article. The concern here mostly pivots around the threads of collapsology in our forms of living. The sort of collapsology rendered by neoliberalism, unleashing “new way[s] of being in the world, where the master is often invisible, and corporeal harm is replaced by slow violence of overwork, job insecurity, and compromised rules. Such is the intense precariousness of this regime that risk-prone life is embedded within the work and living spaces (Dwivedi, 2023, p. 34).

Brutalism: The Next Liberal Narrative of the 21st Century

At the end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama pronounced, “what we may be witnessing [is] the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government?” (Fukuyama, 1989, p.3) What was predicted as the acme of civilizational development has instead turned into a perennial catastrophe for humanity—even the planet we inhabit.

Liberalism—and liberal narratives— have failed. It has ‘become more fully itself.’ A political philosophy, emboldened by globalization, that was aimed at reforming the world order, investing more autonomy in individual rights, and promoting human dignity and liberty, has slowly morphed into a kind of neo-fascist ideology, eventually exacerbating human conditions in the name of giving more choices and freedom. Let’s say, for example, it is far easier to imagine an alternative world on Mars than to churn out conditions for our habitability on this planet, much in the same way as globalization promises free circulation of goods and capital but restricts the movement of migrants across borders. Liberalism’s virtues have died essentially because these have been hijacked by the core principle of wealth generation under the guise of choices and freedom. In other words, freedom of individuals has been replaced by an unchecked freedom of the market, thus treating citizens as consumers and states as collaborators.

In 2013, Stephen M. Walt, the Harvard Professor put this phenomenon very starkly. He asked, “Are you a liberal imperialist? [Who] are like kinder, gentler neoconservatives: like neocons, they believe it’s America’s responsibility to right political and humanitarian wrongs around the world, and they’re comfortable with the idea of the United States deciding who will run countries such as Libya, Syria, or Afghanistan.” (Dabashi, 2024, online) Evidently, Pankaj

Mishra avers, “Uncontrolled liberalism, in other words, prepares the grounds for its own demise”. (Mishra in interview with Wade, 2018. Online) In the same scathing tone, Debjani Ganguly offers a broadside of liberalism’s Janus-faced progressive nature, contending that, “These constitute the definitive features of what I call “deathworlds” of our contemporary era. The liberal romance with the idea of sovereignty, of both the state and the individual, as the right to life, liberty, and equality before the law, is here transformed into the right to kill, to spread death.” (Ganguly, 2016. p. 9 – 10)

What the world essentially needs is, therefore, liberation from the distorted ideology of liberalism itself. Its Janus-faced character has not only been largely exposed but also severely infected. This reminds me of the hilarious joke offered by the Slovenian Philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, in which Yuri Gagarin, the first cosmonaut, on his return from the space visit, was welcomed by Nikita Khrushchev, the general secretary of the Communist Party. Gagarin told him confidentially: ‘You know, comrade, that up there in the sky, I saw heaven with God and angels — Christianity is right!’ Khrushchev whispers back to him: ‘I know, I know, but keep quiet, don’t tell this to anyone!’ Next week, Gagarin visited the Vatican where he met the Pope, to whom he reveals: ‘You know, holy father, I was up there in the sky and I saw there is no God or angels ...’ ‘I know, I know,’ interrupts the pope, ‘but keep quiet, don’t tell this to anyone!’

The joke essentially sums up the self-contradiction ingrained within liberalism. As suggested, the liberal idea of the market offers a plethora of options for us. For example, anyone suffering from cancer has an abundance of choices for treatment (if time allows), only to realize later that all such choices are primarily tied to one’s purchasing ability. No wonder, the Christian Prosperity Church in the USA preaches that faith and financial seeds (donations to the Church or leaders) can lead to God’s blessings, including financial prosperity and physical healing, which reinforces the notion that if you are rich, then God is happy with you. The concomitant vulnerability and loss of public infrastructure are thus a *fait accompli* of our liberal narrative that governs the perception of the world order. That said, the liberal market categorically prioritizes a form of meritocracy that has its moorings in a robust economic system. The nexus is such that the favours are ephemerally designed for ‘generational succession’ and, therefore, the very notion of civic duties, responsibilities, and democratic ethos has been downplayed by the paradoxicality of liberalism.

What W.B. Yeats said more than a century ago, ‘the Centre cannot hold/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world’, still gains relevance for our liberal narratives within the liberal order. It won’t be wrong to claim that the centrality of social order has given way to the centrality of the market principle. Life is available only to the extent that one is able to pay for it, to consume for its necessities, and to sanctify the market demands. It is largely for such reasons that liberalism is often termed as an incubator for authoritarianism. The marriage between liberalism and human dignity was always already doomed to failure. The immunity granted to global market forces is such that it tends to extract even from the remaining life available to many in the global South. Seen this way, the disorganization of life and life forms is the organizing principle of liberalism, which I prefer to term ‘brutalism.’

The pivotal principle of brutalism, aided and abetted by liberalism’s leitmotif, lies in the explicit claims of redistribution of wealth with no motifs to overthrow or demolish oppressive modes of labour and state-capital nexus. The promises of well-being are immense, but the intentions and actions are already predetermined and controlled by the exigencies of the market: ‘Sorry to be such a slave to petty-bourgeois respectability, but would you mind actually wearing some clothes during the degree ceremony?’ (Eagleton, 2024, p.55) Such has been its perpetual pathology that the unequal and unjust system is replaced not by coercive measures or violent

methodologies, but 'with the population's full acquiescence, premised on the ongoing delivery of increasing material prosperity along with the theoretical possibility of class mobility.'

Under brutality, life and liveability are no longer contingent on a democratic setup. Still, they are instead dictated by the exceptionality invested in the state-capital nexus, splitting the world into liveable and non-liveable zones, underpinned as it is by the deep state's exclusive predatory rights. The brutal living conditions in peripheral zones are symptomatic of a quotidian reality that reinforces the notion of incremental violence – a kind of violence that does not come across as threatening or disabling – rather it is in proportion to one's absorbing capacity. The irony, nonetheless, lies in the fact that this absorption has no limits. The limitless choices rendered by liberalism demand limitless consumption and a 24*7 work culture. In so doing, brutality divorces normativity from worldmaking processes. Evidently, the post-1990 world has witnessed a significant decline in unions in workplaces. In the absence of unions, there are no rights; what prevails and dominates is the untenable sense of duty. Such a system then warrants the unchecked surveillance of human lives, even intervening in personal spaces, thus undermining all notions of human dignity and freedom.

So, while the crude realities of globalization keep accentuating by way of its virtue-signalling gesture and the subsequent beatific visage, it is equally vital to understand the methodologies of brutality that undergird liberalism and the global market. In the same way, global economic rules are mostly maintained and governed by the West, while the battle against brutality is fought at local levels, with little impact. Despite the extent of the damage already caused, the untenable puerilism of our powerful echelons is such that it continues to believe that liberalism 'must be more liberal than ever before, it must even be radical, if civilization is to escape the typhoon.'

Pitted against this ongoing war of survival and future habitability are the pressing issues of survival and futurism. In light of the marginalization and cancellation of life, Judith Butler underlines that beings are mostly devoid of a 'right to life' by virtue of their aliveness since life and its forms are seen as resources by extractive forces. This embodiment of pervasive cruelty and everyday precarity defines the core of brutality, which functions 'without external limits.' No wonder, the iterations of the apocalypse are already a living reality in the global South, and "self-determinism" is not just precarious but also a mirage. Brutality is linked to the ideation and rendition of 'collapsology', evidently found in abundance in the global South. The discourse of collapsology ensures that the global South's future is pulverized and pushed to the margins of a circle that keeps moving without reaching its destination. Or to put it differently, the future and life in the global South are ontologically denied protection, since both are conditioned and shaped by extractive regimes of brutality that systematically obliterate the exit door for many of us.

It is not surprising that one witnesses in the global South an acute degree of emergency that is routinely normalized, symptomatic as it is of the brutal life conditions. In fact, one is reminded of a passage in Shakespeare's *King Lear* – "What wouldst thou do, old man? Think'st thou that duty shall dread to speak, When power to flattery bows?" Brutality, the next liberal narrative of the 21st century, has already ensured that democratic institutions bow to marketing principles.

Corporatism and Brutalism

As one can see, the enemy is within —and invisible. One can see it as a culture of corporatism where society is facing an endless war against brutal forces. The rapacious and self-serving nature of corporatism is tantamount to neofascism, as the notions of freedom and security are constantly punctured. The radical growth of corporatism is, of course, linked to neoliberal ideology as Pankaj Mishra suggests that it is driven by “a culture of aggressive selfishness, envy, rancour and animosity, which eventually exhausts and corrodes its participants from within” (Mishra and Sethi, 2015, n.p.).

We live in times where politics and economy are entangled, and it is very much evident in the way democracy itself has been commodified and monetized. How else do we justify the rise of oligarchs in democratic processes? For example, the year 2024 was termed a “global election super cycle,” as over 70 countries held general or national elections. While the outcomes varied, what emerged as the defining feature of the elections was an accentuated form of demagoguery and corporatism. Efficiency, productivity, optimization, trade wars, and climate denialism – all for the sake of a select few – continue to be celebrated and institutionalized.

In economic parlance, Elon Musk emerges as a private limited government libertarian, who invariably recommends a reduction in government spending, hiking the H-1B visa fee, and suggesting an annual fee on it so that hiring foreign workers becomes more complex and taxing, while also repealing such regulations that hinder the growth and expansion of his empire. Precisely, why such an illness is termed brutality is that it’s a war of a handful of people against all, just like a single virus can spread and peril the health and existence of so many of us. The illness that I define as brutality is contingent upon the positivity of growth and necessity of exclusion, promoting the template of incremental violence and ensuring the societies are punctured from all sides, thus rendering the familiar faces and places unnervingly unfamiliar. It narrativizes a global contest for self-sustenance while reaping the unchecked growth of a few select bellies, therefore, ensuring that the lord of this planet remains a handful of messiahs without empathy.

Apparently, the cult of messianism, stoked with the collapse of social assets and demarcated racial identities, is the new norm of liberal narrative and our neoliberal age politics. A disabled and deformed democracy surviving on the crutches of corporatism is the signature style of brutality, an ideology that energizes the extractive regime of the deep-state. Pointing to this fact, Fraser avers, “the drive to devour public power and butcher democracy, which is built into the system's signature division between economy and polity” (Fraser, 2022, p.26.) In the functioning of brutality, the moral high ground is not just debunked but conveniently replaced by the normalizing practices of social erosions that happen around us in our quotidian lives. All responsibilities and agency are vested in the public to take care of themselves, their present, and their future. The individual’s capaciousness is eulogized so that the state-capital duo can capture the entire social system, putting them into service for a handful of elites.

The coalescing of neoliberal ideology into brutality should not be seen as a shock. When human lives and social assets are seen through the lens of statistics and resources, when the biosphere is being sacrificed for the “technosphere”, or, for that matter, when the Earth’s present habitability is exacerbated to find life on another planet, this brutal manifestation of democracy was always a lurking presence. The narrative of brutality is the narrative of each breath being monetized and commodified. We have reached that stage where corporatism has been infused into the democratic ethos. No wonder the most trusted aides of the world’s most powerful

politicians can critique “globalism” while choosing to be silent on the benefits he continues to generate through his global corporate setup. Globalism is not only selective but also exclusive rights of the powerful echelons.

Indeed, it is a paradox. For a nation like America, the most globalized country in the world and the largest beneficiary of global labour and global capital, its President can hijack and distort the very meaning of what it means to be global. How else does one see his orders against Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programmes? The selective amnesia about the multicultural diversity of America and the sacrifices of people coming from outside and yet contributing to building America smacks of an acute level of exceptionality. Likewise, we currently witness a similar iteration of globalism. In his desperation to provide impunity to Musk’s X, he has warned European governments of severe actions if they try to regulate or disseminate information that does not reflect American values.

Following Achille Mbembe’s work on “brutalism” (2024), I define it as an ideology that blurs the distinction between democracy and autocracy, where fascism is ingrained within the codes of corporatism, and where life forms and social assets are surrendered to the highest bidder. Brutalism has thus provided us with a world in which states only align with profit-seeking financial actors, who are constantly evaluating worldmaking with statistical data or data-driven metrics—a jargon.

It is also an ideology that divorces empathy while pretending that the same is available to the whole of humanity. It is indeed a farce that one can fire thousands of people at one go, jeopardize the planet, and digitize humans, while still imposing as the saviour of the world, singing the song of humanity, exactly, what Elon Musk asserted in one of his latest podcast interviews. “The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy, the empathy exploit,” Musk said. “There it’s they’re exploiting a bug in Western civilization, which is the empathy response.”

That is why one can claim that the neoliberal narratives to that brutal stage where states are converted into companies and companies are converting into states. Entrepreneurs are the new visionaries in such a setup; they are both heroes and convicts driving the mission of colonizing life on this planet. Today’s politicians echo almost the same when they praise curtailment management like the American DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) initiative to reduce the cost involved in running the government, “He’s a leader. He really is; he gets it done.” Essentially, this sums up the ideology of brutality. Driven by the rhetoric of profit and hyper-nationalism, the idea of states as the organizing principle of life and human dignity is no longer viable since humans are being treated as ‘wasted lives’ to protect and promote the interests of the state-corporate nexus. Therefore, it should not shock us to see Trump mulling over the possibility of imposing the wartime Alien Enemies Act of 1798 to ensure mass deportation of migrants who have been living in America for years now. It is another matter that they could not get recognized by the nation that boasts to be the epitome of human mercy.

As advocates of entrepreneurship, authoritarian freedom is prioritized over social relations, thus ensuring that the notion of common safety and collective futures are locked within a limited network. The sheer magnitude of unchecked savagery of brutality is brilliantly captured by Tabish Khair in his latest novel, *The Body By the Shore*: “[O]nly massive destruction carries so much money. Only millions of deaths interest governments and corporations”. (Khair, 2022) In a world shaped by a balance sheet of profit and exclusion, it takes little common sense to understand that vulnerability is central to the gaze of brutality. Exactly, why it can be argued that brutality is an advanced form of imperialism, a new norm in international relations through which bigger players can control and dictate smaller countries.

What is needed at this critical juncture is the pedagogical inventiveness of democracy. The transactional nature of democracy is never going to be a sustainable option. How do we renew this weak tie between social relations and brutal rendition of democracy? This question should be at the centre of our discussions, provided we are willing to engage with it.

From Abstract Violence to Incremental Violence: Pathway to Brutalism

The exacerbation of uncertainty and accentuated forms of vulnerability have only heightened in recent years. The age of neoliberalism has turned its gaze from providing means for survival to generating more lifetime and resources for a handful of echelons. That is to say, collapsology has become an ingrained feature of our society across the world, more so, however, in the global south. Seen this way, brutality has become a permanent template of humanity. The neoliberal history of the so-called global and progressive human world is a history prettified by the loot and plundering of resources and human lives by a handful of echelons, who are not essentially to be bracketed as Whites. They exist in all colours and communities. It can be claimed that this selective history and the subsequent form of template of lives without rights subscribed for the masses is an affordable luxury of cancel cultures and dehumanizing projects. Hence, the large number of such nowhere people are brutally cramped at every step, thus charting out their fragmented lives.

The cherry-picked fairy tales of development and globalization have a brutal face, which gets airbrushed as essential crusades for the sake of humanity. As the American Bar Association exposes, “The government separated more than 2000 children from their parents at the border during the period of mid-April to June” in 2018 (American Bar Association, Online). With another 11 million people set to be deported by the US to their places of origin, one could witness a virulent brand of xenophobia. The same holds true for Sweden where immigrants and asylum seekers are facing the wrath of xenophobic policies. Even in Bangladesh, select minorities are denied rights, thus pushing them to the margins of life. Likewise, the conflict in Myanmar, sparked by a military coup in 2024, “has resulted in thousands of civilian deaths, the arrests of tens of thousands of people, and the displacement of 2.7 million others.” More than 10 lakh people have died so far in the ongoing war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

Extending Mbembe’s arguments by focusing more on ideological underpinnings marks a shift from abstract violence to incremental violence. It needs to be pointed out, for the purpose of clarity, that abstract violence is mostly invisible. For example, the acute level of pollution we are all subjected to in the global south, the extreme work conditions, and the everyday structuration of invisible borders by georegimes and capitalist forces. The transformation of abstract violence to incremental violence is the operative code of brutality. Brutalism emanates incremental violence, as will be shown later in this article, to the extent that one can no longer cope with it. And all this is done by euologizing the notions of value, progression, and positivity, a point brilliantly advanced by Byung-Chul Han, “the neuronal illnesses of the twenty-first century follow a dialectic: not the dialectic of negativity, but that of positivity. They are pathological conditions deriving from an *excess of positivity*” (Han, 2015, p. 12). Apparently, the excess of positivity undergirds the blueprint of neoliberal regimes. By presenting everything, including humans, in terms of value and commodity, life and our planet are rendered precarious. One can argue, “for many regions

of the South, having to re-create the living from unliveable is already a centuries-long condition", (Yusoff, 2019), but what needs to be asserted here is the fact that such practices have become invisibly institutionalized, thus throwing a chunk of the global south into a perpetual state of vulnerability. Perhaps, what one also fails to grasp is that harm is not always linked to negativity, but also to positivity, which is why the idea of incremental violence is so central to brutality. The forms and practices of violence are always in a battle against humanity and the planet we all inhabit, and yet such practices go unrecorded and unaccounted. Ian Baucom presents this transformation very forcefully:

Entangled with the screen, entangled with nonhuman biotic forms of life, entangled with data, entangled with surging oceans, entangled with equity bundles, entangled with the geological, entangled with algorithms, entangled with gene-coding, entangled with sun flares, entangled with derivatives – the human in the epoch of the contemporary . . . can no longer be imagined to hold its humanist core" (Baucom 2020, 26).

The accentuation and normalization of risks are linked to the practices of incremental violence. As the expanse of capital continues its unchecked villainy of extractive regimes, in the same way, humans and global south spaces are subjected to newer forms of incremental violence. We are all caught up in a spiralling wave of incremental violence, and that alone should sum up the perilous future of the global south, if there is any future at all. Seen in this context, the practices of incremental violence, inherent as it is to brutality, lead to the structuration and legitimization of life zones and death zones.

Conclusion

It is no wonder that brutality deprives democracy of a whole vocabulary of moral issues, legitimizing a framework for thinking about the accumulation of wealth and decolonizing both the present and the future world. In brutality, democracy becomes subservient to capital, and alien-making is promoted and institutionalized through such storytelling as Musk's. As such, anti-empathy pedagogy is not only subscribed to but also coercively ingrained into the quotidian practices of extraction. To put it simply, brutality paves the way for democracy to be compatible with extraction. At the same time, society and borders are pushed under the gaze of financialization, thus converting democracy into a casino where all our belongingness can be snatched away at one stroke. Such a brutal rendition of democracy ensures that the capitalistic existence becomes the norm of social existence across nations, including the planetary resources that can be sacrificed for the sake of unchecked growth of a select few. It, therefore, does not come as a sacrifice to see such parasitic practices illegalizing societal norms of collective wellness while also illegalizing other people and cultures. Benjamin Constant was so right when he prefigured that "there is no limit to tyranny when it seeks to obtain the signs of consensus." The nub of the matter in brutality of this sort is that such apertures of consensus are no longer required by the states as the gaze of tyranny has been reversed in a way that Musk can dare to morph democracy into autocracy, "I think it's a false dichotomy to look at government and sort of industry as separate.. government is... the ultimate corporation." (Farooq, 2025, Online)

Our commitment to freedom, future generations, and the future of this planet is contingent upon organizing and nourishing institutions on which our collective existence depends. That is

why such narratives of anti-empathy need to be countered from all sides. For, stories are not just assemblages of words, but these are also investments in our emotions, our empathy, and the way we build our common world. It is not to be mistaken simply as an act of telling but also listening. So, when one tells the story of the banality of empathy, it implies that the gaze is within oneself (self-inverted), and that the listening is restricted to the echo chambers of self-accumulation and expansion. On the other hand, listening demands a commitment to caring about the other and feeling *into* the other. It is an art of humanity that demands engagement, and once engaged, requires nourishment and maintenance. Even the most melodious of song cannot be enjoyed if one doesn't harness the listening abilities.

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