

## PREFACE

I have borrowed the concept of brutalism from architectural thought, though in my view, the category is an eminently political one. How could it be otherwise, for there is in architecture an element that is political from the outset—the politics of materials, inert or otherwise, that are sometimes presumed to be indestructible. Conversely, what is politics if not a capture performed on elements of all orders, to which one strives to give a form, if needed through the use of force, an exercise in torsion and restructuring if ever there was one?

Second, architecture is political insofar as it inevitably sets into motion a tension, or, as it were, a redistribution of the force factor between acts of demolition and acts of construction, often from what one might call building blocks. Politics is, in turn, an instrumented practice, a work of assembling and organizing, forming and redistributing, including spatially, of living bodily—but for the most part immaterial—ensembles. Indeed, it is at the point of juncture of materials, the immaterial, and corporeality that we ought to locate brutalism.

Situated at the point of articulation between materials, corporeality, and the immaterial, architecture and politics are not only part of the world of symbols and language. They are also constitutive of the technical world, the world of objects and bodies, and above all, of divisions (*découpages*), of that which must be cut into or out, weakened and molded, forged and erected, in short, verticalized and thereby set going. Their point of intervention is the material zone as a region of the living, this incandescent crossroads of intensities whose raw materiality, in the figure of fire, concrete, lead, or steel, is the fillip that immediately dismisses the old oppositions

between, on the one hand, a world of the spirit and the soul and, on the other hand, a world of objects. It is this raw material that is subjected to the metamorphic processes of forcing and crushing, ransacking, incision, dissection, and if necessary, mutilation.

Architecture and politics thus concern the orderly arranging of materials and bodies. They deal in quantities, volumes, expanses, and measures as well as in distributing and modulating force and energy. One of brutalism's concrete traces is the erection of the vertical into a privileged position, whether this case is carried out on bodies or on materials. But architecture and politics are mostly about working with, against, on, over, and through elements.

In this book, I invoke the notion of brutalism to describe an age gripped by the planetary-scale pathos of demolition and production of stocks of darkness, in addition to all sorts of waste, leftovers, traces of a gigantic demiurgy. It is not a matter of writing the sociology or political economy of brutalization, and even less so of outlining a historical picture of it. Nor is it a matter of looking into the violence, or forms of cruelty and sadism, in general, that tyranny has produced. Making use of the extraordinary wealth of already available socio-ethnographic material (to which I shall refer liberally in the reference notes), the objective is to make *cross sections*, thus enabling a *fresco* to be painted, so that questions can be raised differently and, above all, to say a word on what is specific to this age, which has been given many names, and in which three central lines of questioning dominate: calculation in its computational form; the economy in its neurobiological form; and the living beset by a process of carbonization.

At the core of these questions are transformations of the human body and, more generally, the future of "populations" and the technological mutation of species, human or otherwise. Yet the harm and injuries that these shifts cause are not accidental or simply collateral damage. If, in fact, humanity has been transformed into a geological force, then we cannot speak of history as such. All history, including the history of power, is now, by definition, geo-history. By brutalism, I thus refer to the process through which power as a geomorphic force is constituted, expressed, reconfigured, and reproduced through acts of *fracturing* and *fissuring*. I also have in mind the molecular and chemical dimension of this process. Is toxicity, or the multiplication of chemical substances and dangerous waste, not a structural dimension of the present? These substances and types of waste (including

electronic waste) attack not only nature and the environment (air, soils, water, food chains) but also bodies that are thereby exposed to lead, phosphorous, mercury, beryllium, liquid refrigerants.

By means of these political techniques of fracturing and fissuring, power is re-creating not only the human but the species. The matter to which it endeavors to give form (anew) to, or to transform into new species, is treated similarly to that which one utilizes when attacking rocks and schists, dynamiting them for the purposes of gas and energy extraction. Thus seen, contemporary powers more than ever have the function of making extraction possible. For this to occur, an intensification of repression is required. Part of it involves boring bodies and minds. The law—as the state of exception becomes the norm and the state of emergency, permanent—is being maximally used to multiply states of lawlessness and to dismantle all forms of resistance.

We ought to add to the logics of fracturing and fissuring those of exhaustion and depletion. Once again, fracturing, fissuring, and depletion concern not only resources but also living bodies that are exposed to physical exhaustion and to all sorts of sometimes invisible biological risks (acute poisoning, cancers, congenital anomalies, neurological disturbances, hormonal disruptions). The living in its entirety is, reduced to a layer and a surface, undergoing seismic threats. The reflections that follow aim precisely at this dialectic of demolition and “destructive creation,” insofar as it targets human bodies, nerves, blood, and brains, just as it does the entrails of time and the Earth. Brutalism is the name given to this gigantic process of eviction and evacuation as well as to the draining of vessels and emptying of organic substances.

Through this name (brutalism), the effort is to provide what might be called a thought-image. The aim is to paint the contours of a primordial (matrix) scene, or at least a backdrop against which a myriad of situations, histories, and actors stand out. Yet regardless of these differences, and beyond particular identities, fracturing, and fissuring, processes of draining and depletion obey the same master code: the universalization of the black condition, the becoming-black of a very large swathe of humanity—a humanity that henceforth faces excessive losses and a profound syndrome of exhaustion of its organic capacities.

This question of reserves of darkness and, consequently, of figures of time and power has haunted me since at least the last quarter of the

twentieth century. In my thinking, it has always been bound up with the question of what we have become, what we might have been able to accomplish, and what we might have been—whether Africa, the planet, humanity, or the living, more generally. Far from yielding to melancholy, it is a matter of laying the foundations for a critique of the relationship between memory, potentiality, and *futurity*.

The issue has been to understand why all that which circulates, all that which goes by, beginning with time's passing, remains the ultimate stake for all power. All power indeed dreams, if not to make itself time, at least to annex it and colonize its intrinsic properties. In its abstraction, is the specificity of time not its being inexhaustible, objectively incalculable and, above all, inappropriable? Further still, it is indestructible. It is perhaps this last property—indestructibility—that fascinates power in the last instance. This is why all power, in its essence, aspires to make itself time or, at least, to ingest its qualities. At the same time, power is, from beginning to end, a technique of instrumentation and construction. It needs putty, concrete, cement, mortar, beams or girders, stones to crush, lead, steel—and bodies made of bones, flesh, blood, muscles, and nerves. Demolition is truly a gigantic task.

These practices of demolition, breaking, stone throwing, ransacking, and crushing lie at the core of brutality in its political meaning. They are not the exact equivalents of devoration, autophagy, or cannibalism (regardless of the definition given to these terms) that are habitually located in ancient or primitive societies. Driven simultaneously by old machines and by the most advanced computational technologies, they are profoundly futurist and have come to bear a singular weight on the Earth's future. They have a geological, molecular, and neurological dimension.

I became aware of this as I was writing the present book: some of my reflections over the last quarter of the twentieth century have focused on the practice and experience of power as an exercise in the demolition of beings, things, dreams, and life in the modern African context. I was struck by the amount of energy devoted, especially at the bottom of the social ladder, to interminable acts of patching up, or even repairing of that which has been broken, or simply engulfed by rust, left in a state of prolonged abandonment.

It slowly dawned on me that many practices of demolition had nothing accidental about them. In many cases, we were coming up against modes

of regulating living things that functioned by increasing the number of apparently intolerable situations, sometimes absurd and inextricable, often unbearable. This was because such contexts were ruled by the law of impossibility and demolition. As my work became subject to multiple reappropriations in various contexts, what at first appeared to me as a feature of what I was calling the postcolony began to lose its singularity. I understood that this plot had a scope far broader than the African continent. The latter was, in truth, only a laboratory of mutations of a planetary order. Since then, I, along with others, have set down to work on this planetary turn of the African predicate and its counterpart, the African future of the world.

The age truly is one of the forge and the hammer, ember and anvil, the blacksmith being perhaps the last avatar of the great historical subjects. A vast enterprise of occupying territories, of seizing hold of bodies and imaginaries, and of disassembly, unlinking, and demolition is underway. It is leading, pretty much everywhere, to “states of emergency” or “exception” that are expeditiously extended and made permanent. Contemporary modalities of demolition are crystallizing, profoundly putting into question the classic dichotomies form/matter, matter/materials, material/immaterial, natural/artificial, and end/means. A logic of permutations, convergences, and multiple conversions has replaced that of oppositions. Matter is no longer fundamentally available and docile. It is there only as co-constituted on the basis of a heterogeneity of matrixes and connections.

A change of age is unquestionably underway, as well as a change of condition engendered through transformations to the biosphere and technosphere. This process, unprecedented in the shocks it is triggering, is planetary. Its goal is to precipitate the mutation of the human species and accelerate its transition to a new condition, at once plastic and synthetic, and consequently also pliable and extensible. To arrange the transition toward a new earthly dispensation (a new *nomos* of the Earth), society must indeed be abolished, or at least sculpted and eventually replaced by a nanoworld whose devices are cellular, neuronal, and computational. As a world of plastic tissues and synthetic blood, it will be peopled with half-natural, half-artificial bodies and entities. In a final gesture of hybridization of matter and mind, the human must then be repatriated to the junction point of the material, the immaterial, and the incorporeal, as it

effaces, once and for all, the trace of clay that has been inscribed on humanity's forehead and face ever since the Earth welcomed it on its surface and in its entrails.

Brutalism's ultimate project is to transform humanity into matter and energy. The focal point of the book bears singularly on the monumentality of this project. The undertaking is vast, since it is not only the architecture of the world that must be remodeled but the tissue of the living itself and its diverse membranes. It is clear, then, that the reflections contained in this book essentially make up a long argument for a new planetary consciousness and the refounding of a community of humans in solidarity with the living in its entirety. Without a struggle, no belonging to a common soil, tangible, palpable, and visible, will occur. But, as Frantz Fanon sensed, authentic struggle is, in its primacy, a matter of reparation, beginning with the repairing of that which has been broken.