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Recent highlights from the Ideas blog; Batman, supersized

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An Italian artist, Francesco de Molfetta, has taken it upon himself to reimagine some American pop culture icons, including Batman and Barbie: In de Molfetta's alternate universe, that dynamic duo in particular have let themselves go - to the point where they could qualify as contestants on ``The Biggest Loser.''

To nudge America's self-presentation a shade closer to reality, at least as he perceives it, de Molfetta sculpted a Batman who has ballooned in his rubber suit. (He grimly downs a quadruple-scoop ice cream.) And could an hourglass Barbie really maintain her figure amid American fast food? De Molfetto thinks not, and the artistic outcome is even more unnerving: She gorges her bloated form while naked. De Molfetta's work is on display at the Don Gallery, in Milan.

Women used to have it better?

David Boaz, executive vice president of the **Cato Institute**, argued this month in Reason magazine that libertarians ought to stop making the claim that Americans have seen nothing but an erosion of freedom since the Founding (or, alternatively, since the late 1800s). Such claims, Boaz says, presume that the speaker and his audience share the perspective of white male property owners. Boaz writes:

For the past 70 years or so conservatives have opposed the demands for equal respect and equal rights by Jews, blacks, women, and gay people. Libertarians have not opposed those appeals for freedom, but too often we (or our forebears) paid too little attention to them. And one of the ways we do that is by saying ``Americans used to be free, but now we're not'' - which is a historical argument that doesn't ring true to an awful lot of Jewish, black, female, and gay Americans.

But it's not just a strategic mistake. It's a mistake. Whether we were more free at some point in the past than we are now is a complicated issue.

Boaz writes that none other than future Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas made the same point in a speech at Cato back when he was head of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Until then, Cato's brochures had routinely included the line: ``Since the [American] revolution, civil and economic liberties have been eroded.''

Boaz's piece has inspired a number of responses, but Bryan Caplan, an economist at George Mason University, had perhaps the most unusual. He granted that slavery and Jim Crow cast shadows on golden-age claims but rejected similar arguments in the case of women.

Yes, Caplan says, Gilded Age women were typically not granted independent property rights after they married (because of so-called coverture laws), but marriage was, after all, voluntary. And in theory, and occasionally in practice, enterprising women could demand pre-nuptual contracts that gave them independent property rights. What about voting? For libertarians, he writes, ``voting is at most instrumentally valuable'' - useful if it protects other freedoms. Among other contentious suggestions, Caplan suggests that wives would have been able to protect their property rights through informal, intrafamilial methods - just as most wives today have access to their husband's earnings (and vice versa) although there is no law requiring this. Caplan concludes:

I know that my qualified defense of coverture isn't going to make libertarians more popular with modern audiences. Still, truth comes first. Women of the Gilded Age were very poor compared to women today. But from a libertarian standpoint, they were freer than they are on ``Sex and the City.''

They gained the vote, but also higher taxes and a welfare state. That makes for a net loss of freedom, according to Caplan's calculus.

Use heuristics to shed unwanted pounds

Is willpower failing you in your efforts to get in shape? Wray Herbert, a columnist for True/Slant, suggests harnessing some cognitive quirks that scientists have identified in recent years to shake you out of regretful behavioral patterns. These cognitive quirks usually work against us, but they can also be, Herbert argues, forces for change.

Consider the ``scarcity heuristic,'' which causes humans to place great value on things that are rare. When Herbert, for example, finds himself dogging it during his semiweekly spin class, itching to leave, he will aggressively remind himself that these are the only 45 minutes he's going to have that day to be active before settling into a muscle-atrophying cubicle. Highlighting the scarcity of the opportunity flips a switch, and the mind starts to value what it once despised.

Likewise, the ``default heuristic'' - or the cling-to-the-status-quo impulse - can be inverted into a recipe for action. At another moment of weakness, when his workout routine was falling by the wayside through inertia, Herbert vowed to make merely showing up at the gym part of his ritual. He'd schlep there in sweats and place zero pressure on himself to actually do anything. But once there, he found himself doing stuff, if only to kill time. In other words, he rewired the default. Herbert is collecting such insights for a forthcoming book, titled ``On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind's Hard-Wired Habits.''

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