

**Doing What Comes Unnaturally:
The Gnostic Zombie in Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead***

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I. Pursuing the Millennium, Redux

The defining philosophic problem of modernity is that of the soul that has become closed within itself, and cannot get outside of itself. This closed soul is one that remains confined within the narrow orbit of a static and one-sidedly immanent account of human reality, which denies the very possibility of truths and experiences that transcend the circumscribed limits set by calculability and utility. The leading thinkers of the modern period have evoked in arresting ways the diminished spiritual, political, and historical horizon that afflicts modern man and woman. We may think here of Heidegger's dictum that modern technology constitutes a mode of revealing that alters the way human beings relate to being, so that "everywhere and always" man only encounters himself.¹ For Pierre Manent, modern man is cut off from the experience of conversion -- the postmodern tolerance of all differences is at the same time a flight from their necessarily competing claims of significance, ruling out thereby the possibility of being transformed by a singular difference.² For Hannah Arendt, the crisis of modern politics stems from the waning of authority, which enables men and women to resolve their conflicts without resorting to violence and coercion,³ or, we might add in light of recent events, without putting social peace at the mercy of unsustainable levels of economic growth. José Ortega y Gasset, in *Revolt of the Masses*, provides a scathing portrait of the modern "mass man" who believes that there is no one capable of teaching him anything and who complacently imposes a technicist and materialist ideology on history and society. Such a man, when he reads a book, "does so with the view, not of learning something from the writer, but rather, of pronouncing judgment on him when he is not in agreement with the commonplaces that the said reader carries in his head."⁴

The closed soul, which is the product of the dissolution of the interior forms of hierarchy bequeathed by the Judeo-Christian religion and Greek philosophy, falls easily into the grip of mass opinion. The scholarly work of Eric Voegelin has of course been central in showing how the rule of mass opinion results in the takeover of political life by utopian ideologies, with their most virulent manifestations giving rise to total war and genocide. The historical context addressed by Voegelin's work is the colossal struggle between the rival gnostic ideologies of the revolutionary left and the nationalist right, which then gave way to the prolonged standoff between the Soviet communism and capitalist liberal democracy. It is my contention, however, that his critique of utopian politics remains as timely as ever with respect to the impasses and quandaries into which the industrialized world presently finds itself thrown. If gnosticism, as Voegelin writes in *The New Science of Politics*, represents the "civil theology of Western society," even the collapse of a gnostic ideology like communism would not remove the beliefs, habits, and values that constitute the sources of the utopian derailment. Indeed, as Voegelin observes, "the danger of a sliding from right to left is inherent in the nature" of utopian fantasy, a

¹ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 27.

² Pierre Manent, *Democracy Without Nations? The Fate of Self-Government in Europe*, trans. Paul Seaton (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), p. 8.

³ Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1993).

⁴ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), p. 18.

condition which has left the intellectual mainstream in the West in a “state of intellectual and emotional paralysis,” as its public debates remain “dominated by gnostic clichés.”⁵

The latest guises assumed by Gnosticism in the United States are quite distinct from the familiar emblems and trappings associated with mass ideological movements. It does not proclaim its arrival with the fanfare provided by columns of marching paramilitaries, nor does it attempt to mobilize the whole of the population into an army, whether for the sake of war or work. It does not seek to enforce ideological purity, unless one is running for office, and while it does incarcerate a substantial number of its citizens, it holds back from subjecting to the ardors of reeducation. The contemporary form of utopian political fantasy does not lead to overbearingly invasive policies for the majority, nor is it characterized by a categorical hostility toward the practice of private freedom, as communism and National Socialism were. Rather it seeks to convince the citizen that the economic system is self-correcting, and that extraordinary adjustments to the political and economic status quo are never necessary and always detrimental. Such a creed may seek to inspire its devotees to militant activism, but it would be an activism directed toward a strangely passive end of allowing the economic system to follow its course without any kind of external intervention or constraint, on the grounds that the principles of free market economics will resolve any crisis or overcome any emergency, whether political, social, or environmental. Indeed, what is distinct about neoliberal market fundamentalism is its categorical disregard for what Daniel Bell, and before him, Max Weber, saw as the contradictory nature of capitalism, in which bourgeois society over time casts aside its religious restraints on greed, thereby undermining the basis for its continued prosperity.

Neoliberal ideology does not offer itself as an explicitly political program, as its defining concern is the accumulation of profit. But precisely because it does not concern itself with reorganizing social life along ideological lines, with all the clumsy and often hypocritical coercion such an endeavor entails, the impact of neoliberal capitalism can be more shattering in its consequences and its hold on the citizens more potent than the more conventional and familiar gnostic ideology of its vanquished communist rival. Neoliberal market fundamentalism, according to John Gray, constitutes a misguided and destructive project to reshape social life according to the principle of contracts and the workings of market forces. In adopting the policy of extending the principles of the free market to the basic institutions of society, the Right in the UK and in the United States has unleashed a virulent individualism which uproots community life and the ties of family. The Right no longer reflects the priorities of a traditional conservatism that seeks to conserve cultural traditions and defend the common life against the disruptions caused by hubristic social and economic policies. As Gray observes, “traditional conservatism is no longer a realistic political option when inherited institutions and practices have been swept away by the market forces which neo-liberal policies release or reinforce.”⁶ Instead, neoliberal market fundamentalism reveals the “abject surrender” of conservatism to the spirit of the age, with the “utopia of perpetual growth” taking the place of the myths of the classless society or the master race.⁷

But one must note a crucial difference between neoliberalism and the earlier forms of political Gnosticism. While the demise of Nazism and communism came about from the pursuit of goals that were manifestly impossible to achieve, the upheavals set in motion by market fundamentalism come about from the disintegration of community life and social bonds. The

⁵ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 5: Modernity without Restraint*, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), pp. 232-233.

⁶ John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 131.

⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

sources of disorder are more elusive in neoliberalism than they are in the earlier gnostic ideologies. Because they stem from the dissolution of social bonds and moral restraints, their effects are more erratic and more difficult to gauge. For it is easy for the elites of an affluent consumer society to go on denying the signs of the breakdown of the basic institutions of society until they find themselves caught off-guard by some sudden outburst of violence, as in the case of the riots that have swept several British cities in recent weeks. In the United States, one finds the fear of social collapse accompanied by a pervasive sense of helplessness regarding the capacity of the country to take effective action against its most urgent and pressing problems: persistently high levels of unemployment, widening disparities between rich and poor, the breakdown of the two parent family, the spiraling costs of health care, ballooning budget deficits, climate change, and the depletion of vital resources.

So what does mass man, who has closed himself off from the demands of spiritual authority and come to rely on economic growth to neutralize social antagonism, do when he finds that the political and economic status quo appears incapable of addressing the most vital concerns of the time? How does he respond when he finds himself sandwiched between the breakdown of institutions charged with securing his access to a life of prosperity and abundance on the one hand and the dissipation of the sources of internal order on the other? Confronted by the necessity for radical change but lacking the confidence in society and in himself to take the steps demanded by the future, he is susceptible to becoming entranced by the spectacle of the total collapse of society, which embodies for him the traumatic experience of social transformation that is as inescapable as it is unwilling. For in the absence of a belief in a spiritual order, and with the loss of faith in a future that increasing affluence, all roads to the new world must pass through the Hobbesian state of nature.

II. The State of Undead Nature

The fear that the United States is drifting into catastrophe has manifested itself in the proliferation of literary and cinematic narratives portraying the total collapse of industrial society. While apocalyptic themes have been a staple of science and speculative fiction since the Cold War, what is significant and distinctive about the present historical moment is the extent to which the motif of social collapse has entered into the mainstream of American culture. Hollywood blockbusters such as *The Day After Tomorrow* and *2012* make full use of CGI effects to depict immense natural disasters destroying industrial civilization, while the novels of serious literary authors such as Margaret Atwood, Cormac McCarthy, Jim Crace, James Howard Kunstler, Michael Chabon, and Gary Shteyngart have explored in various ways the themes of the end of the world and the demise of industrial society. But one of the more intriguing shifts in American culture in recent years has been the widespread popularity of zombie narratives in film, television, fiction, and comics. Previously dismissed as a lowbrow genre catering to crude appetites for carnage and gore, the zombie narrative has become mainstream entertainment. For example, the pilot episode of the AMC series *The Walking Dead* drew an audience of over 5 million, the largest number of viewers for any show thus far on that cable channel, including the trendy and critically acclaimed *Mad Men*.

The mindless, undead ghoul that consumes the flesh of human beings lends itself almost too easily as a metaphor about our current economic predicament. The global financial crisis has resulted in the transformation of banks into zombie institutions that have been reduced to minimal functions and are kept going only by infusions of government funds. The slump in which the United States remains mired drives home the weaknesses and limitations of an economy driven by consumption, in which increasing numbers of jobs associated with productive activities have been moved offshore and low wage employment has grown in its place. The zombie, as a creature that engages in a form of low-level, mechanistic consumption

divorced from any kind of productive activity, reflects the fears of a stagnant or contracting economy which has become incapable of the expansion necessary to support widespread prosperity and a social safety net. Steven Shaviro observes that while Marx famously compared the capitalist elites to vampires sucking on the blood of living labor, it is the figure of the zombie that more fittingly embodies the deadlocks of the present phase of capitalism, for “zombies are no longer producing value but excluded from its enjoyment. Instead, they are already-exhausted sources of value, former vessels of creative activity and self-reflexivity that have been entirely consumed and cast aside.”⁸

On the other hand, the onset of the zombie apocalypse also permits an extended thought experiment about the reconstitution of community life under conditions of severe privation and perpetual danger. Indeed, the back cover of the bound editions of the comic *The Walking Dead*, the series on which the AMC series is based, asks its readers to consider how they would live were they deprived of the conveniences and freed from the distractions of modern consumer society, and thus to reflect on what the kind of people they would become when confronted by what Thucydides called “imperious necessities.” Now approaching its 90th issue, the comic is noteworthy for its depictions of a harsh and dangerous world, and its storyline takes on particularly sharp emotional resonances against the pervasive gloom and uncertainty that has overtaken American society since the collapse of the housing bubble and the near-meltdown of the global economy.

The protagonist of the series is the police officer Rick Grimes, who for much of the narrative serves as the leader of a group of survivors that include his wife Lori, his son Carl, former pro football player Tyreese, sharpshooter Andrea, retiree Dale, ex-pizza delivery boy and car thief Glenn, and Michonne, a lawyer in her former life who wields a samurai sword with deadly effect against the undead as well as other humans who threaten them. As in numerous other zombie narratives, a plague of the undead has overwhelmed civilization, bringing about the collapse of the state and the industrial economy. The survivors must contend with the fate of being perpetually exposed to life-threatening dangers and of having to search for food and shelter. They are forced to rely on their wits, resolve, fortitude, and, most crucially, their capacity for cooperation to preserve their lives as well as those of their loved ones. Several of the characters die from losing heart at the loss of their spouses or family members, or find themselves incapable of coping with a new and dangerous world. Others become racked with guilt over the actions they feel obliged to take in order to protect their family and friends. But the most striking characteristic of the comic, written by Robert Kirkman and drawn by Charlie Adlard and Cliff Rathburn, are the unrelievedly grim turns of the narrative, in which major crises turn out to be no-win situations, death overtakes the most sympathetic and well-developed characters, and the protagonist Rick commits violent and morally repugnant actions in the name of protecting his family and friends.

The principal ethical dilemma of *The Walking Dead*, as in many other apocalyptic narratives, has to do with how far one is willing to go in order to preserve one’s own life or lives of those whom one loves. A recurring element in the series involves Rick’s readiness to commit drastic and violent actions for the sake of his family and the group. For example, when the group comes across a federal penitentiary, after having lost various members to zombie attacks during their travels, they are elated at the prospect of turning the prison complex into a sustainable refuge. The penitentiary turns out, however, to be occupied by four convicts, who welcome the group to take up residence in the facility. But harmonious soon becomes impossible when two young girls are found murdered, and the group, panicking singles out an inmate, a tall and muscular African American named Dexter, as the culprit, as he is the only inmate who had admitted to

⁸ Steven Shaviro, “Capitalist Monsters,” *Historical Materialism* 104 (2002), p. 286.

committing a violent crime in having taken the lives of his wife and her lover. Several members of the group lock him up in a cell, only to have the real killer, a lean, bespectacled white man who initially claimed to have been sentenced for committing tax fraud, attempt to take another life. The bitter feelings stemming from the false accusation are not smothered over after the murderer has been punished, as Dexter holds Rick at gunpoint to force him and the others to leave the penitentiary. A sudden attack by the zombies turns everyone's attention elsewhere. Rick initially saves Dexter's life during the fight, but Dexter responds that he has not changed his mind about forcing him and the others to leave. Rick then takes advantage of the zombie assault to shoot Dexter from behind.

The cold-blooded killing that Rick commits severely rattles the other members of the group, even as they reap an inestimable benefit from his action. For they set about making a new home in the penitentiary, protected by its rows of fences and high walls. A farmer named Hershel tills the fields and teaches the others how to plant crops. They welcome newcomers to the group, an African American woman who had been surviving on her own amidst the zombies and a physician's assistant escaping a town ruled by a deranged and sadistic warlord. Two of the younger members of the group, Glenn and Maggie, get married in a ceremony that is both hopeful and moving. Rick's wife, Lori, gives birth to a baby girl. Although the group experiences its share of griefs and quarrels, Kirkman's comic reveals its emotional force most potently in its scenes of ordinary life under extraordinary and monstrous circumstances: a father reprimanding his son while harvesting crops in the humid summer heat alongside a former criminal, a midwife joyfully holding a newborn in her arms, a young woman cursing out her injured older lover for taking unnecessary risks and then collapsing on his chest. These moments take on special poignancy by virtue of being depicted in a horror narrative, under the omnipresent threat of death and the experience of shared sorrow.

III. The Envy of Survival

But the shadow of the initial violence hangs over the lives of the group as well, as they go about throwing themselves into the labors they hope will bring back some semblance of commodious living. Gerry Canavan, in his sharp analysis of the comic, observes that the series reworks violent colonialist fantasies for an era of diminishing economic expectations. The property Rick's group inhabits is expropriated by means of lethal force from one of its residents, evoking the conquest and settlement of the American West. Indeed, the penitentiary itself is drawn in a manner that resembles a "frontier fort," while Rick's young son Carl sports a cowboy hat.⁹ Of course, Rick's group is a racially mixed one, with two African Americans and an Asian American, all of whom are well-rounded characters and not at all token representatives of diversity, and later on Rick and Carl join up with another band of survivors that includes two men in an openly gay relationship. But the element of colonial fantasy, in which an intrepid band of settlers engage in violence against hostile forces to stake out their territorial claims is difficult to overlook. As Canavan observes, "Zombie narratives are ultimately about the motivation for and unleashing of total violence," in which the only alternatives are the destruction of one's own community or the liquidation of the monstrous other.¹⁰ *The Walking Dead*, like *Night of the Living Dead* before it, does however make things more complicated when the most dangerous threat to the protagonists turns out to be another, larger group of survivors.

The search for a crashed helicopter brings Rick and his friends into contact with the residents of the nearby town of Woodbury, which is ruled by a deranged sadist calling himself "the

⁹ Gerry Canavan, "'We Are the Walking Dead': Race, Time, and Survival in Zombie Narrative," *Extrapolation* 51.3 (2010), 442.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Governor.” He stages violent spectacles to take the minds of the townspeople away from the hardships and the despair of their daily lives. The Governor also maintains a stable of captive zombies, which he feeds with the flesh of those outsiders unlucky enough to have ventured near the town. Whereas Rick exemplifies traditional patriarchal values as a devoted husband and father, the Governor exhibits a depraved and vicious sexuality. He repeatedly rapes Michonne after she is captured along with Rick and Glenn by his men. He also keeps a zombie tied up in his apartment, a young girl who he claims used to be his daughter and with whom he has a relationship with sexual overtones. Yet, it is not the case that the Governor oppresses the people of Woodbury, rather, his brutality is directed entirely toward outsiders to the town, underscoring the dark side of the Hobbesian contract that brings unity and security to a given collective. Indeed, towards the residents of the town, he presents a benign and fatherly persona to the residents, who for the most part are willing to overlook his cruel and vicious habits because he and his henchmen have been successful in keeping the undead off the streets.

The two groups of survivors become locked into a zero-sum conflict that rules out any question of peaceful coexistence. The Governor, realizing that the penitentiary is safer than the town, becomes determined to seize it from Rick and his companions, who in turn make preparations to repulse the imminent attack. When the battle finally arrives, it plays out with startling ironies and reversals that evoke a haunting sense of realism. The assault carried out by the people of Woodbury is confused and disorganized, but it turns out to be no less devastating for being undisciplined and poorly executed. Most of the attackers do not know how to fire their weapons properly, and are shocked and horrified when their bullets actually strike down their apparent enemies. But because they are not soldiers and feel themselves frightened and utterly lost on the battlefield, they cling all the more firmly to the inept plans of their crazed leader, eventually inflicting devastating losses on Rick and his friends. By contrast, the decision made by Rick to defend the complex which the group has worked hard to transform into a permanent refuge comes across at the time as reasonable and pragmatic, in light of the ineptness of their attackers and the fact that they possess limited stocks of ammunition. Yet, the outcome of Rick’s decision is utterly devastating, as half the members of the group, including his wife and infant daughter, perish in the firefight. Similarly, Rick objects to a risky mission undertaken by Michonne and Tyreese to sneak behind enemy lines and thin out the ranks of their foes. The fact that they come within a hair’s breadth of success, almost cutting off the head of the beast, underscores the tragically narrow margin between total victory and utter calamity, the best of all outcomes and the fulfillment of the most terrible of nightmares.

Neither group gains from this zero-sum conflict which results only in calamitous losses for both sides. The very fact that Rick and his friends put up determined resistance provokes the Governor into crashing his tank through the ring of fences, which renders the prison useless as a shelter from the undead. All the immense efforts that Rick’s group have made to turn the penitentiary into their home are undone, and Rick is forced to endure the loss of his wife and daughter, for whose safety he has risked life and limb and also committed acts of lethal violence against other human beings. The outcome of the battle over the penitentiary would appear to demystify the value of survivalism that runs through apocalyptic narratives, in which the principal ethical dilemma has to do with how far one is willing to go in order to preserve one’s life or the lives of those one loves. Indeed, in a wrenching issue that follows the death of Rick’s wife and the dispersal of the group, Carl berates his father, who is lying in bed ailing with a fever, for not being able to prevent the deaths of his mother, sister, Tyreese, and the others. But the logic of the serialized horror narrative works against the reconsideration of the ruthless ethic of survival, and dictates instead an escalation in shock effects, gruesome violence, and increasingly appalling dilemmas.

For Kirkman's objective of setting horror in a realistic universe, creating a world in which anyone, including the most innocent and the most sympathetic, can meet with a violent demise, has the consequence of cutting off the development of certain characters before their transformations can become thematically fruitful. On the one hand, death comes about as the result of chance, but the way chance operates in the narrative works against the efforts of the characters to come to grips with their experiences and renders futile the search for an explanation for why the zombies have appeared in the first place. One of the most intriguing exchanges in the comic takes place when the stoic Hershel, who has suffered the Job-like losses of three daughters and two sons, is told by his surviving daughter that the zombie apocalypse disproves the claims of the Bible. Hershel wryly responds that the plague of the undead could be proof of the Bible, as the zombies might actually be the fulfillment of Christ's prophecy of the dead rising from the grave. "But maybe something got lost in translation along the way," he continues, before affirming that God's ways are essentially mysterious and declaring that his faith has never been stronger.¹¹ Hershel, however, is not given the chance to expand this surprisingly adroit piece of speculation into a full-fledged theology for a world overrun by zombies, as he is one of those killed during the Governor's assault on the prison.

The aftermath of the battle over the penitentiary throws the survivors back into a harsh and uncertain existence of foraging for food, taking shelter in abandoned houses, and avoiding the undead. Rick and Carl reunite first with Michonne, and then with Glenn, Maggie, and the others in the group who managed to escape from the firefight. They are also joined by several newcomers, including a soldier, a pastor, and a scientist named Eugene who claims to have been working for the government on a biological warfare program. Eugene tells the group that he has high level security clearance, and that they must take him to Washington DC to a facility where he can develop the cure for the zombie epidemic. Eugene is of course revealed as a liar, but their travels toward brings them into contact with the residents of a gated community that had been built and provisioned by the government to provide shelter in the event of some large-scale disaster. Rick and the others are welcomed into the community and set to work fortifying the walls and venturing outside into the city for supplies, though they are disturbed by the seemingly untroubled suburban habits of many of the residents.

But even this refuge does not provide safety, as it shortly afterward becomes overrun by zombies. In the 83rd issue, part four of a storyline titled "No Way Out," Rick commits an action from which moral recovery would be impossible. Whereas his earlier acts of violence could be understood, if not always justified, in terms of the need to protect the lives of the group, the most recent zombie attack leads him in an appalling predicament. Trapped inside the house of his new lover, Rick decides to escape beyond the gates with his girlfriend Jessie, her son Ron, and Carl by smearing themselves with zombie blood. They hold hands to pass through the mass of zombies in a single file, with Rick in front, followed by Carl, Jessie, and Ron. The undead initially allow them to pass through, fooled by their rancid scent, but Ron panics, halting in his tracks and calling out to his mother, which results in him being bitten by one of the zombies. Jessie clings to his hand, refusing to heed Rick's command to let go of the boy, because there is nothing they can do to save him. Jessie tearfully refuses, and is attacked as well, crying out to Rick, "don't leave us."¹² She keeps hold of Carl's hand, preventing him from moving ahead with his father. So Rick responds by cutting off her hand with an axe. Tears stream down his face, and he apologizes to Jessie before setting Carl free from her grip in this cruel way. The act

¹¹ Robert Kirkman (writer), Charlie Adlard, Tony Moore, and Cliff Rathburn, *The Walking Dead Compendium: Volume One* (Berkeley, CA: Image Comics, 2010), Chapter 7.

¹² Robert Kirkman (writer), Charlie Adlard, and Cliff Rathburn, *The Walking Dead #83* (Berkeley, CA: Image Comics, 2011).

might be necessary for the survival of those who can have a future -- a single bite from a zombie is enough to turn a human being into the undead -- yet it also represents a complete betrayal of love and a repudiation of solidarity. Rick's determination to save his son is so overriding that, for the first time, he actually chooses to abandon others, those whom he loves less, to a horrifying fate.

Although the resolution of this particular story arc has not yet arrived, this action makes it enormously difficult or even impossible to view Rick with the same sympathetic regard. Rick himself becomes so distraught over his own action that he immediately confesses it to the doctor, Denise, before swearing her to secrecy. Compounding the appalling nature of the act is the fact that the others in the community, who had all taken to hiding from the undead, are drawn outside when they realize that Rick and Michonne are surrounded by the zombies. Whereas Rick has acted in a selfish way, mutilating and abandoning the woman who loves him for the sake of saving the life of his son, the others rally themselves with declarations of moral duty: "I can't just leave them out there," says soldier Abraham, while Tobin declares to his partner Aaron, "I won't just leave them to die." Every able-bodied resident, including the lying science teacher and the guilt-ridden minister, who had in the past failed to save members of his congregation, emerges from a hiding place to clear the settlement of the undead. This spontaneous display of courage and generosity strengthens the bonds of the community and renews its spirit for the challenges of the future, yet this outpouring of solidarity takes place in juxtaposition with a disturbing display of the survivalist mentality. The series thus arrives at a juncture most unusual for a narrative that is not a comedy, in which the secondary characters have proven themselves to be more sympathetic and noble than the protagonist. Indeed, the characters Andrea and Michonne regularly risk their lives for others, and neither would ever choose to save a loved one by sacrificing the lives of others.

IV. "Eternal Love Created Me As Well"

The crucial limitation of *The Walking Dead*, and perhaps the main source of its popular appeal, is the inability of the narrative to get beyond the motif of the Hobbesian state of nature. On the two occasions that the characters come to believe that they can overcome the condition of being exposed to violence, their expectations are cruelly thwarted. Settling down in a fortified location brings the community into conflict with other groups of survivors for scarce resources. Wandering from place to place means living under constant threat of attack from the undead. The suburban gated community provides hot running water and ample supplies of food, but strained efforts to maintain the rituals of normal life cannot neutralize the frustrations and jealousies that boil over into murderous antagonism. An undercurrent of deep hopelessness regarding social organization runs throughout the narrative -- even when a group of survivors is able to create a way of life based on shared labor and mutual cooperation, as Rick's group does in the penitentiary, such an achievement is revealed as fragile and its duration tragically brief. One wonders if the world of the comic is in the end best understood as a sort of hell, in which the protagonist is cast about from the no-win situations to monstrous dilemmas that correspond to the most intense and wrenching points of the narrative.

But what is it that makes such a narrative so arresting, and what does its appeal tell us about our culture? Canavan characterizes *The Walking Dead* as a "bizarre postmodern pastiche of the history of US imperialism," in which the predominant concern is the need to inflict violence against outsiders that are declared to be mortal threats to the basic institutions of society, especially the patriarchal family. The basic scenario of the zombie narrative, in which one must kill in order to avoid being killed, underscores the state of omnipresent danger against which the "patriarchal community," typically racialized as white, defines itself: "anyone who is not already one of 'us,' is a potential threat to the future who must be interrogated intensely, if not kept out

altogether.”¹³ On the other hand, the efforts within the narrative to reconstitute a community on a large enough scale to permit the escape from the state of nature end in catastrophic failure. Even as the narrative references the myths of the frontier, the taming of the West, and the expropriation of land from native peoples, it also portrays these motifs as exhausted, as incapable of carrying out the functions formerly accorded to them of building a society in what was once a wild and hostile territory. The problem, however, is that this act of demystification is not undertaken in the spirit of formulating and advancing an alternative, but rather emerges from a nihilistic repudiation of the possibility of any alternative.

For the author Robert Kirkman, it is the Holocaust, rather than the taming of the American West, that serves as the major point of historical reference for *The Walking Dead*. In an interview, Kirkman cites films about the Holocaust, such as *Schindler's List* and *The Pianist* as sources of inspiration: that time in Europe was kind of the only time where you could compare modern real life to a sort of end of the world type situation... There was just this sense of dread and hopelessness...”¹⁴ Kirkman's remark is indicative of the enormous role that the atrocities of the Second World War have played in shaping not only popular culture but postwar American identity, but the twist here is that the impossible situations in which Rick and his friends are placed, and the acts of violence they commit, evoke the side of the war that is overlooked in celebrations of the moral struggle of the greatest generation. Rather, *The Walking Dead* is far closer in spirit to the slaughterhouse of the Eastern front, and the state of nature it depicts can be regarded as the transplantation of that total war onto the terrain of postmodern American consumer society. The figure of zombie, after all, as the image of superfluous existence evokes Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life, the key category of a wholly despiritualized politics which occupies itself with the control and disposal of bodies. The inner logic of what Agamben calls biopolitics reaches its fulfillment in the space of the death camp, where “power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation” and where it is thus not a crime to take the lives of those whom the state has deemed are expendable.¹⁵

Obviously, it is offensive and trivializing to compare a zombie narrative to historical instances of genocide, yet the link between the two attests to the enduring grip that the atrocities of the Nazis continue to exert over the Western imagination. The fantastic and unreal premise of the walking undead might deflect the comic from charges of abusing the experience of the concentration camps, but its obsessive concern with nightmarish and hopeless dilemmas raises the troubling question of what social forces such an emphasis reflects. The implicit connection made by *The Walking Dead* appears to be the identification of the demise of consumer capitalism with the disintegration of society into the war of all against all. It is difficult not to notice the extreme sense of disproportion between the changes to an economic system and the eruption of mass killing. A relatively smooth adjustment to a different sort of economic system, one which is ecologically sustainable and enables all the citizens of the industrialized world to provide a living, though likely in a more modest form, for themselves, is within the realm of possibility. Unfortunately, our society seems to have lost the requisite faith in political action to make such a transition a reality. What is more real to us, even as it disintegrates before our eyes, is the consumer society that promises perpetual growth and increasing abundance. The contemporary fascination with zombies, one hopes, is nothing more than a hysterical overreaction to a prolonged and intractable economic downturn, rather than a basis for reintroducing brutal exclusions in the face of increasing poverty and social discontent.

¹³ Canavan, p. 445.

¹⁴ “The Walking Dead Interview,” *IGN* (11 September 2007), <http://comics.ign.com/articles/819/819361p2.html>

¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 171.

Ortega y Gasset describes the mass man as trapped in the labyrinth of his own egoism. Unable to dedicate himself to a purpose higher than himself, the mass man leads a “disjointed existence” in which he becomes mired in his own triviality.¹⁶ Mass man thus finds himself lacking in authoritative reasons for action, including the reason to save himself from worsening conditions. Whereas in affluent times, it is comedy that best conveys the predicament of recognizing a problem but choosing not to act to remedy it, it is at present the genre of horror that corresponds most fittingly to this plight. We could trace a line from the current paralysis over the neoliberal capitalist economy back to the utopian ideologies of left and right, as faith has shifted its object from action to inaction. We thus find ourselves in a situation that may not require revolutionary action, yet even change on a far smaller scale appears cataclysmically forbidding or altogether unachievable. Is it the case that we would rather see the world slip into endemic disorder than give up the possibility of limitless acquisition? At least in a world overrun by zombies, instead of a dream of a classless society in which there is no distinction between rich and poor, resources are shared equally and human beings continually affirm the value of duty and mutual obligation, we find a grim and unremitting nightmare in which there is no distinction between rich and poor, resources are shared equally among the major characters, and human beings rediscover the value of duty and mutual obligation.

¹⁶ Ortega y Gasset, p. 142.