RADICAL TEACHER

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Awakening the "Walking Dead":
Zombie Pedagogy for Millennials

by Nancy Dawn Wadsworth

ALL STILLS FROM THE FILM *THE WALKING DEAD*

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

What if zombies infiltrated a course on political theory, infecting half-dazed undergraduates with a hunger to understand what constitutes a just political community? What if the dead-eyed, shuffling, animated corpses of film and fiction could be used to consummate an awakening to how political theory matters for our future and indeed the future of the planet?

This essay reviews a political theory course I recently redesigned to incorporate zombie genres as a learning tool. Power and Justice: Introduction to Political Thought is an entry-level, core curriculum introduction to theoretical inquiry in the social sciences, which provides a broad overview of major political ideologies that emerged from and competed for dominance within the modern European tradition: liberalism, conservatism, fascism, anarchism, and communism, with attention to feminism, environmentalism, and globalization along the way. While students have demonstrated consistent interest in past versions of the course, the dense historical texts and abstractions of political theory can be disorienting, especially to early undergraduates. I've also found that Millennial students seek ways to render theory more concrete and pertinent to their sense of themselves and their agency in the contemporary world. In response, the modification Political Theory, Climate Change, and the Zombie Apocalypse was born. This new pedagogical approach offers fertile provocations and a sustained mode of creative critical inquiry that can render political theory more resonant for the Millennial generation.[1]

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American Millennials confront enormous challenges, in the face of which they seem to be alternately incredibly savvy and rightfully despairing—which sometimes (from my Generation X perspective, at least) takes the form of a kind of numbness about political life. On one hand, today's high school graduates grew up in a post-9/11 era of neoliberal triumphalism, in which global capitalism has been rendered the definitive and only "realistic" option. So-called democracy is guarded domestically by a militarized state apparatus, and abroad by soft empire and perpetual war(s) against terrorism. Embedded in what Benjamin Barber (1992) called the "McWorld" of global capitalism, Millennials have grown up learning that the power to buy things is a greater expression of agency than direct political engagement, and that economic growth is what keeps a nation strong. They inherit political institutions tranquilized by the effects of money, extreme polarization, corporate influence, popular disillusionment, and apathy (Gottfried and Barthel 2015). On top of that, this generation has been the most sonogrammed, scoped, quantified, monitored, medicated, and assessed in history,

with school serving as the fulcrum of micromanagement orchestrated to groom youth (of the privileged classes, at least) for success in a capitalist material culture to which no meaningful alternatives seem possible. It would be hard to blame them for feeling cynical.

On the other hand, American Millennials have been represented in or led creative and technologically agile political initiatives such as Occupy, Black Lives Matter, fossil fuel divestment, and most recently the Bernie Sanders campaign. They are astute observers of the world, and interact in a social milieu more networked and tech-literate than any previous generation. They are avid civic volunteers (partly but not only because that helps them reach other goals, like college), and they express a great deal of concern about the state of the world (Strauss and Howe 2000). But they register deep disillusionment with both mainstream political institutions and grassroots actions characterized as "extreme" (Miller 2014; Harvard Institute of Politics 2015). They have also recently surprised researchers with their widespread criticism of capitalism (Ehrenfreund 2016).

I find that most Millennial college students, regardless of background, suspect there is something deeply wrong with the reality they've inherited. It shows in the literature that attracts them, the serials and movies they watch, the games they play. At the same time, much of their conceptual vocabulary is still generated from within American neoliberalism, the system from which they so obviously stand to benefit, at least in the short-term. The improbable combination of zombies, political theory, and climate change provides a set of tools unusual enough to foster engagement in critical political inquiry while remaining culturally conversant.[2] Zombie stories provide metaphors that can enable students to analyze contemporary neoliberalism from different vantage points in search of more just and sustainable democratic alternatives.

Course Design and Objectives

This course serves as one of four gateway course options to the political science major, though it is also interdisciplinary, drawing from sociology, cultural theory, economics, environmental studies, and film/media studies. The version described here is designed for an 80-student lecture class, about one-quarter political science majors. Few students, whether taking it for the political science major or as a core curriculum requirement, enter with more than a rudimentary exposure to theory or philosophy from any field.

The course has three conceptual sections: an introduction to the philosophical foundations of modern liberalism; a survey of liberalism's major ideological challengers in the West; and in the final third an exploration of how different schools of political theory might be applied to address a global collective problem like the climate change crisis. Zombie genres are layered onto these topics in three ways. First, zombie apocalypse motifs are used to illustrate core concepts in political theory, such as the state of nature, the social contract, and different

modes of constructing political community, especially in the face of crisis. Second, zombies as a unique kind of monster provide potent metaphors for *human* behavior in some of its most destructive forms. Students are enlisted in the project of contemplating why so many people—and so many Americans in particular—are attracted to zombie genres at this particular sociopolitical moment. The final section of the class is designed for students to leverage their growing familiarity with both political theory and the zombie metaphor to puzzle through the theoretical and political challenges presented by climate change crisis.

Woven throughout are texts, film clips, and other materials examining the history, symbolism, and cultural relevance of zombie genres. Though I draw on a range of zombie productions, my main pedagogical source is the popular AMC cable series *The Walking Dead*. This six-season runaway hit based on Robert Kirkman's comics series works especially well because most students are familiar with it, and because its unanticipated popularity—it is the most popular cable television series of all time—enables us to consider what the show offers that seems to capture the attention of so many Americans (and others) at this particular cultural moment (Wallenstein 2014).

Due to the size of the class (and the fact that I don't have TAs), students' learning is measured through three exams consisting of a combination of multiple-choice, matching, and analytical essay questions; and an analytical paper in which they work in pairs to use two different political theory frameworks to analyze a zombie production (film, television, comic, or literature). Here I will focus on students' responses to the conceptual organization of the course, and what their essays revealed about the effectiveness of zombie genres as a tool for understanding political theory.

Theory, Contract, and Zombies

The class begins with an overview of the distinction between ideology, a meaning-making system that explains the way things are, and political theory, the *study of* the concepts and principles that people use to describe, explain, and evaluate political events, paradigms, and institutions—including different ideologies (Love 2011). We then preview a series of texts that suggest the potential relevance of zombies to class themes (Drezner 2010, Platts 2013). Students then view the first episode of *The Walking Dead* (TWD), to familiarize themselves with the series' premise. From there we can wade into the political thought of the early modern liberals.
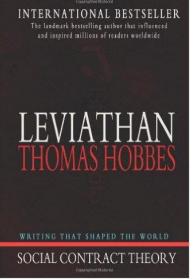
Seventeenth century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously wrote that life in a state of nature is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Most apocalyptic fiction portrays human survival in the wake of destruction as some version of a Hobbesian struggle. To this,

contemporary zombie genres add what Carl Jung (1957) would surely recognize as one of our dark, collective fantasies: apocalyptic social breakdown at the hands of an "other." Whether through animated corpses that destroy, either in the form of a relentless, slow motion herd-force (what we might call the Romero-school zombies, resurrected even more graphically in *The Walking Dead*) or as viral, cyber-speed millennial death vipers (as in British Director Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* series), zombie apocalypse stories are propelled by fantasies of a political and economic near-*tabula rasa*. In this world, the former, ordered reality has been stripped bare and humans must reinvent small-sale economics, political community, and ethics from the ground up, under violent conditions that invite moral ambiguity. The previously functioning system may be retained as memory, as template, or as evidence of failure, but under crisis conditions it is not easily reproduced. This is fertile theoretical ground.

In *The Walking Dead*, a diverse band of survivors, led by former city sheriff, Rick Grimes, navigate the woods and abandoned farms of Georgia, not knowing whether any federal infrastructure has survived the contagion that has zombified their countrymen. As they attempt or confront different modes of authority and cooperation, Rick's band seems to represent the beleaguered hopes for moral community, democracy, and civilization against the threat of the zombie horde, on one hand, and corrupted human experiments, on the other. The unnatural former-humans perpetually stalking the living serve as hostile "natural" forces ravaging the tatters of culture, but culture itself turns out to produce nearly as many threats to the lives and sanity of the "good guys." Under such conditions it is a strain to remain good—at least in the sense of being rational, morally accountable, and restrained in violence. Many fail.

In *Leviathan,* Hobbes imagines humans as, at base, without ties to others—as if without a stated contract, human family and kinship systems don't exist. Isolated and without the protection of mutually compelling law and a powerful sovereign endorsed to enforce it, the theory holds, humans *by nature* will quickly veer toward aggressive competition and eventual war. For Hobbes, a state of nature involves "a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death" (Leviathan, chapter 13).

John Locke's Puritanism-inspired state of nature revises Hobbes to envision a world surveyed by an omnipotent God who gifts man with perfect freedom and equality "within the bounds of the law of nature" (1690, 21). The first such law is the "obligation to mutual love amongst men"; it holds that because humans are all children of the same Master, they are morally compelled not to harm others except in self-defense (whereas Hobbes sees men as inherently belligerent). However, because personal property claims are the primary source of human

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SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY

conflict, the First Law of Nature is insufficient to create a lasting peace. Without an impartial judicant of agreements—which in Locke becomes the socially contracted law that subjects agree to obey for the protection of themselves and their property—the state of nature will inevitably devolve into a state of war.

The concept of the socially unencumbered, self-interested, masculine individual in inherent tension with others and nature itself is at the heart of classical liberal political philosophy. Its premises infuse the ideologies liberalism produces regarding power, natural entitlements, community, material resources, and security. Humans—being alone, fearful, and aggressive—need a social contract to get along and engage in fair exchanges, and that contract is conceived of as ineffective without a strong state able to enforce law with a monopoly on violence. Most American Millennials have inherited these ideas as a kind of second nature. Such theories frame self-centeredness as natural, cooperation as, at best, a product of socialization, and state violence as a necessary concession to self-governance. It's a ruthless world, students concur, and always has been.

But is it true? Are human beings *really* isolated from one another in "nature"? Is community something we cannot imagine without a governing state to enforce it? Is concern for others unnatural to humans? As students are introduced to the state-of-nature heuristic in the liberal social contract theory of Hobbes and John Locke, I pose these challenges by way of a segment from TWD.

In "Vatos," the fourth episode of Season 1, a group of protagonists ventures into Atlanta, now overrun by zombies. Formerly strangers from different racial and class backgrounds, the group members exist in an uneasy collaboration marked by mutual distrust, except when the fight requires unity against a shared adversary, zombie or human. The group seeks to retrieve a member and a bag of guns lost in a previous expedition when some young Latino men, apparently gangsters, attack. The *vatos* want the weapons, and take a member of Rick's group hostage, and Rick's men in turn capture a young *vato*. The two groups face off for what looks to be a violent showdown, until a tiny grandmother intervenes. It turns out that the "thugs" are actually a community of former nursing home staffers, clients, and relatives who have stayed in Atlanta to care for the surviving elderly inhabitants. After the misunderstanding is corrected, Rick's men tour the orderly premises. The young men are working at great risk to protect the weak and disabled; like Rick's group, they have created an unlikely community amidst an ongoing disaster. In a gesture of recognition and solidarity, Rick donates a share of the recovered weapons before moving on.

This clip generates a great deal of engagement from students, and has been one of the more effective tools I have found for breaking through an entrenched notion that human nature is inherently competitive, especially under crisis conditions. Given this visual illustration, it makes sense to them that appearances can deceive, and that people can (and daily do) often take great risks to care for others, even when they don't "have to." It is obvious to students that both groups in the "Vatos" scenario have

assumed responsibilities toward strangers, and demonstrate not just competition but also cooperation in the wake of societal infrastructure collapse. I use other clips and anecdotes to demonstrate how TWD portrays the development of social bonds unlikely under the previous social order. Rick's group, for example, includes members who in the former world were categorized as "white trash" of the most denigrated sort, but who become highly valued members for the special skills they bring, like hunting and tracking. Also, without the old, sedimented expectations governing behavior, groups enter a more active, engaged mode of decision-making; they have to figure out the rules as they go, in a cooperative way. Group members also take care of one another beyond the boundaries of the modern nuclear family: in Rick's group, every adult takes responsibility for the surviving children.

Such scenes from *The Walking Dead* compel students to consider the notion of human "natural mutual hostility"at the heart of early social contract theory as an ahistorical myth. The class is also invited to consider whether TWD's dynamic picture of human behavior under apocalyptic conditions might suggest something about

how, at the level of the collective unconscious, we (Americans, and others in neoliberal societies) might be trying to re-think our assumptions about human nature and the social contract at this particular moment; to imagine more meaningful connections and forms of membership. Might zombie productions be expressing a kind of dissatisfaction with how we relate to one another under current conditions, and a hope for alternatives?

Individualism, Authority, and Myth

Even Hobbes and Locke acknowledged that the state of nature idea was an apparatus built for theoretical purposes. But why this particular myth, and what are the political implications of it? We explore these inquiries by reviewing evolutionary patterns in human behavior, then considering how the social contract theorists' picture may look different if we bring women and children back into view, where social contract theorists have ignored them.

A chapter from an anthropology textbook helps students consider what scholars know about human beings' *actual* organizational tendencies across time. In "The

Evolution of Complex Societies," archaeologists Robert Wenke and Deborah Olszewski (2007) review the variables that produce diverse forms of human societies under different conditions. What becomes clear is that whether organized into relatively simple and egalitarian bands and tribes or complex, stratified societies such as chiefdoms and states, human beings have never been isolated or inherently discordant in the way that Hobbes and Locke portrayed. Rather, individuals are embedded within a web of social relationships. Even without centralized states, communities pivot around agreements and power structures involving socially coordinated elements. To the degree that humans adapt over time, they do so as social units, not as individuals, whether power is shared or monopolized according to some hierarchical authority schema.

Russian scientist-philosopher Peter Kropotkin is helpful for developing these reflections while introducing students to anarchism's theoretical challenge to liberalism's foundational precepts. In his 1902 treatise, *Mutual Aid*, Kropotkin drew on his studies of animal life in Siberia to rebut ascendant Darwinist conclusions about animal nature being extended to explain human behavior. Kropotkin rejected the prioritizing of competition as a first "law of Nature," arguing that there is as much empirical evidence for "sociable habits" as for "self assertion of the individual" in the struggle for existence (Kropotkin 1902, 381). Animals can be singular and competitive, he found, but such traits are balanced by the equally evolutionary tendencies toward sociability and cooperation. In Kropotkin's Siberia studies, in cases where animals did have to struggle against scarcity and compete, they tended to become impoverished and not to evolve. Within human history, Kropotkin argues, mutual aid principles were central to adaptation and the development of new institutions and religions—indeed, to the ethical progress of the human race. Kropotkin sees the state, not "natural" competitive instincts, as the greatest threat to human cooperation, because the state is threatened by human associations that might threaten its monopoly on authority.

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Building on Kropotkin's early anarchist challenge to the individualist assumptions embedded in early social contract theory, we then (re)insert culture and gender into liberal theorists' abstracted, masculinist images of "human nature," in which whole segments of human beings are effectively erased under the auspices of (European) universalism. While depicting pre-colonial America as an example of a real-time state of nature, Locke deliberately overlooked the existing kinship systems of indigenous North Americans. Because, he believed, Native peoples did not cultivate land according to his definitions of private property and agriculture, he read their cultures as "primitive," conjugal, pre-social contract societies, rather than as evidence of communities that *already* demonstrated peaceful self-government. This allowed Locke and other Europeans to label Native lands as "*terra nullius*," justifying Europeans' right to colonize those lands and remove inhabitants (Pateman 2007). In universalizing the [European] autonomous male adult as the "natural" individual, Locke, Hobbes, and others removed women, infants, children, the handicapped and the elderly—in short, human kinship systems altogether—from the frame of consensual political community.

Again, TWD is useful for interrogating the gendered aspects of the theoretical erasure that produces an individualist social contract. A number of scenes in which female characters not only care for others but also lead, illustrate how humans' ascent to adulthood is inconceivable without the labor of women. As Carol Pateman and other feminist theorists have argued, with women historically charged in most cultures with the labor of child-rearing, household management, agriculture, many aspects of social education, nursing, and the lion's share of reproduction, it is not possible to define humans as inherently non-cooperative—though away from families, men might be. Whatever characteristics humans bring to a state of nature, they do not survive long without cooperative social systems. At the same time, TWD creates scenes in which women challenge cultural fallback assumptions about women's role expectations in the post-apocalypse division of labor. Here we consider that the liberal social contract is not just a contract about property, law, citizenship and the state; it is also, at its root, a patriarchal contract, which writes women out of the picture by banishing them to the conjugal or private realm, as derivatives of male heads of household. I use readings from Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), John Stuart Mill (1869), and Susan Moller Okin (1999) to guide a gender critique of social contract theory.

In sum, within Western social contract theory, individual rights (chief among them individual liberty under a consensual, theoretically shared authority) are conceived as inalienable, but community and mutual aid are de-emphasized, as social ties are imagined to exist in a politically invisible "private" realm. A masculine vision of human nature produces a profoundly myopic political contract grounded in a false logic. Deconstructing the gendered state-of-nature fantasy on which early social contract theory pivots challenges the notion that without a state apparatus humans are mutually hostile, competitive units, incapable of creating moral community. In portraying many variants of community in the new apocalyptic reality, zombie shows seem to suggest that social contract and moral community are perhaps being (re)imagined in popular culture at this political moment.

Once Millennials are invited to interrogate the incomplete Hobbes-Lockean myth of human nature, their enculturated understandings of human nature as inherently *only or mainly competitive and individualistic* begin to lift. On the first midterm, short essay items ask students to use scenes from TWD to demonstrate their understanding of cultural and gender critiques of the Hobbes-

Lockean conception of human nature. I have seen a much greater understanding than in previous years of why "forgetting" women or other cultural approaches to social organization and the natural world in social contract theory matters for the way we conceive of the foundations for political community, and of our orientation to nature itself, today. Imagining how modern humans might create or recreate a social contract under apocalyptic conditions renders these concepts much more concrete.

Liberalism's Challengers

The second section of the course builds from the introduction to liberal theory to consider some of its late-modern iterations and ideological challengers. As a radical set of assertions, early Enlightenment liberalism disrupted older reigning ideologies in Western political culture, and was answered by competing schools of thought, including anarchism, conservatism, communism, and fascism, which rejected some of its central contentions. Contemporary zombie genres have plenty on offer when sifting through these paradigms. Below is a condensed sampling.

In *The Walking Dead*, as in the comic series, the protagonists encounter a range of experiments in the organization of power. Rick and his former co-sheriff, dominant males who have acquired the guns and ammo to back their decisions, lead the group under a version (albeit a fragile one) of the old law of the liberal state. As the benevolent lawman figure, Rick upholds honor and order and, when necessary, a kind of Wild West conquest of threats from the anarchic new world, while also trying to protect his pregnant wife and young son, Carl, who symbolize the American nuclear family. Following an injury to Carl, desperation requires Rick's group to seek help from another small community hiding out on the remains of a family farm. Their patriarch is a religious farmer and veterinarian— conservative, community-oriented, and competent in the ways of rural existence. Eventually the groups merge, though not without conflicts over strategy, leadership, and intimate relationships.

After a massive zombie horde forces the community to flee, the group seeks refuge in a large prison complex, where a few convicts still reside. (In a telling panel in Kirkman's series, the Foucaultian prison architecture is determined to provide the best chance at survival, as "freedom" outside has become too dangerous [Kirkman 2009, Issue 12].) Psychologically strained by the effects of the brutal decisions he's been forced to make over the previous months and the group's mounting losses, Rick resorts for a time to a dictatorial, hyper-masculine leadership style. But concerned for his sanity and the violent model he is providing Carl, he later abandons central authority to a democratic council form. In a fleeting period of stability, the group settles into a Rousseauian collective sovereignty, planting crops, sharing decision-making, and defending the complex effectively, but this relative idyll is broken by territorial threats from a community called Woodbury, led by The Governor, a ruthless tyrant.

Several characters on the show analogize nicely to competing ideological frameworks. We read Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* alongside the character of the farmer-patriarch to illustrate the old European conservative reverence for lineage, generational knowledge, obligation, and the glue of tradition. Michonne a katana-wielding survivalist, is useful for elaborating anti-authoritarian critiques of liberalism's attachments to order, law, security, and periodic displays of central authority (as evidenced by Rick's unilateral decisions in conditions of crisis) (Love 2011). Similar to anarchists like Henry David Thoreau and Emma Goldman, Michonne distrusts the temptations of state security. Anarchists argue that state order can never compensate for the loss of freedom or the mind control all hierarchically ordered institutions seem to require. The Governor's Woodbury community sets up easily as a template for authoritarianism, which we interpret alongside Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Mussolini's "Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions" (1932). Students often don't realize that fascism is not just an epithet for an unappealing power structure, but rather a twentieth-century political ideology in which "the nation" (in Hitler's case "the race," and in the Governor's "the community") is made predominant over the individual and associations— which are effectively enslaved to serve the state.

Compared against these competing systems, we can see how Rick's group anchors a proto-Lockean liberal center, as it were, positioned between three ideological poles. These are (1) the anarchism of either loosely-bounded groups or all-out moral lawlessness, represented in the negative extreme by the cannibalistic community the group encounters in Season 6; (2) a traditionalist conservatism that is useful in some respects (e.g. remembering how to grow food and care for others) but unable to adapt to the horror of zombie plague and brutal human competition for survival; and (3) a ruthless authoritarian model that quashes rights and collective input. Within Rick's proto-liberal group members provide input, but consensually "nominated" leaders like Rick sometimes render snap judgments without democratic approval. There are guidelines around behavior and punishments for breaking the rules, indicating that vestiges of the old law under the American state remain—as when one valued member is banished for secretly killing an infected member to avert further contagion. And the group has constructed a military apparatus, a mode of small state or militia security, by training every member, including children, to use guns and daggers. However, we also

identify ways in which, by functioning without a formal state apparatus or formal government, Rick's group realizes some of the radically democratic ideals that anarchism values.

Once oriented to these divergent political theory schools, students are able to proceed to a deeper analytical step: weighing different variants of liberal political and *economic* thinking. Excerpts from Adam Smith, Milton Friedman, and the others (all in Love 2011) demonstrate some of the ways in which Lockean notions of property and "free" markets are bounded to liberal conceptions of government non-interference or "negative liberty." This strain of American thought emphasizes restraints on government to protect individual or corporate freedom. Other thinkers see negative liberty as inadequate to the pursuit of meaningful freedom and political equality (Roosevelt, Green, and Kramnic in Love 2011). Positive liberty theorists seek a more egalitarian version of liberal representative democracy, recognizing that most citizens do not begin from an equal material starting place. Modern neoconservatives such as Irving Kristol combine strong government in some areas (military force, ideological dissemination across the global), and thin state power in others (social welfare services).
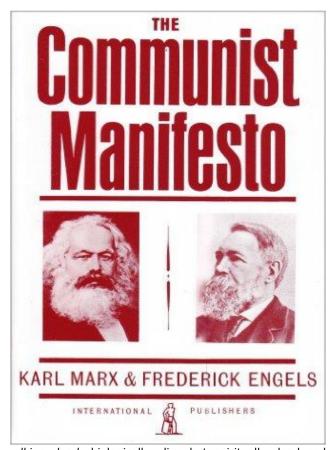
By the two-thirds point of the class, students have become invested in answers to a set of core questions we have been using zombie productions to ask: Is freedom under the liberal social contract really free? Is a greater equality under liberalism possible, or is a different system required? What makes political community meaningful, and what power structures render it just or unjust? As besieged as they are by constant stressors, why do characters in apocalyptic shows seem freer in some ways than we do in an ordered society with a functioning government and infrastructure?

The Walking Dead Awaken—Or Do We?

In contrast to the liberal social contract thinkers, Karl Marx rejects the need to invent some "fictitious primordial system" to explain human conditions, when we can start with "the fact of the present" (279). I assign "Estranged Labor" from the 1844 Manuscripts, and The Communist Manifesto (Love 2011) for a sense of the Marxian approach.

The Marx readings facilitate a conceptual change of frame within the course. To this point, we have interpreted the current proliferation of zombie products as metaphors for collective anxieties circulating at the current moment. Within these fantasies audiences identify, as they have for decades, with the human "we" fighting off the external threat of the "other," whether it represents fears of disease, foreigners, nature, or some other threat (Platts 2013). The Marxian critique allows us to consider whether zombie stories might be compelling for a different reason: zombies metaphorically embody our fear that *we have become like zombies*.

Students quickly see how alienated workers whose otherwise creative, life-enhancing labor is commodified under capitalism become, according to Marx, a kind of

walking dead: biologically alive but spiritually deadened and politically unconscious. As capitalism expands, the fetishization of markets and commodities channels peoples at all levels of the system into a mindless, destructive consumerism that spreads across the globe, much like a zombie horde. The Communist Manifesto was essentially a manual for how a psychologically and materially enslaved populace might awaken from an unconscious state to fight its way to a new, liberatory reality. This vision bears similarities with the original Haitian notion of the revolutionary zombi—the enslaved body that rises en masse from the grave to overturn the slavery system (Rushton &Moreman 2011).An article by humanities scholars Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism," (2008) takes the zombification question a step further, into contemporary life. In midterm essay assignments, students demonstrate deft engagement with Marxian critiques to consider how zombie narratives might be compelling to contemporary audiences precisely for the way zombies remind us of *something about ourselves* in a neoliberal era.

Zombies and the Climate Crisis

How is it that humans could be doing systematic damage to a planetary ecology upon which we (and every other species) depend for our own survival? What in our way of thinking, in our way of approaching the natural world, allows the developed world to continue to profit from destructive behavior, even in the face of clear evidence of unprecedented anthropogenic impact? The final third of the course works to synthesize students' growing

understanding of political theory with one of the major problems we now face.

Selections from the volume *Political Theory and Global Climate Change* raise critical considerations about the benefits and limitations of liberalism as a political philosophy, with regard to addressing a global climate crisis (Vanderheiden 2008). On one hand, premises lodged deep within the liberal social contract have justified the practically unrestricted exploitation of the natural world. These include the "natural right" of private property, the value of self-interested behavior, fear of state restriction, tolerance for deep inequality, weak community obligations, and rational actor theory, by which people are assumed to make rational means-ends decisions under most circumstances. Such ideas have given humans in liberal political economies carte blanche to consume "like zombies"—mindlessly, with no aptitude for considering consequences—for four centuries. On the other hand, equally central to liberal philosophy are the core concepts of basic universal rights (including the rights of people to the fundamental requirements of survival, and of communities to develop), the notions of procedural fairness and legal equality, and, at least in theory, the Lockean proviso of limits on appropriation in order to protect the rights of all. Liberalism's perpetual conundrum is that its rights universalism exists in tension if not direct contradiction with the behaviors it endorses under the rubric of "liberty."

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Several aspects of climate pollution make it especially difficult for liberal political systems to address effectively. Political theorist Steven Gardiner describes the conundrum as a "perfect moral storm" (2008, 2013). First, like the viruses that propel the plague of the undead in zombie fiction, the impacts of anthropogenic climate pollution are spatially unbounded, so while individual states may choose to self-regulate, such efforts in isolation cannot solve the problem. Second, greenhouse gases (GHGs) and other environmental pollutants often disproportionately impact populations that have contributed the least to their production, namely the developing world and the poor (Vanderheiden 2008). Climate impacts are also temporally "backloaded," in that the conditions we experience today are a result of carbon pollution generated a century ago, and, in turn today's pollution is substantially deferred to future generations—affects which will be exponentially multiplied as each generations' pollution builds on the last (Gardiner 2008, 32). Third, as negative climate impacts are "not caused by a single agent but a vast number of individuals not unified by a comprehensive structure of

agency" the collective willingness and ability to act is fragmented (Gardiner 32).

This creates a prisoner's dilemma, in which it is "perfectly convenient" and perfectly rational for the current generation to act selfishly, while costs accrue to action that would benefit all, illustrating the famous tragedy of the commons in planetary terms (Gardiner, 33). Given that there is a fixed limit on the amount of greenhouse gases the planet can tolerate without widespread, irreversible destruction, meaningful regulations require cooperation between states and some form of mutually enforceable mechanisms and institutions. Unfortunately, such scenarios are anathema to a neoliberalism in which state sovereignty and capitalism remain sacralized, and corporations' ability to either sidestep regulatory controls or rig them in their favor is endemic (Adamian 2008). For those reasons, the United States never signed onto an international carbon emissions agreement until 2015 in Paris—and that agreement, which many see as inadequate, is unbinding. Because "the source of climate change is located deep in the infrastructure of current civilizations" we are, in effect, primed to render increasingly morally corrupt decisions, either continuing a mindless, herd-mentality consumption like zombies, despite the known damage to people already living subsistence-level lives and to future generations, and/or retreating into paralysis (becoming politically zombified) (Adamian, 29). We enact a real zombie apocalypse while watching fictional ones from our living room couches.

As the obstacles to meaningful political action and the ramifications of inaction on climate change become clearer to students who are generally not accustomed to pondering these issues, I find that they begin to express legitimate anger at the problem they have been handed. At this point, the zombie metaphor no longer feels like a novelty or class gimmick, so I seek out opportunities in the final sessions to teach about collective modes of political agency that have had an impact in other contexts (abolition, woman suffrage, civil rights, WTC-IMF protests), and consider creative approaches currently being initiated across the globe (Vandana Shiva in Love 2011). We also consider how new media and other factors might be conducive to change-oriented engagement within or beyond neoliberal political-economic structures.

Conclusion

I have been struck by the enthusiasm the overwhelming majority of students have expressed across the course, and in their evaluations, for the use of zombies and *The Walking Dead* in particular to understand what political theory is and why it is relevant to their lives. In a final exam essay, I ask students to evaluate the value of using zombies as a metaphorical tool for thinking about the climate change conundrum, and what might be productive ways of shifting our fundamental thinking and action in order to address the problem. The range and passion of the answers I've received have eliminated any suspicion I had that Millennials do not care about what is happening to their world. Some excerpts:

In the face of one of the most daunting challenges that humans have ever faced, one could make a strong argument that instead of acting like heroes and pioneers society so passionately reveres, humans are acting more like zombies . . . [Z]ombies are creatures that are focused entirely on consuming and on living to satisfy immediate desires. As Vanderheiden notes, at the last several important conferences on climate change, industrialized nations like the U.S. have refused to agree to plans that demand they lower their GHG in missions because they do not believe it is fair for them to have to [do so], even though they have been far more responsible for the problem and developing nations have. Stubborn refusals at conferences like these demonstrate an intense desire to consume as much as possible and to worry about the consequences later.

For me, what is the most analogous aspect of zombies to our current social order is the lawlessness: zombies exist outside of the realm of the law, no rules apply, and in their wake the leave destruction. For some people in power this is their reality; to be outside of social contract, moral obligations to strangers, and disregard anything other than profit . . . Human beings are still marching towards the ability to produce and consume, not because we must (the amount of byproduct and waste tells us that) but because it's the only purpose we have given life.

With the theme of the zombie also comes the iconic imagery of decay that not only inhabits the body of the zombie, but also the world in which they [operate]. In the popular depiction of zombies, the body of an infected individual is often times wrong with decay, exposed bones, shredded skin, etc. Yet despite these factors they march onwards. Beyond their individual bodies the world around them has fallen into decay . . . , yet they are oblivious. [T]he zombie will stop at nothing to consume. I find this to be a particularly effective part of the analogy with climate change, as humanity consumes, unaware of how it is destroying itself as an individual and as a whole. Seeing our actions, purchases, and ways of life destroying the livelihood and passions of others is a . . . reality check that may result in more individuals understanding the repercussions of their actions.

Even those with no previous interest in either zombies or climate change testify that the combination "woke them up" intellectually, raising their political ire and, in many cases, inspiring them to get involved in change initiatives. Given sufficiently effective and interesting tools, this generation is eager to help us all break out of the zombie fog. I will let this student's hopeful note conclude the essay:

I think that one of the ways to change our fundamental thinking is to redefine what is valuable to us as humankind. I feel that the contemporary schools of thought we have read, specifically those regarding climate change and justice, are built on a new kind of consciousness. Where older schools of thought could not see the power of interconnectedness (example: in reference to a question on the first midterm where women and slaves' liberties were not taken into account within the definition of individual and universal rights), these newer schools do . . . [T]hey take into consideration not only our right to expand, develop and produce, but also to protect and strengthen. Zombies may represent the fact that we are damaged or damaging beyond repair, but there are tools we have learned in this class that can counteract that damage, and pave the way for a better future.

I have been struck by the enthusiasm the overwhelming majority of students have expressed across the course, and in their evaluations, for the use of zombies and The Walking Dead in particular to understand what political theory is and why it is relevant to their lives. In a final exam essay, I ask students to evaluate the value of using zombies as a metaphorical tool for thinking about the climate change conundrum, and what might be productive ways of shifting our fundamental thinking and action in order to address the problem. The range and passion of the answers I've received have eliminated any suspicion I had that Millennials do not care about what is happening to their world.

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Notes

1 Millennials are defined as the demographic cohort following Generation X, born between roughly (depending on researchers' parameters) 1982-2004 (Strauss and Howe 2000).

2 I see this approach as consistent with what psychiatrist Albert Rothenberg (1971) called Janusian thinking, "the capacity to conceive and utilize two or more opposites or contradictory ideas, concepts, or images simultaneously" in order to facilitate the creative process. It is applicable to any field, though Rothenberg focused on the arts and sciences.