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Anarchism and the Walking Dead

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Fear the Walking Dead just finished its first highly rated season on the AMC cable network. FWD is a spin-off from the wildly successful series *The Walking Dead* which will soon begin its sixth season. Set in the same zombie apocalypse universe as TWD, FWD takes place in Los Angeles (instead of Georgia and the South) right before the zombie virus infects the masses. Modern zombie stories are usually *Lord of the Flies*-style tales about the collapse of civilization and the resulting chaos. But something distinguishes FWD; instead of some kind of Hobbesian allegory of might-makes-right, FWD seems to be a story affirming left libertarian-anarchist themes (for now).

In terms of political allegories, zombie apocalypse stories are thought to fall into two categories: 1) an anti capitalist/consumerist fable with a message that rails against the massification of people into mindless horrors, or 2) right libertarian fantasy about rugged individuals fending off hordes of monsters and dealing with the weakness of fellow survivors whose displays of compassion often threaten to bring final destruction for everyone.

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TWD often embodies 2). As Jason Lynch from *Adweek* says, the story line in TWD after six seasons goes something like this: “Rick (Andrew Lincoln) vacillates between feral and commanding; the group meets up with a new, seemingly genial band of survivors but quickly learns that all is not what it seems; a beloved character is shockingly killed off; initially timid characters become hardened by their circumstances; some people splinter off from the group and eventually return. Oh, and something really disgusting happens with a zombie.”

Daniel Drezner studies the impact of zombie apocalypse tales on political discourse and finds that the genre, with its tendency toward misanthropic and authoritarian themes, becomes very popular in times of social-political crisis such as wartime and economic recession. But what is more worrisome is that such themes will reinforce fascist ideas about the need for strong leaders in the face of crisis, a willingness to use violence at all costs, and contempt for compassion, cooperation, and solidarity with those outside of the tribe.

Drezner is concerned about this effect because he thinks the right wing libertarian allegory is wrong about the capacity of human beings to react to crisis. People are more capable than having to resort to the blunt tool of violence as an answer to all problems, he thinks.

Rebecca Solnit’s book *A Paradise Built in Hell* backs this up. She discusses how communities have pulled together to respond to disasters without people turning on each other in a war of all against all. And Scott Crow’s excellent work *Black Flags and Windmills* describes the eruption of specifically anarchist organizing with the Common Ground Collective in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Indeed, John Clark has recently argued in his book *The Impossible Community* that there are three just as likely reactions to crises in the modern world: disaster capitalism, disaster fascism, and disaster anarchism. Naomi Klein has done the most to describe the first—the idea that capitalist forces today are

perched to take advantage of natural and financial disasters to sweep away existing structures and impose neo-liberal reconstruction projects that eliminate all sorts of social and labor protections. Disaster fascism is essentially the world of TWD and the fantasy of the rugged individual. Disaster anarchism, on the other hand, is the explosion of cooperation, mutual aid, solidarity that can help people get through a crisis and leave a legacy of values for a different, post disaster, world.

What stikes me about FWD is that it is not so much an allegory about the collapse of *civilization* as much as it is about the collapse of the *state*. As the zombie infection begins to spread in the first season, most of the officials we see responding are the police and the military. It is as if the infection has pulled back the veil and revealed that what the state really is is an agency of force and coercion. The main characters soon find out that the army had been planning for a while to cordon off, and then kill, the civilian population. By the end of the season, the only authorities that remain are the soldiers, and once the leaders on top are out of contact, the military hierarchy crumbles. If you've read Scott Crow's work, you will notice how the army in the show acts very much like what he describes going on in NOLA. The US Army and National Guard would infrequently make a show of force, but provided very little food or medical assistance to survivors. They would show up, make a brief scene, and then leave for long periods. In that state power vacuum, disaster fascism did appear, with wandering groups of white supremacist militias showing up to threatening residents and then disappear into the night (not unlike the zombies of FWD).

Solnit and Crow provide accounts of people responding to crisis with solidarity and cooperation instead of violence, misanthropy, and alienation. In FWD, while the state is collapsing everywhere, the main characters are continually dealing with the issue of how to take care of one another and come to one another's rescue. The group includes several families who are

slowly learning to integrate and build a larger sense of identity with one another. There have been several episodes where characters are directly confronted with the question “who counts as family?”

Of course, the worry about the descent into barbarism continually looms for them as they work to build a community of care. The notion of the protection of the family is often part of fascist ideology and the need to use force to provide that protection is almost a given in that mindset. This attitude is represented in the character of Daniel, portrayed by Ruben Blades, who is depicted as a survivor of the Salvadoran civil wars of the 1980s (its not clear if he was part of the FMLN or Arena). It eventually comes out that he engaged in torture and the disappearing of victims. It is through his brutal interrogation of a captured soldier that the main characters learn of the military’s plan to kill them all.

He is also the mastermind behind the plan to unleash a zombie horde that will overwhelm the remaining military personnel so that they can rescue their own missing family members. Daniel is a clear example of the disaster fascism of the zombie genre—he is willing to use violence to protect his own and he sneers at any displays of compassion and empathy as “weakness”. The interesting work of the series will be to see how it uses this character and whether it is able to transform him into something more liberatory.

And whether or not disaster capitalism will appear in FWD is also unclear. Halfway through the season, the character of Strand appears in one of the military holding cells.

He is well dressed and able to gather information from his military captors by bribing them with his high priced jewelry. By the end of the series, he has joined the family and taken them to refuge in his luxurious mansion on the coast. There they have all the trappings of their former civilization: food, water, and electricity. Strand then makes it known that they can’t stay there and he is leaving to board a fully provisioned

yacht. Presumably, season two will begin there. Strand’s character remains mysterious, but he does have the power to alter the story with his resources and he expresses glee at a thought of a world in which the current financial elites, with their “grande lattes and frequent flier miles...”, are swept aside for a new world order.

How FWD will pull apart and tease out these different approaches remains to be seen and it might very well be the case that it reverts to the right wing fantasy that permeates the post-apocalyptic imagination at this time. Yet, its refreshing to see something that at least hints that another world is possible in which mutual aid and solidarity in the absence of the state might be a foundation.