

The Walking Dead and Bottom Days

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Abstract. *Undoubtedly, the industry of movies and other cultural entertainments bespeak of us as a society. Many anthropologists have focused on the analysis of cinema as a form of understanding the social fabric. In this vein, this paper not only explores the roots of the Walking Dead, a cablevision series that captivated a much broader audience, but also connects in the worldview of one of the best European philosophers, Soren Kierkegaard. Our thesis is that modernity seemingly jettisoned abject obedience and faith in revelation, though current US political campaigns apparently revert to premodern sensibilities. Modernity relied on human reason and scorned faith. But we have entered a postmodern world in which faith and obedience reappear under slightly different guises, a sort of return of the repressed in psychoanalytic terms. We have a postmodern world. We face it with fear and trembling because we cannot rely on faith. How then are we to understand what exactly we face and how should we respond?*

Introduction

The zombie virus has gone viral. The cable television series *The Walking Dead* had seven million ‘likes’ on Facebook and 300,000 Twitter followers as of march 2012 (Lazar 2012). Vampires, if anything, show even larger numbers with an estimated 32 million Facebook ‘likes’ (Graphs.net 2013). Other undead populate the web and popular culture. The undead in various forms may not inhabit the earth, but they proliferate and reproduce in electronic form along with print media. We suggest that this phenomenon, the popularity of undead motifs, does not arise from especially clever marketing strategies, although they play a roll, but they would find less success if it did not resonate with a form of public consciousness, or more accurately, unconsciousness.

The undead represent a postmodern sensibility. This sensibility reeks of decay.

“[It is a] ‘degraded’ landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Readers’ Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery and sciencefiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply ‘quote’, as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance”. (Jameson 1991:55)

Jameson goes on to assert that postmodern culture represents a political unconscious. That is, people experience a postmodern political economy, but they lack the wherewithal to express it in articulate discourse, in political terms. In a similar vein, the arts have represented, in what might be considered prescient ways, what has already begun in the economic, political, and social structures, but has not yet appeared in explicit terms. Somewhat arbitrarily stated, modernism began in the mid-nineteenth century. Charles Baudelaire called it *modernité*. Accordingly, modernism depicted the ephemeral, fleeting, ever changing nature of industrialized urbanism. Even then Baudelaire’s fascination with the macabre and his admiration for the work of Edgar Allan Poe portended a certain connection between death, decay, and the advent of modern culture. It is with such artistic background

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that another viewpoint seems relevant to the social character of the time.

Law and Order.

One of the questions that concerned philosophers and social scientists was how society is united. Thomas Hobbes (1651) envisaged the social bond as based on two powerful but contrasting tendencies: the appetite for the property of others, and the needs of personal safety. Hobbes goes on to say that one might fight to gain further wealth competing with others, but sooner or later, the concept of protection prevails. To avoid the war of all against all, people do confer to a third party, Leviathan (state) the monopoly of force. Therefore, in Hobbesian theory, human beings are prone to develop a lasting peace. In contrast, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1762) argued that human beings corrupt themselves when they abandon the state of nature as given by God. The societal order gives to person an illusory view of reality. The division of labor, accompanied with all ideological mechanism of indoctrination leads the individual savage mind to the covenant. Certainly, the conflict we in our societies observe today, results from this frustration and not vice-versa. The Rousseau legacy gave an all encompassing idea of how a group is formed, and it paves the ways for the contributions of another French scholar, Emile Durkheim.

Durkheim (1893, 1895, 1912) turned to Rousseau's concept of the *volonté générale* for a conception of social solidarity that did not depend on the atomistic individualism of liberal economics, today neoliberal economic, nor on the Hobbesian leviathan. Durkheim recognized that contractual relations among people, even those that ostensibly founded the state, depended on pre-existing norms and shared values. Here, Durkheim inserted the *conscience collectif* as a way to talk about how humans carry on their intercourse on a quotidian basis—that is, neither through formal contract nor coercion. People collectively create their normative worlds, which they then project onto various organizational and symbolic entities, hence arise churches, states, and religions.

The Liberal Alternative

While Durkheim sought an explanation for how a society is possible in collective explanations, the liberal alternative stays close to individualism. Instead of a coercive leviathan as in Hobbes, an apparently softer version was articulated by John Locke (1689). In the Lockean version of the social contract, the state acts as arbiter, whose main role is to settle disputes—a sort of general arbitration panel. John Rawls was one of the main exponents of this liberal tradition.

Based on his theory of justice, John Rawls identifies five forms of political organizations. In his 1999 *The Law of Peoples* he focuses on some questions linked to a utopia within the framework of a democratic constitutional society. Starting from this premise, Rawls explains not only why some nations fail in this process but also the idea that motivates the law of peoples in modern democracies. The first, he adds, is one of the evils of human history, unjust war and political oppression. The second refers to social policies to eradicate deep-seated injustices. Rawls' five subtypes of political organizations are: a) reasonable law, b) descent people, c) outlaw states, d) societies burdened by unfavorable conditions and e) benevolent absolutism.

The theory of reasonable law rests on the belief that people sacrifice their appetite for war and ambitions to achieve wider forms of political, economics, and social cooperation. Therefore, trade and negotiations are of paramount importance to balance the international relationships. Of course, Rawls is criticized simply because after Auschwitz this idea would seem a simplistic utopia, an allegory. His response to these allegations is not convincing. Rawls echoes Kant's doctrine of international law that only a liberal society may lead human beings to a sustainable state of well-being.

Reasonable and liberal people form a constitution that specifies democracy as the primary form of government. Reasonable people seem to be united by three factors, constitution, common sympathy, and moral nature. Each view is counter-balanced by the view of a second, centrifugal force, which leads the society to pluralism. The law of people not only limits the sovereignty of the state, and the problems this generates, but also limits states' propensity to declare war on other states. This idea corresponds with Rawls' concepts of justice and security.

“A difference between liberal peoples and states is that just liberal peoples limit their basic interests as required by the reasonable. In contrast, the content of interests of states does not allow them to be stable for the right reasons: that is, from

firmly accepting and acting upon a just Law of People. Liberal people do, however, have their fundamental interests as permitted by their conception of right and justice. They seek to protect their territory, to ensure the security and safety of their citizens, and to preserve their free political institutions and the liberties and free culture of their civil societies” (1999 p. 29).

What is important to discuss in the Rawls’s theory is to what an extent the liberality he proposes creates asymmetries or inequalities. He proposes the veil of ignorance in establishing a constitution in which the founders of a polity will not know where they will stand in the social and political-economic hierarchy. By this means, he argues, the constitution will ensure a measure of equality and equity, because no one wants to be at the bottom and if they are, wants the ability to rise.

Following this, Rawls sets forth a model to understand how conflict may be controlled. The veil of ignorance not only facilitates an egalitarian dialogue among liberal peoples, but also determines the lack of self-determination. People behave without knowing their own possibilities or the settings where they move. The principle of the laws of peoples can be exemplified in 8 points.

- 1— People are free and independent.
- 2— People are prone to observe treaties.
- 3— People are part of a much broader covenant that binds them
- 4— People are to observe a duty of non intervention
- 5— People reserve the right of self-defense
- 6— Human rights should be honored by peoples.
- 7— War engenders serious restrictions to freedom and democracy
- 8— Peoples must assist other peoples living under unfavorable conditions that prevent their having a just descent political regime.

As a theory, the law of peoples should be revisited, but not for the reasons Rawls notes. Not surprisingly, he describes democratic society as decent. In so doing, he cuts the world in two: democracies which are based on the law and toleration, and burdened societies. It is plainly that the duty of assistance, formulated as the Truman Doctrine by the United States after the Second World War, implies that all peoples wish to be not only democratic, but well-ordered. At a first glance, this belief overlooks the fact that order and wealth are inextricably intertwined. The neoliberal development in 1990s not only issued a lot of uncontrolled loans that indebted many poor countries, but also generated an iron chain of dependency between first and third world. Shown to be a resounding failure, the first social scientists who encouraged the theory of development—Milton Friedman possibly the most well known, especially in his design of the Pinochet-led Chilean economy—replied that cultural asymmetries were the reason for the third world not to gain the benefits of financial assistance. That is, it was not the economy; it was the value system of Third World peoples that kept them in poverty.

The Zero Sum Society

Rawls’ theory not only rests on shaky foundations, his shakiness lies in the ignorance of the history of democracy, which is only the history of Western law. The concept of zero sum society is changed whenever catastrophe surfaces. Bottom days, exemplify not only our fear of chaos, but the extent to which chaos will become reality. In his reading of Baudrillard, G. Coulter acknowledges that liberal illusion rests on believing that the world is ordered by rationality. This view not only ignores how reversibility works, but also how stability and instability alternate with each other. In these digital times, events occur first on the screen and afterward in reality. The boundaries between fiction and reality have been blurred. When one delves into Baudrillard’s legacy, it common to see a pioneer who alerted us to an enigmatic and intelligible world that we know through the lens of the media. To unravel the concept of truth, Coulter says that since things are created they are condemned to be destroyed. Failure to recognize this, is rejecting the nature of life. Baudrillard struggled to develop an all-

encompassing conceptual framework that helps people to understand the acceleration of history, the transformation of past-time in present history. Therefore, he compared the war on terror declared by Bush or the ever increasing disasters as the movie, *Minority Report*, where “precogs” help the police to make arrests before the crime is committed. While Roland Barthes employs the term ‘terror of meaning,’ Baudrillard admits that irony is based on the terrorism of meaning because it makes the system work against itself, as an autoimmune virus. Fiction, like theory gives meaning to our appreciation of the world, fiction pre-presents what we may perceive and feel. Therefore, the truth is not circumscribed by prior verification, but what comes from reversible thought. This means that if any system is explained by the construction of concepts (theory), its hidden side is nothing but the heart of the system. Truth rests on the enigmatic nature of the world. Recognizing that nothing can be said about the world, Baudrillard is convinced that appearances have replaced meaning, in a type of vertigo of interpretations. The violence of interpretation lies in the impossibility of separating reasons from effects in the events that the media portray. News about natural disasters produced by global warming effects is equivalent to terrorism and earth quakes without any kind of distinction. Not only has the system of meaning been altered by capitalism and the media, but upended. It has destabilized of what truth is, leading us to think in terms of the following axiom,

“Western rationality has always been based, as regards discourse, upon the criteria of truth and falsehood. However, in consumer society, the neo-language of advertising lies beyond truth and falsehood where it increases in codes and models rather than actual reference or veracity” (Coulter 2012 p. 26).

Following this, Coulter deciphers a contradiction. If Baudrillard’s axiom is right, the absence of truth reveals that we cannot find it, because the truth remains covert since is enrooted in fiction, beyond human access, and fiction cannot be empirically verified. Truth is as the snake that swallows its own tail. From irony to critique, his texts would go around the world defying previously stereotyped beliefs and stable knowledge. If we have some certainty about how World Trade Center collapse happened, Baudrillard would destroy our perceptual frames, even to claiming this event never existed in reality. Once again, as Coulter writes, he is not the philosopher of nonsense but his methods help us to uncover our Rawlsian veil of ignorance, our prejudices rooted in the mechanistic turn of mind. Coulter’s first section one is dedicated to the complexities of the world, perceptions of it, and the concept of reversibility. Coulter project was to analyze the limitations of Marx with respect to otherness. Coulter’s critique reveals the influence of post-Marxian legacy in Baudrillard. Baudrillard said that the West is debating itself into a quandary between the real and its double, simulation. However, we live in a moment when the real is framed by the principle of simulation. Since the real cannot override the copy, the hyper-real substitutes for the real. What today we may learn from disasters comes from cinema and the film-industry. In view of this argument, disasters are often commodified and sold by the media as not real events, but pseudo-events. The visual technology in digital times has not only changed the perceptual horizons accelerating time and space.

The Bottom Days

Damian Thompson (1996) says that millenarianism refers to the belief that civilization is facing the end of the world as a result of sins or other moral failings. This situation often is depicted as the encounter of good versus evil. After the latter is defeated, humankind is favored by a thousand years of prosperity and happiness. Thompson reminds us millenarianism is not a prerequisite of religious life. Moreover secular organizations in political life appeal to millenarianism in particular contexts. If the world advances inexorably to its own self-destruction, the New Testament reveals that a select group of persons will be saved. This, Thompson adds, leads to narcissism and maniacal grandiosity. It is not surprising this type of attitude favors mass suicide and similar pathologies; Jonestown comes to mind. Pertinent here is the connection of millenarianism with the economy. From Mircea Eliade on, anthropologists turned their attention to apocalypses as a projection of the economic cycle of the soil. Like a calendar that leaves some days for destruction, apocalypses appeal to a much broader discourse of disasters. Signs of terror accompany millenarianism, and point to the end as a product of self-corruption. The root of bottom days is the notion that sin must be expiated. Disasters may be equated to having a bad harvest. In many cultures this is commemorated by a New Year. The bottom day’s theorist realized that after the economy encountered problems, millenarianism surfaced as an expiatory ritual of restitution (Thompson, 1996).

Almost all cultures have tales about an exemplary center, an immemorial life where human beings and god coexisted in harmony. This paradise, a term coined by Eastern religions, has prevented access by humans the founding parents committed a crime, sin or other norm violation. From that day on, civilizations try to regain the primitive state of nature where suffering did not take place.

Thompson argues that if humankind lives in accordance to Gods' precepts, the cycle of decadence (downfall) may be deterred. For some reasons, the bottom days appears whenever the economic order is in danger, or in the process of basic change, like Zoroaster or the *Book of Daniel* that were written in times of uncertainty, war, and chaos. Apocalyptic literature seems to be associated with a rupture between two orders or cosmologies. Accompanied by an awful and shocking vision, prophets serve as mediators between the present and the shadows of future. The state of emergency that apocalyptic related literature generates is, for some analysts, a fertile source for messianic politicians. Thompson emphasizes the process of isolation that millenarian groups suffer. Since these attitudes break contact with outsiders, and reduce the number of social bonds, rendering members more vulnerable to psychological manipulation. The characteristics of apocalypses and bottom days prophecies are detailed below:

- The message given by God(s) or Angel(s) defies the prevailing political authority.
- The destruction of oppressors not only is imminent but an irreversible decision of gods.
- It appeals to a much broader sentiment of exception that sometimes leads to narcissism.
- The vision is revealed to a community, whose morality is set above that of other groups.
- The end of the world starts with a fight between two opposing forces—good and evil.
- There is a tendency to combine hope, linked to faith, with goodness and fear to evilness.
- The proximity of *the great disaster* triggers a mass migration, abandoning the old home.
- The calendar takes a month (28 days), to be divided by the divined number, 4. This gives 7, the days of the week. Thompson agrees though this has been imported by Judaism, (known as theory of great Week), it has been practiced in Sumer and other neighboring communities. Following this argument, bottom days would be a question of working time.
- The narrative is accompanied of disasters, which are caused by the moral decline of humankind.

The allegories used through these tales are emulated and projected to daily life. For example, John from Patmos had the vision of a great beast, a term which later came to be associated with Stalin, Hitler, Kissinger and even the Pope. The malleable nature of apocalypse makes the discourse perdurable in all epochs. In his book, *The End of Time*, Thompson demonstrates that the cycles of time are determined by the economy, but when some problem presages an upcoming crisis, the idea of the end of time serves to recuperate the status quo by renovating the pride and trust for the community all—a reaffirmation of its *conscience collectif* (Durkheim 1912). In view of this, politicians whose administrations were not successful are prone to manipulate apocalyptic literature to cause two effects: fear and hope. Based on a state of rivalry between what is considered the evil, or the essence of corruption, the political order tends to be perpetuated. Following this explanation, it is not surprising that the Mayan prophesies of the bottom days in 2012 would be a result from the financial crisis that whipped the world in 2007. Although technically this event has a clear diagnosis, terrorism, natural disasters, global warming, and other traumatic events were interpreted as a sign of the end. Of course, a discourse of this caliber means that no real solutions for real problems are needed. Not coincidentally, the citizenry is domesticated by the introduction of daunting news. People feel as if nothing can be done simply because the end is imminent. This discourse gives elites more legitimacy, and undermines the critique inside the society.

Every end of millennium represents for human beings a new structuration of their beliefs, their production, forms of consumption, and even their hierarchical lines of authority. Millenarianism can be defined as a moral movement whose aims are intended to eradicate the sin of human heart; at the same time it offers a new pattern of behavior rooted in brotherhood, love, and cooperation. As privileged witnesses of the beginning of a new

millennium, current scholars play a pivotal role in the understanding these types of radical changes for humanity, although this topic has not gained considerable attention from social sciences for now. Some members of societies invent their own the eschatology or the bottom days. Sometimes they are supported by previous polarized beliefs that emphasize the in-group as a sign of good while the others are depicted as a representation of evil. For that reason, the present review is twofold. It refers to the different anthropological waves that focused in millenarianism, and it reads a social discourse which can be examined to reconstruct the life of writers who prophesized the end of world.

Norman Cohn (1998) surmises that Zoroaster (c. 1000 and 1500 B.C.E) was the first prophet who addressed the apocalypses which symbolize the final fight between Asha's forces (order) and Druj (chaos). Evidently, Zoroaster's life was marked by a time of turbulence and conflicts. Zoroaster was experiencing the invasion of new Indo-Aryan neighbors. Most likely, an Iranian invasion pushed him and their relatives to escape to other remote zones. Under the dichotomy of domination or liberation, Zoroaster projects in his texts the ambivalence involved his deeper emotions. After all, the theory of apocalypses is not too strange. The message of apocalypses is aimed at articulating a devastation resulting from human corruption. Suffering, redemption, and the rediscovery of tragedy are parts of Zoroastrianism interconnected in Christianity. One of the relevant aspects predominate in the end of the world seems to be the injustice and despair.

Bernard McGinn (1998) examined the consequences of the fall of the Roman Empire. According to McGinn, Medieval Christianity dissociated the conceptualization of civilization from Christianization. These societies were in part fragmented and redeemed their disputes in civil wars on behalf of religion. The belief in a last judgment, encouraged by theologians, led to the need to forecast when and how the world would end. The theory of apocalypses and end of world converge on hopes for a new life and a thousand years of peace within the context of terror in a realm ripe for total destruction. McGinn addresses the legends giving origin to the theses of Beda, Gregorio Magno, and Saint Columbianus (three scholars who sustained the idea that a Sacred Roman Empire should be erected following Catholic principles). The figure of Christ as a king of kings was of course functional to the contemporary political power of a nobility. The historical frame ranges from 400 to 1000 C.E, which corresponded to a new sense of Christianity based on the meaning of Christ as a king.

Krishan Kumar (1998) emphasizes the apocalypse as a figure of utopia. In this valuable project, Kumar catches a glimpse of the different sentiments predominating in European societies during tenth century. He compares the fear and expectation of Middle Ages with our postmodern gaze, arguing that we are witness to a decline of hope. The secularization of disaster has been created by humans so as to experience the terror of an imminent end. Unlike the Middle Ages, the lack of hope puts humanity in a difficult position. The tenth century was not time of unmitigated terror, even though there were some natural tensions. Saint Agustine and the Venable Bede had hopefully anticipated the end of World in 999. Generally, the Roman Catholic Church considered prophecies a form of heresy, but with certain toleration. The Protestant Reformation would reinvent the apocalyptic traditions continuing with the exegetic and historical revisions linking directly the figure of the Antichrist with the Pope. In this vein, professor Kumar accepts that the mayhem brought by the advent of tenth century was accompanied by a renaissance of culture and economic growth. The bottom-day's destruction by imposition of blood, pestilence, and violence was certainly associated with a moral need for rebirth. Only if the ascetic suffers in the profane world, would the Lord would bring eternal life in heaven.

Nonetheless, our current times are characterized by a notable lack of certainty and hope for the possibility of a better life. The spread of the secular outlook and atheism seemed to change the cosmology of lay people in regard to natural disasters. Although the dread of a farmer in tenth century can be analogically compared with a postmodern citizen of a megacity, the point is that our world is much more sorrowful and hazardous. Westerners witness civil wars in Middle East and parts of Europe as well as higher rates of unemployment and other calamities from the upsurge of lethal virus to the threat of bio-nuclear terrorist attacks. The postmodern millenarianism sets the pace to panic, pain, and frustration. Economic rational calculation rooted in the egoism of market decimated trust in others to the extent and leads consumers to melancholy. We are living a chronic mourning.

In Kumar's account modernity prioritized the hermeneutic of the close of a neoliberal utopia. Late modern capitalism has created the annihilation of time and along with it an implicit lack of alternative pathways and emptiness of sense in our day-to-day lives. In this context, Kumar argues that we are in the presence of a devaluated millenarianism that lacks any a romantic vision of utopia. Whereas the Christian millenarianism

prepares people to live forever through the death, the lack of faith in God put our civilization in a troublesome situation because the death is contemplated only with fear. Nonetheless, Kumar is convinced the utopia has not completely disappeared in Western but has mutated to other forms such as the concern about ecological issues. Whatever the case may be, Christianity paved the way to the advent of a new millennium which can be manipulated by elites to their own benefit. The political manipulation of fear can lead humanity to a real state of conflagration, one fabricated and disseminated by mass media.

Fear and Trembling at the End of the world

Kierkegaard began his essay by reverting to René Descartes' famous skepticism to doubt everything. But Kierkegaard (1843) notes that not even Cartesian skepticism excludes faith. He quoted from the Philosopher's *Principles of Philosophy* (1644 Pt.I sec.76): "What God has revealed to us is incomparably more certain than anything else; and that we ought to submit to the Divine authority rather than our own judgment even though the light of reason may seem to us to suggest, with the utmost clearness and evidence, something opposite."

Kierkegaard used the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac to treat the matter of Christian faith. In so doing he made the story fit his argument. Bob Dylan, on the other hand, succinctly summarized it in his lyrics, which captures the original sense of the story.

Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
Abe says, "Man, you must be puttin' me on"
God say, "No." Abe say, "What?"
God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but
The next time you see me comin' you better run"
Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin' done?"
God says, "Out on Highway 61" (Dylan 1965)

The Hebrew Scripture from chapter 22 of the book of *Genesis*, composed c. 500-600 CE, made obedience the central lesson.

"15 And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham a second time out of heaven,
16 and said: 'By Myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son,
17 that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;
18 and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast hearkened to My voice.'
(Genesis)"

Abraham obeyed and therefore God rewarded him. Faith did not enter into it. But fear and trembling did, as Dylan's interpretation makes clear. Obedience follows fear as Machiavelli knew when he wrote that the secure prince prefers fear to love. Rewards accrue to those who obey. Those who resist risk punishment and death, or sickness unto death as Kierkegaard wrote subsequently in 1849.

Kierkegaard preached a specifically Christian faith in which sacrifice figures prominently. His rendering of the Abraham and Isaac story leads with what he believed was an inexorable logic to the sacrifice of Christ in which God sacrificed his son (himself) so that humans would no longer sacrifice. Kierkegaard would have the Christian sacrifice mark the historical turn away from the dominance of a priestly caste, as they were the ones who performed the Judaic sacrifice. Friedrich Nietzsche made the historical argument explicit: "in retrospect one

understood Jesus to have been *in rebellion against the existing order*. . . Evidently the small community did *not* understand the main point” (Nietzsche 1988 sec. 40). Instead, Kierkegaard lodges the divine in each individual who sacrifices only symbolically and mentally. As Emile Durkheim pointed out, “The things which the worshipper really gives his gods are not the foods which he places upon the altars, nor the blood which he lets flow from his veins: it is his thought (1912). It is, of course, in thought that obedience and subordination begin.

Modernity seemingly jettisoned abject obedience and faith in revelation, though current US political campaigns apparently revert to premodern sensibilities. Modernity relied on human reason and scorned faith. But we have entered a postmodern world in which faith and obedience reappear under slightly different guises, a sort of return of the repressed in psychoanalytic terms.

We have a postmodern world. We face it with fear and trembling because we cannot rely on faith. How then are we to understand what exactly we face and how should we respond?. Although the Mayan calendar predicted a world-ending every 13 Baktuns (December 21, 2012), a rather less eschatological approach speaks of the end of a world system. The world system now at its end is the world capitalist system as described and analyzed by Immanuel Wallerstein (2003, 2004), the originator of world system theory (1974). Wallerstein has combined his world system theory with another contemporary theory of systems—namely chaos theory. Briefly, Wallerstein argues that the world capitalist system is moribund and the world has entered a chaotic state of its political economy.

There are several cultural representations of the end of the world capitalist system. These include a breakdown in world finances, increasing violence, widening social disparities, political repressions, insurgent social and political movements, and various artistic representations of death.

The Beginning of the End: Philosophizing About It

Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Kierkegaard could see the results of extreme social upheaval. He reacted against it, in fact all the new bourgeois political economy, especially including the mass media (1846). Of course, the tumult did not originate from the heavens, but from new social arrangements summed up under the sobriquet, industrial capitalism. The new dominant class in these arrangements was the bourgeoisie who steered a course of constant revolution.

“The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind”. (Marx and Engels 1848: c.1)

The same milieu surrounded Kierkegaard and Marx and Engels. Whereas Kierkegaard examined it as a crisis in faith endemic to the human condition, Marx and Engels situated it in historical processes. The problem for Kierkegaard’s explanation lies with his reluctance to give up the transcendent. As suggested by his reference to Descartes, Kierkegaard could not avoid the assumption of a transcendental ego, which also presented a stumbling block to Kant. Nonetheless, Kierkegaard’s argument can lead to greater understanding.

Kierkegaard points readers away from reason and toward something beyond it, namely faith: “faith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off” (1843:64). He went on to chastise Hegel for arguing that individuals relate to the universal as particulars. Instead, according to Kierkegaard, they transcend the universal by their actions in the world.

“Faith is precisely this paradox, that the individual as the particular is higher than the universal (...) the particular individual who, after he has been subordinated to the universal, now through the universal becomes the individual who as the particular is superior to the universal”. (Kierkegaard 1843:66)

How do they accomplish this? They act absurdly. “He acts by virtue of the absurd, for it is precisely absurd that he as the particular is higher than the universal” (67). Tortuous reasoning this may be, but it provides a clue

toward a solution. Where do people act absurdly and with such grandiosity that they subsume the universe? It occurs commonly in dreams. What Kierkegaard was trying to reason through remains inaccessible to reason. It resides, however, not in faith, which may not be justified, but remains an act accessible reason. It resides in what reason does not govern, because it is unconscious, as shown by our most common encounter with the unconscious in dreams.

Trying to retain a transcendent ego when all around us is in constant flux, when “all that is solid melts into air,” entails absurdity. Despite the possibility that human life may be absurd as in Albert Camus (1942), when discourse and argumentation lead to absurdity, they have encountered a fatal stumbling block. They have failed. We may discount them because they end in nonsense. Nonetheless, reason does not rule all our mental processes. It does not rule the unconscious, as Sigmund Freud pointed out at the beginning of his psychological writings in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). As Freud argued, reason does not rule the unconscious, but we can make what is unconscious, conscious by analysis. This is what Marx and Engels were attempting. Whereas they avoided the problem of the transcendent ego, because they focused on the empirical, other thinkers addressed it head on. The present argument detours to them, but will return to the realities of political economy to explain popular culture phenomena in this age of the digital, as opposed to industrial.

Killing off the Transcendent

Arguably, no other idea of Nietzsche’s is better known than his death of God assertion. He first mentioned it in *The Gay Science* (1882). He began his discussion with a parable in which The Madman, surrounded by unbelievers, declares that we, presumably humanity, have killed God.

“Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? . . . Do we bear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? . . . God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (Nietzsche 1882 sec. 125)

Later in the section, Nietzsche has The Madman realizing that since people are not responding as he expected, he concludes that he must have come too early. “I have come too early,’ he said then; ‘my time is not yet.’ . . . it has not reached the ears of men . . . and yet they have done it themselves.” As Nietzsche made clear in the sections leading up to it, sections 108-125, His point was that there is no transcendent, no eternal, nothing is fixed, fast frozen, all is fluid. Neither the earth, nor the universe, nor absolute ideas provide anything like a secure observation platform. There is no purpose in life, nor in the universe, no grand design, no telos. We are free, but we must free ourselves.

“Let us beware of thinking that the world eternally creates new things. There are no eternally enduring substances; matter is as much an error as the God of the Eleatics. But when shall we be done with our caution and care? When will all these shadows of God cease to darken our minds? When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to “naturalize” [sic] humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?” (sec. 109)

Instead of fear and trembling, Nietzsche recommended rejoicing at the realization that humans are the only creators of the only world they have—the human world. We stare into an abyss, but that abyss is apparent. We have hallucinated it. That is what Marx and Engels meant when they said that “man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” Compelled perhaps, but the realization comes hard. People are loathe to give up their security, even if it is imaginary.

Let us return to that myth by which a nascent state among Semitic peoples justified their foundations of law—the Abraham-Isaac sacrifice. In this story, the tribal custom that prohibited fathers from killing sons, a needed custom if the tribe would survive for more than one generation, must give way to the wishes of God. In this, God’s wish subordinates human law to a divine charter, and thenceforth all law must be founded on a contract between Abraham, as representative of the tribe, and God. Never forget, though, that such law derives its power from violence, as Dylan pithily explained. “Mythical violence in its archetypal form is a mere manifestation of the gods. Not a means to their ends, scarcely a manifestation of their will, but primarily a manifestation of their existence” (Benjamin 1921:248). The gods are the ultimate law breakers as they transcend human institutions and the real conditions of life and relations among people.

“If mythic violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood”. (Benjamin 1921:251)

Nietzsche saw his task as clearing away reliance on the gods, or any other transcendental figure, to free people from their fear. Like Marx and Engels before him, he struggled against the tide of both scholarly and popular sentiment. For present purposes, however, Nietzsche’s struggles themselves are not an issue. Instead, the question is why he, or anyone, had his insights at the time and place he did—why Europe in the 1880s? What was going on that would predispose such insights? Ideas such as his do not fall from the sky. They are not divinely inspired.

Late nineteenth century Europe, called by Mark Twain the gilded age in America, witnessed several significant developments: the second industrial revolution led by electric power, neocolonialism, and the social, if not total political triumph of the bourgeois class. What Marx and Engels observed in the 1840s had borne fruit forty years later. It terrified Kierkegaard who sought safety in his god. Nietzsche saw an opportunity to kill the gods and transcend the values of good and evil that sustained the social order. He recognized that people create their own conditions of life, with ‘create’ as the operative word. Humans create. They have bound themselves with a morality of good and evil. He saw an opportunity to transcend, or sublimate in Hegelian terms, a morality whose genealogy came from slave-based societies and a religion originating in sacrifice. Accordingly, Nietzsche’s transcendent figure, his Superman, is a creator and a destroyer in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885) who goes beyond the master-slave morality in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887).

Nietzsche wrote at the threshold of modernity. His project aimed at destroying the shackles of the old morality. At first he sought his goal in Dionysian wisdom: “temporary identification with the principle of life” (1967 sec.417). He realized his endeavor to oppose decay was impossible, and “Thereupon I advanced further down the road of disintegration . . . We have to be destroyers! . . . To the paralyzing sense of general disintegration and incompleteness I opposed the *eternal recurrence*” (1967 sec.417). Destruction has to come first; otherwise people will never escape the slave morality and the value system of masters versus slaves. To anticipate, Nietzsche here reminds one of J. Robert Oppenheimer’s comment on the successful test of the first atomic bomb: “I am become death, the destroyer of worlds,” citing the *Bhagavad-Gita* (Oppenheimer 1945/1965). Just as Vishnu could take on both aspects of creator and destroyer, Nietzsche adjured people to become creators and destroyers.

The Machinery of Creation

Artistic work presents the most obvious, but by no means only or even most important, instance of human creativity. It is most obvious, because artist work creates works—paintings, plays, symphonies, sculptures, and so on. The works objectify human creativity in ways that help us experience them as distinctive products, unlike for example social institutions which are continuous and necessarily collective. Although sharing certain basic characteristics as art, we sense glaring differences between say Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and *The Walking Dead*. Both are dramatic performances, and both present problems of their respective ages. Nonetheless, differences in media technology count for a lot in our sense that they seem quite distinct from one another. In part that difference lies with the different machinery used to produce them.

A critical feature of the dramatic machinery of ancient Athens was architecture. Performed outdoors the stage and chorus area formed the focus of stadium seating accommodating as many as 12 to 14 thousand spectators. Since dialogue was essential, the architecture had to provide acoustics so that the thousands of spectators could hear it. This kind of architectural machinery has two important features: it is stationary and relatively permanent. Neither feature applies to *The Walking Dead*. The latter is a digitized performance enacted remotely and based on a comic book series of the same name. Audiences can see and hear it at any time or place using a variety of devices ranging from theater sized screens to hand held mobile telephones. The enabling machinery, satellites, remains invisible, certainly compared to the stone stadia of ancient Greece. In ancient Greece the audience participated in the performance and the whole performance was a ritual of intensification since the plays enacted the mythologies that served as icons of culture. The performances enculturated ancient Greeks. The audience entered into the work of art. In television performances, and *a fortiori* for online videos, the audience is removed. Pace Benjamin, who said “Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction. The laws of its reception are most instructive”

(Benjamin 1936 sec.IX). In this he paralleled Brechtian epic or as Brecht later called it, dialectical theater. Distraction, or escapism, was what Brecht tried to overcome by making his productions analogous to those of the ancient Greeks: One of the goals of epic theatre is for the audience to always be aware that it is watching a play: "It is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from [epic theatre]: the engendering of illusion" (Brecht 1964:122).

In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin (1936) analyzed machine replication. His analysis aimed at a common problematic for the Frankfurt School—namely, how to exclaim how the German proletariat, widely considered among the most progressive if not revolutionary in the industrialized world, succumbed to the appeal of the Nazis. He and his colleagues lay the blame on mass culture and its manipulation for political ends.

"The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values. . . . All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war". (Benjamin 1936 Epilogue)

At least with respect to theater, and doubtless other forms of art as well, manipulation of audiences for political purposes does not necessarily equate with fascism. Moreover, the unfortunate political consequences of the art forms have less to do with the art than their use and milieu. The political problematic does not arise from the medium, but the uses for which it is intended and the uses to which it is put, often very different things. Here one distinguishes between the mechanical reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica* as opposed to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. As to Picasso's intent, Paul Virilio reports that "When a German interrogated him in 1937 about his masterwork: "That is your doing, not mine!" (Virilio 2000:19). Leni Riefenstahl blamed it all on the audience.

"I met Leni Riefenstahl and asked her about her epic films that glorified the Nazis. Using revolutionary camera and lighting techniques, she produced a documentary form that mesmerized Germans; her Triumph of the Will cast Hitler's spell".

"She told me that the "messages" of her films were dependent not on "orders from above," but on the "submissive void" of the German public. Did that include the liberal, educated bourgeoisie? "Everyone," she said". (Pilger 2013)

Benjamin, and far less ambiguously Theodor Adorno (1970) decried the subsumption of classical artistic canons to the political economy of capitalism. Capitalism affects art the same way it affects all other aspects of social life: it alienates artists from the means of production and their works as it commodifies art, just as it does with all forms of human endeavor. In fact, art is a realm of social life *less* commodified than others. If there is a difference wrought by *The Walking Dead* and *Oedipus Rex*, it does not lie in their technical media, contrary to the dictum of Marshall McLuhan that the medium is the message. The relations among artists, audience, technology, and the social, economic, and political order are dialectical. They condition and in fact co-create one another. *The Walking Dead* reflects the end of the political economic order of world capitalism in much the same way as *Oedipus Rex* represented the beginning of the end of Athenian democracy.

Conclusion

Societies are constructed on basis of two contrasting forces, order and chaos. Staring from the premise the world has been created by the forces of order also the end should be in charge of chaos. The presence of death in biological life of human beings is experienced as problematic and fearful. However, individual human beings gain immortality through their identification with and participation in their societies (Durkheim 1912). Hence arose the belief in recycled individuals: when one dies in this world one expects live at other level. Theories of apocalypses are often projection of the social contexts a people is experiencing. Millenarianism is composed of two elements, the bottom-days is accompanied by a terrible fright which wreaks havoc in populace with a renovation of faith and hope for the future. The early capitalism erased the utopist element of in favor of a paradise on earth where everyone could have the opportunity to live an a life of abundance. Its late modern decline has ushered in a hopeless consternation, represented by a world of undead. Like Kierkegaard, Bull is not wrong to say that in Western history the religious belief surrounding the future has consisted in an eschatological conviction the world will abruptly end with the return of a messiah who will vindicate the pourers or oppressed

in his name fighting stubbornly against their enemies. Precisely, one of the aspects fear generates in people is lack of perspective and uncertainty as to precisely how and when the planet will finally succumb.

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