

Statehood and Legitimacy In *The Walking Dead*

Gregory Heeren

The premise behind hit TV show *The Walking Dead* sounds fairly simple. In an apocalyptic world, in which the vast majority of the population has been wiped out by a virus that has turned them into bloodthirsty, brainless automatons, a small band of survivors struggles to stay alive and optimistic. Beyond the more obvious elements of the show, the superficial hacking to pieces of zombies, inter-group squabbles, and skirmishes with other surviving clans, there exists a broad reservoir of implications and inferences that can be drawn from the ways in which these characters interact with one another and the way that they compete and organize in order to stay alive. By looking at the show through a lens of political theory, we can apply the ideas of several key theorists about issues such as statehood, leadership, legitimacy, and rights, using the show as a practical testing ground for influential ideas about political organization. Ultimately, by analyzing the particular threats that the characters face and the roots of their failings in adequately protecting themselves from those threats, we see that the characters' failure to organize effectively is chiefly due to their inability to form stable and reliable governing structures.

It will be useful to first outline some basic plot and thematic elements of the show. The first episode opens with a middle-aged man named Rick Grimes waking up in an abandoned hospital. After stumbling outside, he finds himself in a dystopian nightmare. Fortunately, Rick soon runs into some survivors in Atlanta and miraculously is led to his family, who are living in a camp nearby. The main characters of concern are Shane (Rick's best friend and 'cop buddy'), Lori (Rick's wife and Shane's love interest), and Carl (Rick's nine year old son.) In the group's struggle to survive they eventually end up squatting on a farm owned by a man named Hershall. The second season is primarily set on this farm, where the group struggles to survive amid zombie attacks and inner-group conflict. As the characters grapple with relationships, personal pride, and the ever-looming zombie threat, the relationships that develop between these key characters become increasingly illustrative of the obstacles to successful political organization.

In his article "The Walking Dead, Like All Zombie Stories:... Not About Zombies At All," journalist Jeffrey Goldberg points out that "Zombies are quite one dimensional as characters...so they're deeply uninteresting" (Goldberg). As the story of the Walking Dead develops, and as the conflicts and struggles between (living) characters grow richer and more complex, the show becomes less and less about the zombies and more about the characters themselves. The point has been made in academic literature that horror fiction involving zombies is particularly well suited for social commentary. Unlike stories about werewolves or abstract monsters, zombies give us an image of a widespread collapse of humanity, of human institutions, and of the moral frameworks that humans have set up. Zombies are "exceptional vessels for allegory because, essentially, they are us—or, more accurately, they were us. Since zombies retain their human form, no matter how

mangled, we recognize ourselves in them” (Weed 14). Zombies are therefore “products of the same society they threaten” (15), opening them of to a range of theoretical social interpretations.

The Walking Dead is open to rich analysis through a range of lenses, including psychology and philosophy. However, the show especially lends itself to deep political analysis. With all pre-existing government structures and institutions, as well as contracts and guarantees, demolished, those existing survivors have to band together against a common threat (the zombie hordes) for their mutual benefit and protection. This organization is natural, and it is the fundamental basis for political theory about state formation. While the addition of zombies presents a fun extra element of surprise and terror into the equation, and one that surely impacts the attempted political organization, the show is essentially about a primitive political effort by a group of humans without institutions to successfully organize itself. This paper will consider the organizational structures of authority set up by the group, first stressing the importance of the family unit as a means of organization, and then considering the emergence of statehood. In the discussion on statehood, I will consider the sources of political legitimacy and the forms that it takes. Also crucial to this discussion will be an analysis of the rights of the people in this developing governing structure and the bounds of authority. Finally, the forms of governance adopted by the group will be viewed critically, and be considered as the institutional basis for the group’s weakness.

Perhaps it is relevant to raise the academic discussion about the zombie craze itself as indicative of a larger pop culture movement to dehumanize people who, in the real world, are viewed as enemies, and to provide social commentary on this fear and hatred. Zombies, while largely recognized to be allegorical of social problems, are also seen as “stand-ins for Islamist terrorists, illegal immigrants, carriers of foreign contagions, and other ‘dangerous’ border crossers” (Saunders 81). While this is certainly a valuable discussion, viewing the organization of conscious people as the more interesting political question, this paper will consider zombies to be a largely faceless, inhuman security threat, and will in fact view the zombies rather than the humans as ‘The Walking Dead.’

The Family Unit

“All I am anymore is a man looking for his wife and son. Anybody that gets in the way of that is gonna lose,” Rick snarls at Merrell Dixon in the second episode of the first season, immediately after Merrell has threatened Rick and his small clan with a gun (“Guts”). After walking out of the abandoned hospital Rick, naturally, tries to go to his home. After discovering that his family has left home, finding them becomes his main priority. In an amazing stroke of luck he is reunited with them, and at that point his sole concern becomes protecting them. We can consider the family unit the primary and immediate means of governance in this post-apocalyptic world. It has a crucial role to play in the organization and preservation of survivors. The formal state has crumbled along with all of its institutions and its obligations, legal and implicit, to the citizens. The only remnant of a stable organizing structure still intact from the old world, the only social grouping that people are familiar with and already recognize, is that of the family unit. Love of family is one of the key motivations for the survivors to continue to live and to strive to improve their situation, which will require political organization. Acclaimed horror author Kim Paffenroth acknowledges that “the committed love among family members is the only reliable, if fragile, source of meaning or purpose in an otherwise bleak human existence” (249). We can see this at work from the outset of

the show in Rick's obsession with finding his wife and son. Once they are reunited, we instantly witness how this family bond will affect decision-making within the group. The day after Rick returns, he already is pleading with his wife to allow him to return to Atlanta, where he has just come from, in order to rescue Merrell, the aggressive and ambitious racist he accidentally left tied to the roof of a building. He can no longer independently decide to do this; instead, he has to plead and negotiate with his wife for her to allow him to return, which she eventually agrees to. This shift from independent from group, in this case family, decision making represents the birth of a type of societal structure of decision making, albeit one that the characters are used to and comfortable with. This family unit, with all of its embedded implications about protection and obligation, is arguably what also gives rise to a more developed extra-familial 'state' identity. Because family is all that the group has left, they also recognize its importance and sanctity, prompting them, somewhat ironically, to occasionally intervene within families in order to protect the family unit.

Because of the sanctity of the family unit, "the most serious threat in *The Walking Dead* (*sic*) is from those men who threaten the established family units" (Paffenroth 247). When Carol's abusive husband Ed grabs her arm and starts to lead her back to the camp against her will, Shane takes it upon himself to tackle Ed to the ground and beat his face to a pulp. After this brutal retributive attack he menacingly threatens, "you put your hands on your wife... anyone in this camp again, I will not stop next time" ("Tell It to the Frogs"). Shane has asserted his right to interfere in order to protect the family unit before expanding this claim of protection to the whole camp. In some ways then, the group widens their sense of family to extend to all the group's members. In other ways, this family association might be dangerous to the formation of a cohesive group. At one point Rick admits to Lori, "I'd kill every single one of the people here if I thought it'd keep you safe" ("This Sorrowful..."). This mindset clearly makes family a liability. Socrates understood this divisive impact of family, expressing in *The Republic* the need for a society to be "free of faction." This leads Socrates to propose that in the ideal city people should be lied to and told that they were all crafted underground by mother earth. This will cause them to "think of the other citizens as brothers and born of the earth," freeing them from faction and causing them to look out for the common good rather than private interest (III/414 b-e). In the show, despite the factions that arise from these family allegiances, this need to protect the core family unit is evidently the main factor that gives rise to a sense of 'state.'

Statehood and Rights

Thomas Hobbes is often credited as being the first truly modern (Western) political theorist. Locke's theory of rights and state formation, on which much of the modern western Democratic state is built, can be considered in several ways a response to Hobbes. The idea of a state emerging from savagery is directly applicable to the situation that the survivors in *The Walking Dead* find themselves in. Finding themselves in a 'state of nature,' the group organizes for their mutual security and protection. Hobbes writes that the life of man in a state of nature is "solitary, poor, brutish, nasty, and short" (Locke). It is natural then that people organize into some political form to avoid the danger surrounding them. According to Hobbes, this necessity for organization will naturally cause a leader to rise up and rule as a sovereign. Ideas about rights and morality are empty without "a sovereign to determine its content and enforce it by the credible threat of violence" (Walker 62). Locke, on the other hand, believes that every person has natural rights to

“life, health, liberty, and possessions” (Locke) which are present before the state, and which it is the mission of the state to protect.

We can see both sides of this theory of state formation present in the show. Rick and Shane both rise up as sovereigns in the show, creating what is essentially an issue of jurisdiction, which will culminate in Rick being forced to kill Shane. The process of rule making for the group consists of Rick and Shane making decisions for everyone, with the others occasionally disagreeing but being ultimately overruled. These two also set the bounds of rights for everyone. Rick once boldly tells the group “We don’t kill the living” (“Wildfire”), standing up for the implicit right to life; however, he breaks this rule when he shoots two men from a different group who attack him. Property rights last for an even shorter time. When Andrea at first hesitates to take a necklace from a shop, Rick tells her “I don’t think those rules apply anymore” (“Guts...”). But this opens up the question, what rights do apply anymore? This is what the group, and its two self-elected leaders, fail to define. In season two, when the group moves to the farm of an elderly man named Hershall, they vow to respect his right to property. Hershall tells the group not to carry guns on his property, a rule that Rick respects but that Shane disobeys as soon as it becomes inconvenient. Additionally, Hershall commands the group not to open his barn (which happens to be filled with his zombie family), but Shane eventually disobeys this rule, leading to a dangerous zombie massacre. The issue of defining rights can be tied directly to the issue of leadership. The competing claim to authority by Rick and Shane is a primary cause for the inability of the group to develop a coherent and stable code of law to govern their behavior.

Legitimacy

“We’re gonna have ourselves a little pow-wow. Talk about who’s in charge. I vote me. Anybody else?” (“Guts...”). This quote is not from Rick or Shane, but rather from the aggressive racist Merrell. The small group is on a rooftop in Atlanta, surrounded by ‘walkers,’ and Merrell is pointing a gun at the group of survivors. This scene illustrates the real nature of danger and power in this nightmarish world. The true challenge of survival is not from the zombies. While they present an enormous threat, they begin to drift into the scenery. The real struggle is in organizing a group and bringing it under a single centralized ‘government,’ which Merrell briefly attempts to do through force. Rick rises from background to calmly reply “Yeah,” before knocking Merrell to the floor. In doing so, he is asserting his own supremacy and his own right to govern. He does so, in this instance, by using force not against the group, but against another, more dangerous ruler. Does this then give Rick legitimacy in his governance? An understanding of the type of state that forms within the main group in *The Walking Dead*, how it comes to form, and the inherent problems it has requires a discussion of the legitimacy of the ruling party, or in this case one individual. In the wake of the collapse of civilization, groups of survivors are immediately concerned with just one thing: survival. As Si Sheppard writes in his essay about clan leaders in *The Walking Dead*, states are formed to move from anarchy to some order, and they necessitate “individuals (surrendering) their autonomy in exchange for security” (Sheppard 89). As the group struggles to organize itself and seek out leadership, it also struggles to identify what constitutes a ‘legitimate’ claim of governmental authority for which every member of the group is willing to give up personal autonomy.

In the few scenes before Rick arrives in the camp, it is apparent that Shane has adopted the primary leadership role in the camp. He has clearly taken charge of the group and is seen giving orders. This assertion of authority is in some ways unsurprising. Because Shane was a police officer before the virus, the group views him as a natural figure of authority to rise up and take charge (Sheppard 90). Rick arrives at the camp with this same qualification, creating a power struggle between the two former best friends for this alpha-dog, leading position. This struggle very quickly creates tension, made even more complicated and intense by the relationship between Shane and Rick's wife while Rick was in the hospital. Rick arrives at the camp in the second episode of the first season, and already in the fifth episode we see Shane pointing a gun at his back, on the verge of killing him.

Another way that we can analyze these competing claims to leadership, beyond personal qualifications, is by viewing them through the theory of charismatic authority. Many theorists have conceptualized the idea of a charismatic authority in different ways; however, the original and most famous interpretation is that of Max Weber. A simplified version of charismatic authority can be drawn out of his writings, where he at one point describes the theory as "resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person [...]" (Weber 215). This is, according to Weber, one form of political legitimacy, the other two being tradition and rule of law. Focusing in on charismatic authority, we see that this framework maps closely onto the relationship between Rick and the rest of the group. While both Rick and Shane begin with a level of 'traditional' legitimacy, derived from their status as police officers, Rick quickly takes a firmer leadership position by seeking to establish charismatic legitimacy. As previously mentioned, the day after arriving at the camp Rick unilaterally decides to return to Atlanta to rescue Merrell. While he asks his wife first, he makes it clear that this is something he personally feels he needs to do for the good of the group, and it is clear that whatever his wife's response he will find a way to accomplish this task. During the commitment stage of charismatic leadership the leader demonstrates his "extreme commitment" to the group, which "often takes the shape of some kind of sacrifice on the part of the leader or impending danger on the leader" (Palshikar 4). This makes the leader appear "courageous" in the eyes of the followers and gives him legitimacy. By returning to Atlanta to save Merrell, who is significantly the brother of another member of the group, and also to gather more guns, Rick shows that he is willing to put himself at risk for the good of the group. Later when a girl in the group, Sophia, gets lost in the woods, Rick immediately rushes in to find her. While Shane takes a more utilitarian approach to leadership, constantly analyzing what is in the best interest of the group as a whole, Rick constantly shows his willingness to sacrifice his personal safety for the good of the group, causing him to appear more devoted to the good of the whole group and more charismatic.

The question remains of whether or not this really constitutes legitimacy. After making sacrifices for the group, a charismatic leader naturally loses a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of his people. His followers will "(suspect) their leader as pompous and a hypocrite" (Palshikar 4). This shift in thinking occurs when the group starts to become angry and disillusioned with Rick after they fail to find Sophia. They begin complaining about Rick, forcing his wife Lori to stand up for him. She angrily confronts them, saying "if y'all think you can do this on your own no one is stopping you. You look to him for answers and blame him when he isn't perfect" ("What Lies..."). This statement exemplifies the process and development of charismatic authority.

If there is any doubt that Shane and Rick are competing for nothing less than the claim of ownership of the nomadic group-state, we need only look as far as Max Weber's definition of statehood. His definition of a state, the most used definition in contemporary political theory, is "the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (qtd. in Jung 34). Through this lens we can understand what 'the state' is in its most basic terms. The state claims to be the authority capable of *legitimately* using force. It becomes clear in the course of *The Walking Dead* that this is essentially what the competition between Shane and Rick comes down to. The two confront this reality in one particular incident when they find a teenager named Randall who previously attacked their group. Significantly, Randall also knows where the group is staying. As Shane pulls out his gun and fires at Randall, Rick knocks the gun away just in time for the bullet to miss the teenager. This incites an unprecedented vicious fight between the two. Rick has finally asserted his rule of the state, his position as *the* government, by making a claim that he alone is allowed to decide when to use force against other people. While Shane is justifying killing Randall based on a utilitarian principle that it will be safer in the long run, Rick clings to a Lockean notion that the rights to life exists regardless of any particular interests of the state and cannot be arbitrarily taken away.

Problems

As the famous sociologist Norbert Elias explains, typically the monopoly on the use of force will be transferred from the leadership to the people over time. This marks a movement from authoritarian to democratic rule (Jung 34). As this happens political institutions will develop under the rule of the people. This process never takes place in *The Walking Dead*. The group never truly has the luxury of time or safety to consider this shift. Instead, the demands of protecting themselves from zombies and the complex power struggles between members of the group leads them to constantly search for leadership, changing their allegiance and support of leaders when it is convenient. Problematically, Rick has nothing firm in which he can ground his claim of leadership. Relying upon a mixture of traditional and charismatic authority, Rick leads the group, but never with a clear or defined mandate. Thus, the relationship of the leader to the people is always tenuous and in question. As aptly observed by Si Sheppard, "Rick's ultimate flaw is his inability to translate these qualities into the institutional basis for his leadership" (Sheppard 94). Stated another way, "[t]here are no formal or informal mechanisms to uphold his decisions" (Sheppard 93). This plays out when Rick announces his personal decision to execute Randall. Some members of the group are complacent and others are indignant. Dale in particular demands that they hold a hearing where each member gives his opinion. But at this hearing, rather pathetically, no one can agree on the procedure of the hearing. Some members simply want Rick to make the decision, some want no part in it, and others, notably Dale, demand a democratic procedure to decide Randall's fate. Ultimately, they end up choosing what Rick and, thankfully, Shane both decide, in a way that leaves no one truly satisfied.

The inability to establish institutional mechanisms for legal proceedings and conflict resolution, and thus to provide legitimization for the regime, is what truly undermines the continued survival of the group, and what keeps them in constant peril. Differences of opinion in matters such as the execution of Randall are not the primary danger for the group; rather, the complete lack of a formal mechanism through which they can resolve these differences of opinion keeps them weak. Associations and allegiances such as that of the family unit create factions within the group, and

unclear definitions of the laws and rights of individuals within the group leaves members unclear as to their status in relation to the group. Meanwhile, the competing claims to authority from Rick and Shane, and the inability or lack of motivation for the rest of the members to rise up and set a clear definition of state-legitimacy, coupled with the lack of formal institutions to put into practice and guarantee the decisions of the governing body are followed, leaves the group confused and disorganized. This disorganization is a constant threat to the group's survival, demonstrating the crucial importance of state-institutions and legitimacy in human survival and prosperity.

Works Cited

Bloom, Allan. *Republic of Plato*. Trans. Alan Bloom. New York: Basic, 1991. Print.

Goldberg, Jeffrey. "'The Walking Dead', Like All Zombie Stories...Not About Zombies At All." *Atlantic*. 25 11 2012: Web. 3 Apr. 2014.

"Guts". *The Walking Dead*. Writ. Frank Darabont. Dir. Michelle MacLaren. AMC, 7 Nov. 2010. Television.

Hobbes, Thomas. *The Leviathan*. Web. 25 Apr. 2014. <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/hobbes/leviathan-c.html>

Jung, Dietrich. "State Formation and State-Building: Is There a Lesson to Learn Fromology?", *Danish Institute for International Studies* (2008) : 33- 42.*Academic Search Premier*. Web. 9 Apr. 2014.

Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Civil Government by John Locke*. Oregon State, n.d.Web. 25 Apr. 2014.

Paffenroth, Kim. "For Love is Strong As Death." *Triumph of The Walking Dead: Rober Kirkman's Zombie Epic on Page and Screen*. Ed. James Lowder. Dallas: BenBella Books, 2011. eBook.

Pereira, Diamantino. "On The Autonomy of the State and the Case of the Portuguese Estado Novo." Diss. Drexel, 1992. Web. 9 Apr. 2014.

Peter, Fabienne. "Political Legitimacy." Stanford University, 29 Apr. 2010. Web. 9 Apr. 2014.

Sheppard, Si. "Realistically, Nice Guys Finish Last." *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Zombie Apocalypse Now*. Ed. Wayne Yuen. Chicago: Open Court, 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2014.

Saunders, Robert A. "Undead Spaces: Fear, Globalisation, And The Popular Geopolitics of Zombiism." *Geopolitics* 17.1 (2012): 80-104. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 9 Apr. 2014.

"Tell it to the Frogs." *The Walking Dead*. Writ. Frank Darabont, Charles H. Eglee, Jack LoGiudice. Dir. Gwyneth Horder-Payton. AMC, 14 Nov. 2010. Television.

“This Sorrowful Life.” *The Walking Dead*. Writ. Scott M. Gimple. Dir. Greg Nicotero. AMC, 24 Mar. 2013. Television.

Walker, Jason. “What’s Yours Still Isn’t Mine.” *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Zombie Apocalypse Now*. Ed. Wayne Yuen. Chicago: Open Court, 2012. Web

Weber, Max. *Economy and Society*. Berkeley: Univ. Of California Press, 1978. Web.

Weed, Cameron. *The Zombie Manifesto: The Marxist Revolutions in George A. Romero's Land Of The Dead*. MA thesis. Baylor, 2009. Web

“What Lies Ahead.” *The Walking Dead*. Writ. Ardeth Bey and Robert Kirkman. Dir. Ernest Dickerson and Gwyneth Horder-Payton. AMC, 16 Oct. 2011. Television.

“Wildfire.” *The Walking Dead*. Writ. Glen Mazzara, Dir. Ernest Dickerson. AMC, 28 Nov. 2010. Television.