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Zombie Companies and Corporate Survivors

Adam Golub and Carrie Lane

The term “zombie company” refers to a company that is officially “alive” despite being financially dead. A company that needs constant bailouts in order to operate, a company that can manage to pay the interest on its debts but not reduce the actual debt, or a company that appears healthy from the outside but is in fact teetering on the edge of ruin — these are all zombie companies. As a writer in *Business Week* put it in 2009, “Zombies suck life out of an economy by consuming tax money, capital, and labor that would be better deployed in growing companies and sectors.”¹ The number of so-called zombie companies in the United States has been especially high in recent years, a trend linked to government bailouts during the 2008 recession and persistently low interest rates, which allow companies to avoid bankruptcy and keep lurching along — not quite alive but not quite dead, either — longer than they otherwise could.

The current popular usage of the term “zombie company” to describe insolvent or unprofitable businesses reflects a broader cultural fascination with the zombie in the 21st century. From film and television, to literature and video games, to public spectacles such as zombie walks and zombie proms, the undead have enjoyed a renaissance in con-

temporary U.S. culture. While the specter of a cannibalistic reanimated corpse evokes a certain kind of visceral horror that partly explains its recurring popularity, the figure of the zombie has also functioned historically as a means of critiquing capitalism, work and consumerism in the United States. In the early film *White Zombie* (1932), for instance, zombies were imagined as a labor force shackled to an unscrupulous capitalist zombie master. As Ann Kordas explains, because they “did not complain about their pay or working conditions,” zombies represented “ideal worker[s] who could solve many of the labor problems of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America.”² In the 1970s, George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* — set in a shopping mall — offered what Kyle William Bishop has termed a kind of “economic morality tale” about the dangers of being enslaved to consumerism in the postwar era and engaging in “blind consumption without any productive contribution.”³ Other zombie narratives have thematically explored anxieties about corporate malfeasance (*Resident Evil*, a film series begun in 2002), the dehumanization of the workforce (*Fido*, 2006) and the dynamics of class inequality (*Land of the Dead*, 2005). If monsters speak to a society’s broader fears and anxieties, then zombies arguably scare us because they symbolize, as Christine Heckman puts it, “the fear of enslavement by an economic system or institution.”⁴

Given that zombies are “now a major descriptor of a certain class of economic agents,” we are interested in exploring the implications of this economic discourse for the *victims* of zombie companies.⁵ If corporations today are the zombies, who, exactly,

are the human survivors who flee and fight them? According to free market thinking, the heroic survivors are healthy companies and the people who run them. In the thought experiment that follows, however, we would like to turn that logic on its head. It might easily be argued that even those companies that are healthy, profitable and thus not officially “zombie corporations” share some attributes with the undead. The legal concept of corporate personhood, for example, in place since the early 19th century, recognizes corporations as, in many respects, “people,” with the same legal rights and responsibilities as individuals, such as to sue or be sued. Thus we might contend that all U.S. corporations are, in some respect, akin to the undead, as functioning entities that consume resources but are neither living nor breathing, seeking to feed off the bodies and brains of laboring humans. Indeed, even the most profitable corporations today, and perhaps especially the most profitable corporations, share many attributes of the zombies encountered on the page and on the screen.

In that case, the group that might most logically be cast as the survivors in this scenario is the multitude of workers trying to survive in today’s volatile and arguably terrifying labor market. It is not just zombie companies that have multiplied since the Great Recession. Despite that recession’s relatively brief official duration (December 2007 to June 2009), at its peak, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 10 percent of the U.S. labor force was unemployed, more than 15 million people. The average duration of unemployment was more than nine months. Even now, in 2015, more than nine million Americans are unemployed,

It is these people — the unemployed, the underemployed and the insecurely employed — who most resemble the haggard, resilient survivors of the zombie-riddled landscapes of popular culture.

nearly seven million are “involuntary part-time workers” (they want full-time work but cannot find it) and another two million-plus are out of work but are not “officially unemployed” because they have not “looked” in the previous four weeks. Add to those 18 million the countless millions who have full-time work, or have a spouse or partner who does, yet have no idea how long their jobs will last, whether the pay will be enough to meet the rising cost of living or whether a single unexpected setback will unravel their tenuous hold on financial survival. It is these people — the unemployed, the underemployed and the insecurely employed — who most resemble the haggard, resilient survivors of the zombie-riddled landscapes of popular culture, surviving day by day in hostile, uncertain environments while managing an unending but ever-changing set of demands on their minds, their bodies and their souls.

Even those sympathetic to the plight of today’s workforce might question whether job insecurity or unemployment, however challenging, is really akin to running and fighting for one’s life in a zombie apocalypse. For those who require a bit more evidence, we

have compiled a series of parallels between the situations of today's workers and those of the survivors in the many zombie films, books and TV programs we have consumed over the years. These comparisons are offered in a spirit of intellectual playfulness, but we also believe the comparisons are at core valid ones, and can help articulate the plight of workers today while also explaining the enduring obsession with all things zombie in U.S. culture.

The Institutions on Which Americans Rely Have Crumbled

Among the most terrifying moments in zombie narratives is when the survivors realize that no one is coming to save them, that the institutions they once relied upon — the government, the police, the hospitals and aid workers — no longer exist. Such moments highlight how dependent most people are on particular social systems and institutional structures, as well as their “trust that the system will always reset itself.”⁶ In the very first episode of the television show *The Walking Dead*, for example, the main character Rick, a small-town police officer, awakes from a coma in an abandoned hospital. Staggering along the blood-smeared, corpse-laden hallways, it becomes clear to him that the staff entrusted with his care have either fled or have themselves fallen prey to what Rick will soon learn is a zombie pandemic. Later in the same series, the group of survivors with whom Rick allies himself arrives at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. Expecting salvation from the agency designed to manage such crises, they instead find a lone, discour-

aged scientist whose only suggestion is that they join him in a group suicide. Fictional scenarios like these suggest that in the wake of an undead apocalypse, faith in the power and permanence of U.S. society's structures will be misplaced and Americans will have to respond on their own.

Similarly, in the contemporary United States, the institutions that once protected workers seem to have abandoned them to their fate. Corporate employers who once provided relative security in exchange for loyalty and hard work, especially to white-collar workers, now privilege “flexibility” in their workforces, even going so far as to suggest that offering workers too much security denies them the right to determine their own professional destinies. Similarly, full-time positions are on the decline, replaced instead by part-time, temporary or contract employment. Although such contingent arrangements sometimes work in favor of the most highly skilled professionals, most employees accept such arrangements in the hopes of ultimately securing full-time, so-called permanent positions.

Alongside rising insecurity, workers also find themselves stripped of perquisites that were once standard components of corporate careers, such as on-the-job training, health-care, pensions and career planning services. Instead, employees are increasingly left to secure or at least heavily subsidize their own insurance, manage their own retirement finances and navigate the increasingly horizontal corporate ladder on their own. Simultaneously, union membership has declined dramatically, a trend exacerbated by recent court cases upholding right-to-work laws that prohibit unionized agencies from

requiring employees to pay union fees. Thus the organizations best positioned to protect employees from the erosion of benefits and secure employment are now less numerous and, as a result, in many cases less effective than ever.

Just as a zombie apocalypse “stops the machine” and effects “dramatic reversals and restructurings of society,” so do unemployment and job insecurity.⁷ Like their brethren in zombie lore, American workers find themselves stripped of the supports and havens upon which they once relied and in which they trusted, left to fend for themselves in increasingly hostile territories. According to neoliberal logic, of course, such harrowing experiences are supposed to provide individuals with a valuable opportunity to reinvent themselves. Once again, however, a survey of zombie narratives reveals some suggestive parallels.

The New World Requires Constant Retraining

Surviving in post-industrial civilization and surviving in a zombie apocalypse require very different skill sets. When the dead walk, one needs to acquire “apocalypse know-how” in areas such as manufacturing, mechanics, emergency medicine and survival skills. In his novel *World War Z*, Max Brooks suggests that a zombie apocalypse would necessitate massive retraining of the workforce: “Everyone was some version of an ‘executive,’ a ‘representative,’ an ‘analyst,’ or a ‘consultant,’ all perfectly suited to the prewar world but all totally inadequate for the present crisis. We needed carpenters, masons, machinists, gunsmiths.”⁸

In the film *Zombieland* (2009), the protagonist describes the new rules he has learned in order to survive the undead apocalypse — guidelines such as “beware of bathrooms,” “travel light,” “get a kick-ass partner” and always be sure to “double tap” when shooting zombies. In *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), one of the characters insists on learning how to fly a helicopter in case the pilot in their group ends up dead before they can escape by air (and it’s a good thing she does, too).

Arguably, the moral of nearly every zombie tale is that in order to survive one must evolve — learn new skills, shed old values and — most importantly — never get complacent. Although not necessarily required to learn masonry, fly helicopters and handle advanced weaponry, American workers are expected to constantly retrain, on their own dime, in order to remain attractive to employers. Security in this context is dismissed as a state of naïve, feminized dependence in contrast to the exciting alternative of constant, autonomous reinvention. Such a framing attempts to recast the loss of secure employment as an opportunity for individual agency and success, an opportunity for the worker to become a savvy pragmatist who pioneers “new strategies for navigating an increasingly insecure world.”⁹ However, job insecurity places increasingly heavy burdens on American workers and their families to remain ever-vigilant about industry and labor market trends, to fund and find time for constant continuing education and retraining and to build a financial safety net that will keep them afloat between periods of un- or underemployment.

Like the survivors of zombie outbreaks, even the most hard-working, innovation-

If insecure work is the single, relentless zombie who must be battled or outrun, this broader age of insecurity is a zombie herd, threat piled upon threat, able collectively to take down both the least adaptable and the best-prepared survivor.

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mind U.S. workers find themselves over-taxed by these demands. The young and the structurally marginalized have never known different, but others recall nostalgically an era that did not require constant innovation, never-ending change, un-ending motion. Even those who embrace this new world of work pay a steep price for doing so. The pressure of unending vigilance and constant reinvention weighs heavily on people, especially over time; optimism wanes, energy depletes, friends disappear and families unravel. These burdens are exacerbated by rising insecurity outside the world of work — war, global warming, mass foreclosures, credit crises, rising college debt, anti-immigrant activism, corporate-controlled political parties, a failing health care system — further destabilizing what tenuous hold families might have on safety and security.¹⁰ These burdens, like the zombieapocalypse in many of its pop cultural manifestations, take an especially heavily toll on already marginalized or disadvantaged populations such as the poor, people of color, women and the elderly — categories which of course

overlap significantly. If insecure work is the single, relentless zombie who must be battled or outrun, this broader age of insecurity is a zombie herd, threat piled upon threat, able collectively to take down both the least adaptable and the best-prepared survivor.

Individualism, Competition and Community

Zombies are not the only threat survivors of a zombie outbreak face. Most zombie fiction features human villains, too. Oftentimes, Kim Paffenroth points out, “other, living human beings, and especially those closest to us, are the real threat.”¹¹ Already, survivors must compete for scarce resources such as food, shelter, vehicles and gas. Meanwhile, marauders wait to strip other survivors of their meager supplies, invading gangs wrest safe spaces away from their former inhabitants, and members of the group who have hidden the fact that they are infected become newly turned cannibals who prey on their compatriots. Strong survivors know better than to ally themselves with the weak — typically children, women, the elderly, the injured — who will potentially slow them down and decrease their chances of survival. The fifth rule of survival in *Zombieland*, after all, is “no attachments.” In the face of a zombie pandemic, it is understood that no one — undead or alive — is to be trusted.

The U.S. obsession with individualism and Americans’ faith in the benefits of competition has only intensified under the neo-liberal regimes of the previous decades. The

solution to high unemployment, it is often proposed, is for jobless people to be more aggressive and innovative, to market “the brand called you” more effectively to potential employers. Ever so deftly, persistently high unemployment and a staggeringly wide — and growing — wealth gap between elite citizens and the vast majority of the population are recast as individual failures, the solution to which is to outshine one’s peers, rather than to question the actual merits of turning oneself into an infinitely flexible human brand. Whether dog-eat-dog or zombie-eat-human, the basic tenets of how the world works are the same.

And yet, in zombieland, as in real life, things are a bit more complicated. All zombie stories feature characters swearing that they cannot care about or for other people, lest they be held back by them or further weighed down by their eventual loss. And yet the heroes always break their own rules, going back to save the girl, the dog, the injured buddy, the one-legged old farmer. And nearly every zombie story features an ensemble cast, unlikely bedfellows who band together against a common enemy, helping one another along even at their own peril.

The same is true of those trying to survive in today’s volatile labor market. Despite an overwhelming cultural emphasis on individualism and self-advancement, day after day, beleaguered wage-earners find themselves turning back to rescue one another. Unemployed tech workers, for example, consistently go against what might be defined as their own best interests. They inform others about a hot job tip even when they themselves plan to apply for that job, proofread each other’s resumes, share professional net-

works and buoy each other’s spirits. The poor and the middle-class are consistently more generous and empathetic than the wealthy, giving a larger share of their income to charity and showing greater compassion for those facing hardship.¹² As Garrison Keillor has said, “Even in a time of elephantine vanity and greed” — and zombies, one might add — “one never has to look far to see the campfires of gentle people.”¹³

Conclusion

This last point may help explain the current popularity of zombie stories in U.S. culture. Audiences root for the humans to survive the zombie onslaught, in part because they can relate to the survivors’ plight. Zombie narratives feature everyday people — not experts or elites — facing seemingly insurmountable odds. In the undead apocalypse, audiences find “recognizable ‘everyman’ characters in very real and ordinary contemporary environments with overwhelming supernatural forces.”¹⁴ Gregory Waller notes that such stories “situate the horror in the everyday world of contemporary America.”¹⁵ And as one critic observed of *The Walking Dead*, what viewers respond to is not the zombies so much as the “human emotion in a dire situation.”¹⁶

The 21st century U.S. economy — with its lurching zombie companies and armies of corporate survivors — may not be quite apocalyptic. But for many, it has created a dire situation characterized by job insecurity and the collapse of formerly dependable institutions. We agree with Marc Leverette when he states that in order to understand

the cultural work of monsters, they must be considered “within the complex matrices that generate them, such as social, historical, and cultural relations.”¹⁷ The resurrection of the undead in popular culture speaks to a new set of economic relations that have no doubt made the survivors of the zombie apocalypse that much more legible and relatable for contemporary audiences. For in zombieland, the living dead have essentially taken away workers’ jobs, invalidated their acquired skills and upended the world they once knew and believed in.

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