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Max Brooks's *World War Z*: *An Oral History of the Zombie War*: Conservative Armageddon and Liberal Post-Apocalypse

ABSTRACT: *World War Z* (2006) produces a liberal utopian vision of a world in which many of the political problems of the early 2000s have been solved after an apocalyptic event, yet the underlying structures that created those problems are left unaddressed. This article thus argues that *World War Z* should be read for both its apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic dimensions. In analysing the contributing factors of the apocalyptic scenario as well as its post-apocalyptic aftermath, this reading shows how the novel highlights the limits of a progressive liberal imagination.

Few zombie novels provide readers with as panoramic an overview of a zombie apocalypse's global dimensions as Max Brooks's 2006 novel *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*. Brooks's interview-based novel presents a series of individual accounts of survival in a decade-long war against zombies. A "book of memories" (3) as Brooks's unnamed narrator-interviewer calls it, *World War Z* claims to be the residue of the data collected by the narrator for the United Nations' Postwar Commission Report; if that report contained all the "clear facts and figures" and the "cold, hard data" (1), the novel recounts instead the personal stories behind that data. But in this book, the personal is, quite frequently, the political: the survivors' tales are tied back to a greater narrative of (initial) political and military ineptitude, slowly overcome by a re-organisation of society to combat the zombie hordes, and ultimately culminating in both victory over the undead as well as an improved—but not decisively altered—political and social system. Mark McGurl, in a perceptive review of *World War Z* and its predecessor *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003), has argued that the novel is "an allegory of the contemporary world system and its many risks, and characters exist in it to mark representative points on a much larger map." Certainly, like other zombie fictions, *World War Z* registers some of the "extant social anxieties" (Platts 547) of its contemporary moment. In so doing, it offers a representational cognitive map, a "way of linking the most intimately local ... and the most global," and produces a viable "political and economical analysis" of its contemporary moment, as well as of imaginable alternatives, via the overlapping "limited" but "nonetheless sufficient" data points that its interviews constitute (MacCabe xvi-xv). I argue that *World War Z* clearly establishes a set of cultural, political and economical anxieties

extant in the early part of the first decade of the 2000s, and uses the zombie apocalypse to reveal them. The novel narrates a neoconservative armageddon where the zombies overrun a world in which profit, greed, militarism, partisan politics (in the derogatory sense) and sheer governmental incapacity dominate, to be replaced, in the post-apocalyptic world, by an idealised, liberal-social democratic, internationalist system in which the common danger to all mankind has succeeded in uniting, if not all, then at least a significant part of humankind.[1] In so doing, *World War Z* illustrates what Slavoj Žižek notes in *Living in the End Times* (2011) is the "basic paradox of liberalism": the liberal imagination of possible political alternatives is restricted to believing that its maximal goal is the construction of the "'least worst society possible,' thus [merely] preventing a greater evil" (38), rather than aiming for the best possible society. In its particular imagining of the post-apocalypse, *World War Z* reflects a liberal vision of society as only marginally improved, with all the failures of the imagination that this implies.

Mark McGurl is certainly right to point to the globalised narrative of *World War Z* as its most distinguishing feature, and his invocation of the idea of the world system is a useful pointer, allowing us to see what critiques *World War Z* undertakes, and which it leaves aside. Fredric Jameson has observed that

> all thinking today, is *also*, whatever else it is, an attempt to think the world system as such. All the more true will this be for narrative figurations, whose very structure encourages a soaking up of whatever ideas in the air are left and a fantasy-solution to all the anxieties that rush to fill our current vacuum. (*The Geopolitical Aesthetic* 4, original emphasis)

Beyond this figurative impossibility of thinking the world today except as world system, however, *World War Z* becomes difficult to read as a world systems novel (cf. Medovoi "Love is Not a Game"; "Terminal Crisis?"). For one thing, it does not really reflect upon the constitutive characteristics of the world system (as theoretically conceived), such as its division of labour between geographically distinct parts of the globe (cf. Wallerstein 23-4), core and periphery states between whom a power differential exists. What *World War Z* illustrates, instead, is the "new socio-economic situation" of "globalizing capitalism and its weaknesses and contradictions" (Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* 266), or in Jennifer Rutherford's words, "it actualises risk theory" (13). It is certainly possible to see the novel's narrative as an allegory of this: even as it clearly and unambiguously represents the multifarious connections in an increasingly globalised world, the zombie apocalypse can be read as an allegory of globalisation's incipient dangers, its "weaknesses and contradictions." Such an allegorical reading does not exhaust the novel's potential, however: globalisation as a fact of contemporary human existence becomes both the source of grave dangers as well as, in the liberal utopia that it constructs out of the ashes of the old world, the solution to the problem. *World War Z* clearly soaks up all the anxieties that filled its contemporaneous

vacuum of political alternatives, and perceptively highlights the deficiencies of the neoconservative politics that were prominent in the mid-2000s. But at the same time, in imagining their solution lies in a simplistic "global liberal order" in which practical solutions prevail in lieu of "all the old ideological baggage" (Žižek 38), the novel also inadvertently highlights the deficiencies of a liberal response to those politics.

THE WORLD BEFORE: *WORLD WAR Z*'S CONTEMPORARY DYSTOPIA

Much of the groundwork for *World War Z* was laid earlier. Brooks's novel is the follow-up to his 2003 *The Zombie Survival Guide*, a vastly different offering but a necessary precursor. A "fiction without fictional characters," as Mark McGurl has it, the *Survival Guide*'s major conceit is that "[t]he dead walk among us" (xiii) already, indeed have always done so. The book provides the zombie with a natural explanation: Solanum, a virus that kills the host, infects the brain and renders it independent of oxygen, allowing it to function without the support of a body (or so, at any rate, the *Guide*'s logic goes). The virus is transmitted by fluidic contact, zombifies its victims within 24 hours, and produces unreasoning and unthinking undead whose sole aim is to attack living humans in order to perpetuate the virus. Having established its zombification mechanism, the *Guide* takes some time to distinguish its "real" version of the zombie from both the Voodoo and the Hollywood zombie ("Hollywood zombie films stray, in some cases wildly, from the reality on which they are based" [23], it rather archly notes),[2] and then proceeds to instruct readers in weapons choice and use (from the humble stick to the flamethrower), tactics for home defense and for the attack, as well as more basic survival skills in a world of the undead. The *Guide* advises its readers that they should not "discount any section of this book as hypothetical drama," because "every lesson in this book is rooted in historical fact" (xiv). Indeed, the final section of the book is a recounting of human history, which suggests that outbreaks of zombie-ism were responsible for, among other things, Egyptians removing the brains of their mummified dead (184); the demise of Viking settlements in Greenland (193); the disappearance of the Roanoke colony in Virginia (197-8); the Donner-Party-like annihilation of the "Knudhansen Party" on the trail to California (206); experiments undertaken by the Japanese Imperial Army in Manchuria in 1942-5 (220-2); as well as several more recent episodes around the world.

The *Guide* is a parody of self-help books and a satire of the zombie film genre's cherished plots and devices, from chainsaws to abandoned malls. It is also, however, a necessary precursor to *World War Z*, establishing the mechanisms by which the novel's undead function and highlighting the historical dimension of their existence. It ends with what amounts to the preview of *World War Z*'s backstory and a nod towards the zombie as a particularly contemporary danger in a globalised age:

> The world's population is growing. Its center has shifted from rural to urban zones. Transportation has linked the planet with increasing speed. All these factors have led to

> a renaissance of infectious diseases, most of which were thought to be eradicated centuries ago. Logic dictates that Solanum can flourish in such a ripe environment. Even though information is being recorded, shared, and stored as never before, it cannot hide the fact that zombie attacks are on the rise, their frequency mirroring the "development" of this planet. At this rate, attacks will only increase, culminating in one of two possibilities. The first is that world governments will have to acknowledge, both privately and publicly, the existence of the living dead, creating special organizations to deal with the threat. In this scenario, zombies will become an accepted part of daily life—marginalized, easily contained, perhaps even vaccinated against. A second, more ominous scenario would result in an all-out war between the living and the dead: a war you are now ready for. (247)

It is exactly this war that *World War Z* is about, and that provides the kind of global narrative that makes the novel stand out. The novel takes us all around the globe, from China's backcountry to heavily urbanised Western Europe, Israel, South Africa, Japan and, of course, the United States, where most of the narrative is set. The novel's first interviewee is a Chinese doctor who recounts his encounter with what may have been Patient Zero, the point of origin of the entire, Solanum-driven epidemic. The "contagion narrative of world zombification" (McGurl) that the *Guide* establishes and *World War Z* enacts, nods towards the 2002/3 SARS epidemic as a danger to the globalised world, but soon develops away from this simple and more natural risk towards a political critique that leaves the medical aspect of the plague on the sidelines. *World War Z* highlights early on that the world swept away by the zombie apocalypse is suffering from more problems than the undead and their viral infection. To offer just a few representative examples: the doctor who diagnoses the first patient is "incarcerated without formal charges" (11); smuggling people between China and the outside world booms despite the disease because of bribery (13); illegal transplantations are undertaken in Argentina using Chinese organs created by "political expediency," i.e, executed prisoners (23, 27), and helped along by the police (25); and intelligence failures at the CIA contribute to the severity of the outbreak (45-50). Each of these issues marks one of those "representative points" that demarcate the reality of the political and economic system *World War Z* critiques, and to which the zombies are an immediate, fantastic solution, or at least, a means of breaking up the system.

Despite its global reach and the universality of the problems it identifies, the heart of the novel's political criticism is not global; it lies in its narrative of the US's reaction to the crisis, politically, socially and militarily. Faced with the crisis, the US administration (a thinly veiled George W. Bush is President) finds itself unable to do more than order surgical strikes using commando units, because the necessary "massive national undertaking ... That kind of effort [that] requires Herculean amounts of national treasure and national support" (52) is impossible to marshal in the face of American apathy towards military solutions and disenchantment with the treatment of military veterans. The Iraq War, the narrative suggests,

pointless and futile, has grave consequences now, leaving the US both unwilling and unable to defend itself on the scale required. And even when the US does act militarily, on the scale it is capable of, it fails to understand the nature of the threat, using tactics based on the successful shock-and-awe of the Iraq War against an enemy that "can't be shocked and awed ... Not just won't, but biologically *can't*!" (104, original emphasis). *World War Z* sees contemporary US military forces as more of a hindrance than a help, and the very choice of military force as a fundamental mistake of politics.

At the same time, the business-friendliness of Bush's administration comes under fire because it permits the release of a worthless drug claimed to be a vaccine against the zombie disease. The novel's vociferous critique here becomes apparently systemic, representing "big-time, pre-war, global capitalism" (54) as a cynical game of playing with peoples' fears, a game that implicates an entire politico-industrial complex. Asked by the interviewer what would have happened if someone had discovered the uselessness of the drug, Breckinridge Scott, the drug's salesman, replies:

> Who was going to blow the whistle? The medical profession? We made sure it was a prescription drug so doctors stood just as much to lose as us. Who else? The FDA who let it pass? The congressmen who all voted for its acceptance? The surgeon general? The White House? It was a win-win situation! (57)

Politics, another interviewee informs the narrator, does not solve poverty, crime, disease, unemployment or war, but only prevents these problems from impinging on one's power base (61). Pre-apocalyptic society in *World War Z* is deeply cynical and self-involved, racist, and unconcerned with the world outside each individual's own narrow concerns. Another interviewee notes of her pre-war situation, "Oh yeah, I was worried, I was worried about my car payments and Tim's business loan. ... I was worried about our portfolio, even though my e-broker assured me this was just first-time investor jitters and that it was much more profitable than a standard 401(k)" (64).

At the same time as it identifies the pervasiveness of financial worry, the novel takes at least some glee in presenting signs of the plague's leveling effect: "very wealthy investment bankers" in "rumpled and torn" Armani suits (17), the vaccine producer's exile in Antarctica (54), and the transplantation doctor's existence as "guest, mascot, or prisoner" somewhere in the Amazon rainforest (21). The zombie apocalypse also takes away, then, a set of concerns intimately tied to life under contemporary capitalism, from which the novel itself sees no escape. Ultimately, however, it is not the systemic problem of capitalism itself that *World War Z* identifies as the central issue (even if it punishes the individuals complicit in the system). Rather, it is a whole host of smaller issues: militarism, an insufficient control of political power, clientele politics and reactionary neoconservatism. Even though these issues are connected with capitalism because of the economic system's totalising potential, they are

independently resolvable. The major step towards symbolically enacting this smaller scale political change is the establishment of an American coalition government. Without explicitly naming names, the novel here envisages George W. Bush replaced by his Vice President (Colin Powell)—Bush is apparently removed for disability—who in turn nominates Howard Dean as his own Vice President (the text even gestures, just perhaps, towards the possibility that Dean's Democratic Party might actually have wanted Barack Obama). With that (and the successes this coalition government achieves), the zombie apocalypse has swept away both a broken political system as well as what the novel conceives to be a broken political ideology. To take up Evan Williams's words (though not his point), the zombies in *World War Z* "are the crisis which allows for powers that be to declare a 'state of emergency,' [in which it is okay to sedate the sitting president] to suspend normal channels of legislation and to bring about drastic changes" (105). This process becomes part of a liberal utopian solution to its contemporaneous problems precisely because of the dysfunctionality of the existing normal channels; when change cannot happen within the system, it must be forced on it from the outside.

Crucially, *World War Z* represents its contemporary problems as unsolvable and indeed even unperceivable within the current political setup. The zombie apocalypse thus becomes both a revelation of these problems as well as a means of changing the system. Yet, as we shall see, what the novel envisions as a future, its utopian vision, is an improved version of American liberal capitalism, rather than a genuine systemic change. In each of its episodes of criticism, economical or political, *World War Z* highlights a problematic aspect of late capitalism and its neoconservative, neoliberal political manifestations. It does not, however, identify these individual points of data as symptoms of a larger problematic, beyond reading them as problems of the political (rather than the economic) system. Breckinridge Scott's question to the interviewer highlights early on the limited critique *World War Z* makes: "Do you understand economics? I mean big-time, pre-war, global capitalism? Do you get how it worked? I don't, and anyone who says they do is full of shit. There are no rules, no scientific absolutes. You win, you lose, it's a total crapshoot" (54-5). Scott's cynical and self-serving analysis is, on the one hand, clearly meant to offer a general appraisal of late capitalism ca. 2006, a stepping stone in *World War Z*'s critique. Yet notice that the novel's insistence is on "pre-war, global" capitalism, not capitalism per se. Indeed, as the next section will show, the novel ends up seeing the reestablishment of the capitalist system as the final point of its imagination of the post-apocalypse.

"SCARIER THAN THE LIVING DEAD": THE LIBERAL UTOPIAN POST-APOCALYPSE

Very little of my initial reading of *World War Z*'s imagining of its contemporary situation requires literary interpretation; the novel carries its politics on its sleeve, and draws its characters and its analysis of the political and economic system in fairly broad strokes. Yet it

bears pointing out these elements of the novel because they set the stage for its initially radical, finally negligent imagination of the post-apocalyptic world. One of the features that sets Brooks's novel apart from its peers (and indeed, from almost all zombie *films*) is that it is avowedly post-apocalyptic, a counterexample to Evan Williams's claim that "the vision of the zombie apocalypse is never a post-apocalyptic vision, not a single event and revelation out of which we regroup and attempt to rebuild" (85). In fact, *World War Z*'s apocalyptic, revelatory moment already lies in its narrative past: while zombies persist, and, as far as we can tell, zombification remains the fate of all those who die with their brains intact, they have been seamlessly integrated into the evolved but still-existing system. The novel is as interested in what the zombies reveal about its contemporary moment—that is, in the apocalyptic potential of the zombie—as it is in what they may fantastically enable, in the zombie's post-apocalyptic appeal.

World War Z's postwar situation cannot be reduced to people "cooperatively providing for their own food, shelter, and defense" (Collins and Bond 193), though an intensified communitarianism is certainly one of the features of its post-apocalyptic vision. Rather than seeing a society barely past the threshold of a primitive social contract, the aftermath of war in *World War Z* shows that a resurgent humanity has established a coherent system of international cooperation and a restructured but resilient capitalist economic system, and has obtained a clearer appreciation of private, communal cooperation. Technological advances have lessened the world's reliance on fossil fuels, locally based economies have (at least in part) been substituted for the global, and international, perhaps even transnational cooperation has replaced national competition. These points of data reveal *World War Z*'s underlying belief in the efficacy, indeed the necessity, of positions broadly to be conceived as "liberal" in the American political sense, and social-democratic or Green elsewhere.

World War Z reveals its advocacy of progressive liberal politics in bits and pieces, by describing a world in which the values of liberal democracy have already succeeded. The headnote for the second interview is perhaps the first instance highlighting *World War Z*'s belief in the necessary expansion of progressive politics after the apocalypse. In Lhasa, now the most populous city on Earth and capital of the People's Republic of Tibet, free elections bring the Social Democratic Party to power (12). In at once imagining a free Tibet, the possibility of free and fair elections in what would conventionally be thought to be a Communist dictatorship from its very name (as in the People's Republics of China and North Korea), and the outcome of this election as a win by a Social Democrat party, *World War Z* manages to make a number of suggestions towards its belief in liberal politics. Numerous other instances, most of them in headnotes and hardly ever emphasised narratively, combine to fill out this picture. In Barbados, the interviewer describes the future of nautical commerce as trimaran-hulled, sleek, fuel-celled "infinity ships" (28); control of the ongoing anti-zombie operations at the Arctic Circle rests with a UN-led—rather than a national—force (50); in Amarillo, Texas, oil has given way to biofuel plants using cow dung (59), serviced by a former

member of the Bush administration; in America's "New Community" housing model, solar panels and small gardens render inhabitants independent of greater economic structures (63-4); "Radio Free Earth," broadcasting globally without regard for nationality, is described as "the first real international venture" (194-5); and buildings are being designed to be "energy-independent" (228). Each of these issues figures as a data point in a larger picture of the results of the zombie war, and each of them implicitly redounds to the victory of liberal ideals.

Most notable and crucial in identifying the limits of *World War Z*'s utopian vision, however (and this brings us back at least somewhat to the world system), is the way the novel treats old-fashioned labour. Establishing a so-called safe zone behind the Rocky Mountains, the remaining United States embarks on a program that fundamentally restructures the nature of work in the US. As Arthur Sinclair, director of the Department of Strategic Resources, notes in his interview about the pre-apocalyptic United States, "[o]urs was a postindustrial or service-based economy, so complex and highly specialized that each individual could only function within the confines of its narrow, compartmentalized structure ..." Suddenly, with the collapse of the existing system, "[w]e needed carpenters, masons, machinists, gunsmiths," not the financial analysts, day traders, executives, consultants and others, who under the new conditions are labeled as "possessing no valued vocation" (138-9). As with the various developments of localising energy and food production, the general tendency of the novel here is to emphasise use value over exchange value, manual labour over the kinds of work that merely perpetuate the infinite creation of capital, and to explicitly denounce these latter occupations as valueless. The novel explicitly recognises the potential of such a development as shattering, and puts it into an easily recognisable version of Marx's definition of capitalism, the system where money makes more money through the production of commodities:

> The more work you do, the more money you make, the more peons you hire to free you up to make more money. That's the way the world works. But one day it doesn't. No one needs a contract reviewed or a deal brokered. What it does need is toilets fixed. And suddenly that peon is your teacher, maybe even your boss. For some, this was scarier than the living dead. (140)

World War Z's take on labour, in other words, seems deeply critical of the contemporary economic system's priorities, and, at least tentatively, to be on the verge of systemic critique, suggesting that its post-apocalyptic society recognises the value of unalienated labour and has already produced major shifts in the perception of survivors. It is here, however, that the novel's imagination runs into difficulties, difficulties related to the by-now almost stereotypical insight that it is "easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (Jameson, "Future City" 76). Indeed, the unexpected resilience of capitalism in part marks yet another aspect of *World War Z*'s specifically liberal utopia. "Cuba won the zombie war" (228), one interviewee says; as Brooks's novel narrates it, through a combination

of military preparedness and communist ruthlessness, Cuba successfully manages both to keep itself safe as well as to integrate a large number of US refugees. Yet this integration leads to a great change in Cuba: the island, once the last existing socialist country in the Western Hemisphere, becomes, almost naturally, a liberal Western capitalist democracy. As the novel describes it:

> Over the next several years what occurred was not so much a revolution as an evolution, an economic reform here, a legalized, privately owned newspaper there. People began to think more boldly, talk more boldly. Slowly, quietly, the seeds began to take root. ... We had money, lots of it, money that created an overnight middle class, and a thriving, capitalist economy that needed the refined skills and practical experience of the Nortecubanos [as the US immigrants are called]. (232)

Cuba becomes a democracy, a capitalist "superpower," in a suitably ironical reversal of roles. The Cuban interviewee sums up the Cuban experience with a Churchill quote: "democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others" (233). As Slavoj Žižek perceptively notes, the Churchill quote "holds even better for liberalism," which, seeing little prospect for any radical betterment of the human condition given human nature, "presents itself as the best of all possible worlds; its modest rejection of utopias ends with the imposition of its own market-liberal utopia" (38). If Cuba cannot but become a liberal, capitalist democracy, it is small surprise that the US, too, ultimately creates a use-value based economy merely as a measure of expediency for the immediate state of emergency. By the time the interviews are conducted, this emergency has passed, and the post-apocalyptic society gets back onto its economic tracks. As Sinclair states in his final interview: "Getting people away from barter, and to trust the American dollar again ... not easy. ... Confidence, it's the fuel that drives the capitalist machine" (337). Then, having established that his new primary goal will be to get Americans away from using Cuban pesos and back to dollars again, he hands the interviewer a bottle of root beer, the same drink that earlier figured as a symbol for the problematic global connections that made establishing the local manufacturing that saved human civilisation such a hassle. Both capitalism and globalisation are here to stay; whatever critique the novel lavishes at these systems becomes lost in the impossibility to imagine an "after" to capitalism in this world.

Not only is *World War Z*'s vision for the post-apocalypse based on the return to the economic status quo ante, including the kinds of currency wars and globalised economies the novel both implicitly condemns and explicitly shows to be dangerous; it also offers barely any rationale for this return. Within the economy of use-values that Sinclair's US department has set up, it is not clear that there is any room or indeed any need for getting away from barter, as Sinclair insists needs to be done. The capitalist system is simply ingrained. It imposes itself on the new world order as readily as it did on the old, not on the strength of what it can do, but because of the failure to imagine alternatives even when those alternatives have been

proven to work. It is in this regard that *World War Z*'s imagination fails most signally. It is not that the novel cannot imagine an end to capitalism, it is that having imagined it, having explored capitalism's failures and limits, and having replaced it with the beginnings of a system in which use-value dominates in localised and nationalised economies both, *World War Z* needlessly foregoes the new system.

CONCLUSION:

World War Z's ethics are best exemplified in its own words: "Who knows what we could have accomplished if we had only chucked the politics and come together as human bloody beings" (262). The novel celebrates this voluntary collectivity in both its content and form. The greater vision of the post-apocalypse is assembled through the kaleidoscope of survivors' narratives; as noted, these individual narratives are perceptively selected to highlight some of the most notable problems of *World War Z*'s contemporary moment, acting as points on a larger cognitive map that plots the anxieties of its day. Apocalypse figures into it as a means of revealing these anxieties, and imagining change. In *World War Z* (and elsewhere), "zombies," as Evan Williams suggests, are the fantasy form of the real necessity of "creative destruction" (104) that precedes radical systemic change. Zombies permit the kinds of interventions into the (political) system that enable the novel to conceive of alternatives: a world focused to a much greater extent on international cooperation, small-scale societal cohesion, and advanced and progressive technologies capable of supporting human civilisation in the long term. Indeed, contrary to what Collins and Bond argue, "highly advanced technology" does not "occup[y] an ambivalent place" (193) in *World War Z*. It is resoundingly celebrated, except for military technology, because most of the technology we see is green: solar panels, solar-energy plate glass, fuel-cell engines for ships, and bio-fuel power plants. *World War Z* emphasises that these technologies are game-changers; they will permit humanity's lasting survival, and thus counteract the dangers of neoconservative industrial politics of the early 2000s, such as its disregard for ecological damage and the impossible, infinite growth that its system demands. Significantly, however, these technologies serve as mere signposts in *World War Z*'s larger progressive narrative. To become better "bloody human beings" is the novel's chief answer to the problems it identifies; "racial, political, and religious divides that had separated the nation[s'] peoples are forgotten," and its post-apocalyptic scenario depicts a "regeneration following the plague's scouring" (Collins and Bond 190).

Apocalypse in *World War Z* thus functions as the place for the revelation of the particular anxieties of the novel's historic moment and its belief that these anxieties are largely the product of a particular brand of politics within a largely workable, indeed necessary, economic system; post-apocalypse is the place where an alternative society may be envisaged and explained. The novel's agenda thus is necessarily both apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic, requiring both the exposition and dismantling of the old as well as the creation of the new.

World War Z is not, like so many other texts in its genre, merely interested in survival after the end of the contemporary social system. Rather, it is avowedly utopian, emphasising throughout its suggestions for post-collapse, alternative, better ways of living. But the way it does so is disappointing on its own terms. *World War Z*'s belief in the possibility of (mere) regeneration, as Collins and Bond have it, means that Mark McGurl is too optimistic about the "utopian dimension" of Brooks's novel; when "the starkly depopulated post-WWZ world turns to Cuba as the engine of the renewal of global commerce," this Cuba can hardly stand for a "'phase shift' in the ecological and social systems we inhabit." It is explicitly a capitalist Cuba that comes out stronger from the destruction of the pre-apocalyptic society. Brooks's novel is utopian only in the narrow sense that it envisages a liberal utopia of international cooperation, bipartisan politics (its politics being either international or American), and collective, social democratic resurgence. The world that is dismantled in Brooks's novel is neoliberal, neoconservative and capitalist; the world that arises from the ashes is (in its better parts) social democratic and communal, but also capitalist. Given the acuity with which Brooks's narrative highlights the necessity of envisaging new conceptions for labour, community and the economy at large, *World War Z*'s hesitant progressivism points to the limits of its—and the liberal—utopian imagination.

NOTES:

[1] I am using the term "liberal" here in its American sense of a progressive, centre-left position, and will throughout; this is because Brooks himself, as an American, is most easily located in the national political spectrum. Such a liberalism seems occasionally at odds with the more classical economic liberalism of a more European tradition, but note Slavoj Žižek's point:

> Today, the meaning of 'liberalism' moves between two opposed poles: economic liberalism (free market individualism, opposition to strong state regulation, etc.) and political liberalism (with an accent on equality, social solidarity, permissiveness, etc.). In the US, Republicans are more liberal in the first sense and Democrats in the second. The point, of course, is that while one cannot decide through closer analysis which is the 'true' liberalism, one also cannot resolve the deadlock by proposing a kind of 'higher' dialectical synthesis, or 'avoid the confusion' by making a clear distinction between the two senses of the term. The tension between the two meanings is inherent to the very content that 'liberalism' endeavors to designate, it is constitutive of the notion itself, so that this ambiguity, far from signaling a limitation of our knowledge, signals the 'innermost truth' of the notion of liberalism. (37)

That is to say, you cannot have political liberalism without also having economic liberalism.

[2] In a continuation of this meta-gag, *World War Z* pokes fun at the *Survival Guide*: "You could see it was clearly written by an American, the references to SUVs and personal firearms. There was no taking into account the cultural differences ... the various indigenous solutions people believed would save them from the undead" (197).

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