

Pandemic Woes, Undead Foes: A Case Study of the CDC's *Zombie Pandemic* Graphic Novel

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Abstract

In 2011 The Centers of Disease Control (CDC), USA, published a graphic novel titled “Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic”. The graphic novel outlined a disaster preparedness strategy for citizens. It positioned the rhetoric of sudden transformation from docile citizen to unruly monster as a civic threat that could be diffused through effective supply chain distribution and a militaristically disciplined citizenry. We locate the rhetoric of the graphic novel’s use of the “zombie” figure within a hypothetical global pandemic as part of a wider set of simulations carried out by the World Health Organization that preceded the current ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, we briefly revisit the cultural history of the “viral outbreak” narrative in popular culture. In this regard, we see the “zombie” as a cultural construct that encapsulates contemporary socio-political anxieties of apocalyptic dissolution within the narrative of global pandemic.

Our panel analysis of the graphic novel examines the thematic framing of the pandemic narrative as a zombie pandemic for a pre-existing audience within a survivalist gun rights US subculture. The paper demonstrates the graphic novel’s affiliation with the mainstream middle-class and a broad new-liberal ideology. The paper approaches the CDC’s graphic novel in connection with the neoconservative American hegemonic discourse of “securitisation.” In doing so, the paper sees the CDC graphic novel’s ambiguous approach to zombies both as a threat to the American way of life and as a weakness within its established citizenry that needs to be handled carefully.

Keywords: Pandemic, WHO, Zombie, securitisation, CDC, Graphic Novel

Between 1999 and 2005, the World Health Organization (WHO) prepared and revised a Pandemic Influenza and Response paper where any global pandemic was divided into 6 phases. Phases 1-3 were related to relatively low-risk transmissions of the influenza virus from other species to humans. Phases 4-6 were related to a significant species jump of the virus with a demonstrated potential for a pandemic in more than one WHO region (World Pandemic Phases 24). Envisaged as a “planning tool” the phase division was based on potential guidance to countries, not “epidemiological prediction.” The planning document envisaged WHO as the central hub of a coordinated multilateral response: WHO was to decide if the “criteria” for any particular transmission “phase” had been reached (26). If Phases 5-6 were characterised by “widespread human infection,” the “Post Peak” and “Post Pandemic” phases were to be characterised by the “possibility of recurrent events” and “disease activity at seasonal levels” (24). In this phase characterisation WHO conceptually divided the world into 6 regions that was represented in a colour-coded map (25). Phase characterisation was rendered visible across the regional division of the world. This representation was a simulation of possibilities. WHO’s world had to be in a constant state of planning: normalcy was to be understood at best as a preparation for the next “phase” of disease. Human health worldwide was not represented as a completed passage from disease to health, not a clearly demarcated historical moment in the history of the world, but a procedural relaxation of a “rapid pandemic containment operation” (23). WHO’s world is a third-order simulacrum, where any multilateral response is best coordinated through a near-militaristic simulation: moments of rest are only an “immediate ‘at-ease’ signal” (24), a liminal phase whose presence always indicates near-militaristic alertness.

By 2018, WHO was offering guidance in developing simulation exercises to prepare for a pandemic. It designed these “scenarios” as large-scale drills for “realistic pandemic situations” that were based on past “pandemic influenza” “exercises” and “preparedness plans” (World “Developing” 14, 13). In its guidance plan, a “scenario” was a “preplanned storyline” that created

a “fictitious influenza pandemic” to help participants practice premeditated response actions; these actions were to be “in line with the pandemic influenza preparedness plan” (13, 14). WHO’s preparatory logic was like an autonomous program that preceded the virus. The world would reset its simulation drills to adjust to new (and unknown) viral mutations.

The global reach of WHO’s simulations had already been accepted when, earlier in 2011, the 64th World Health Assembly had adopted the “Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Framework” (PIP) to share influenza epidemiological data and increase the possibilities of vaccine development in developing countries. One of its key successes, outlined in the 2018 Final Report was the launch of a “simulation portal” called “PIP Deploy” (World Executive Summary ix). The goal of this large-scale simulation was to test the capacity of global and national-level supply chains across the six WHO regions for “product deployment” (ix).

An independent task force in 2020 recommended that the US should treat the Covid pandemic as a “serious national security and global security threat” and that a US-led Global Health Security Coordination Committee be formed to “better mobilise and harmonise” worldwide responses to “pandemic threats” (Burwell et al. 7, 8). Positing the Centers of Disease Control (CDC) as central to a US-led worldwide surveillance and assessment of pandemic security threats, the organisation would be the “logical home” for a “consolidated epidemic threat surveillance and forecasting office” (10). The CDC would offer “guidance” for a rapidly “scaled up” deployment of concerted efforts (10). The policy recommendations also extended to more efficient stockpiling of “critical medical supplies and protective equipment” within the Strategic National Stockpile system (SNS) to ensure standardisation of “global supply chains” (11). In this projection, The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was to be tasked with updating supply chain vulnerabilities (11). Written during the Covid-19 pandemic, this 2020 independent report is remarkable for its dual insistence on efficient stockpiling through supply-chain management (using the logic of global outsourcing), and a militaristically efficient administration with the CDC as a command-and-control centre of guidance operations. Assuming the logic of constant surveillance and alertness,

that is articulated through the rhetoric of neoconservative American hegemonic discourse, the study envisages the future of public health in terms of the discourse of securitisation.

How did the discourse of “securitization” and the focal positioning of the CDC enter the simulations of viral disease in the American popular imagination? It has been argued that zombies are representative of an “existential threat to the state” where the figure of the zombie becomes a “compelling proxy” for “transmission issues” relating to phenomena as diverse as “terrorism, ethnic conflict, nuclear proliferation, and the global HIV/AIDS epidemic” (Morrissette 2-3). In this context, the field of international relations has seen the popular discourse of a “hypothetical zombie apocalypse” to categorise threats to nation states (3). A prominent approach within US-led IR theory is the “neoconservative” approach which “combines a concern for American primacy” and an effort to uphold American hegemony in the field of international realpolitik (5). However, Critical Security Studies (CSS), an emerging field within IR theory, questions the state-centric focus of such approaches; its concept “securitisation” deals with cultural politics through which “a particular issue is framed as a threat to security” (11). By positioning an issue as “an existential threat to the continued survival of the state” the discourse of administrative action follows the path of the removal of the threat by all available means. A military response to acts as diverse as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and environmental degradation conditions the state in terms of its resource allocation and public outreach strategies as well (11). This overall process of creating a policy-making environment that sanctions violence has far-reaching consequences for the way cultures treat real and fictional threats to the state and its citizens (14-19).

Roger Luckhurst, in his book *Zombies: A Cultural History*, connects the viral outbreak narrative to popular culture representations of the zombie horde because both emerged in the backdrop of “global health threats” such as the 1960s “Marburg hemorrhagic fever,” the 1970’s Ebola virus, the onset of HIV in the 1980s, and SARS “global panic” in the early 2000s. He sees the preparedness for global health catastrophes as part of a “reflexive modernity” whose “global transport and communication networks” allow greater, speedier circulation of risk and danger

(Luckhurst 179). Luckhurst links the contours of the zombie outbreak narrative in popular film to the notion of a pandemic. During the HIV outbreaks, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published an article titled “Night of the Living Dead,” referencing the classic 1968 George Romero zombie film of the same name. The link is not accidental. Luckhurst delves into the CDC’s public campaign in 2011, with its “Zombie Apocalypse Preparedness” pack and its school-education posters to see it as a culturally relevant educational tool for inculcating “basic measures” in an “epidemic outbreak” (181). These connections were made largely because of popular culture narratives (novels, films, video games) that have circulated such associations between actual pandemics and a hypothetical zombie outbreak.

Failure of containment is part of the narrative structure of the zombie outbreak: the authorities’ failure to offer sustainable leadership in the face of zombie outbreak forms the staple basis of many films and television series. In an analysis of the AMC series *The Walking Dead* — the first season premiered in 2011 and the series will end in 2022 — Paul Cantor shows how loss of faith in government, loss of control, the presence of a “herd mentality” and the docility of citizens are the themes of this series (Cantor 139-140). Furthermore, he argues that while the characters in the show continue to think of the CDC as their saviour, the series represents the failure of the CDC to live up to the survivors’ expectations (140). In this regard, Cantor states: “The CDC (in *The Walking Dead*) represents science at its most inhuman and frightening, an overwhelming force on automatic pilot, indifferent to ordinary people’s feelings and their fate” (Cantor 140). This focus on a popular television series’ approach to the CDC illuminates by *contrast* the cultural rhetoric of the real CDC’s graphic novel. Cantor sees its graphic novel (Preparedness 101: *Zombie Pandemic*) as a public relations response to the anti-people image of the *fictional* CDC in the zombie series. He sees the *real* CDC publication as offering a pro-government rhetorical approach. Instead of being a frightening simulation that is indifferent to people, the CDC’s graphic novel portrays itself as a highly competent organisation that is a guiding

light for docile and productive citizens, where its capability to manage the zombie crisis is based on an efficient stockpiling system (Cantor 141).

The CDC's graphic novel *Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic*, published in October 2011, is designed as an advisory for US citizens. Meant as "both educational and entertaining," the graphic novel employs the figure of the zombie. Part 1 tells the story of a young, middle-class, white couple (Todd and Julie) who find themselves thrust suddenly into a zombie pandemic and must evade the rampaging horde by hunkering down in their home. Part 2 depicts the events at the CDC where scientists and military personnel run a coordinated, round-the-clock campaign to maintain order and protect unaffected citizenry while the vaccine is prepared. Meanwhile, Todd, Julie, and their dog Max run out of food and essential supplies and must make their way to a safe zone nearby which is administered by the government and protected by troops. They reach the location after escaping a zombie horde in their car. Soon, the vaccine is ready and a shipment is delivered to their location. At the gates, however, the zombie hordes use this opportunity to attack. Todd is caught by a zombie and pushed to the ground. He is suddenly woken by his dog Max and realises that the entire episode was a dream. Failure of containment is part of the nightmare. Shaken, but with support from Julie, Todd decides to immediately prepare an emergency kit. The graphic novel ends with a page that contains an itemised list of supplies that go into an "All-Hazards Emergency Kit" (Centers 35).

The zombies in the CDC graphic novel are depicted in a manner familiar from countless American horror films, television shows, and video games. They are recognisably human figures who move in a shuffling, bent manner. They have a cadaverous appearance; their faces are blue indicating dead, rotting flesh and their eyes are a vacant yellow. The majority of them are drawn as slack jawed with bloody mouths and yellow teeth. All are devoid of human speech; they can only grunt. Todd first encounters the zombies as an undifferentiated horde on his television screen as part of a news segment. In one panel, the reader sees a shadowy figure drawn in dark green with

a claw for a hand; from this figure emits a word balloon with jagged edges that says, “UUURRRR!” In the panel parallel to the previous one, Todd is shown peeking out of his partially open door; his speech bubble as he says “Hello?” is a smooth balloon meant to differentiate human articulateness from the zombies’ mindless grunting?

In an encounter with an elderly neighbour, Mrs. Clements now turned into a zombie, Todd is forced to be rough with her only in self-defence. This first encounter between humans and zombies in the CDC graphic novel characterises the zombies’ paradoxical situation as both fellow citizens who are recognisable as neighbours and relatives and a novel threat to the American way of life. Todd and Julie do not pack any makeshift weapons in their gateway bags and Julie explicitly asks Todd to ensure that their car does not hit the zombies. Even the troops deployed to guard the perimeter of the safe zone share in this sensibility. As the zombies storm the safe zone just as the vaccine supply trucks arrive, the panels depict a rapidly deteriorating situation. Two army men are drawn back-to-back, brandishing their rifles as they are swarmed by zombies with outstretched hands and vacant faces. The first man warns his superior that they will be soon overrun. His superior, the sergeant, replies as he keeps a zombie at arm’s length with his rifle, “We can’t just shoot them. These are our fellow citizens!” (30).

The initial enthusiastic response to CDC’s use of the zombie for public education purposes was encouraging. The CDC blog crashed due to heavy net traffic. However, hopes that the zombie theme would appeal to young adults’ interest in emergency preparedness had unexpected results: the blog’s exposure to randomised samples of elementary school children showed the respondents’ eagerness to include firearms in emergency preparedness kits (Houghton et al. 520). Comparative studies with zombie and natural disaster scenarios showed about 75% respondents (in the *young adults*’ category) preferring to list firearms as part of their hypothetical preparedness kits (521). Independent demographic studies of gun ownership show that “white, middle-class, middle-aged, and politically conservative men” are likely to own firearms because the gun is

symbolically linked with notions of masculinity and serves to re-establish men as self-appointed defenders of their home and community (Mencken & Froese 3, 1). Similarly, survivalist subcultures are tied to a crisis of masculinity: studies of disaster preparedness reality television shows demonstrate the participants' need for a "preindustrial model of hegemonic masculinity" that necessitates their performances of masculine "self-sufficiency and paramilitary violence" (Kelly 95, 98). In her ethnographic study of such subcultures in New York, Anna M. Bounds finds that "this trend of self-reliance...reflects a weakened belief in the bond between government and its citizens." (Bounds iii). Daniel Drezner argues that chief among those who have successfully co-opted the zombie metaphor to advance their own policy agenda is the National Rifle Association (NRA) which employs a "millenarian rhetoric that warns that in a world of violent actors, the state will be unable to defend Americans" (Drezner 837).

The CDC's intervention in the discourse of zombie preparedness through their graphic novel, therefore, is both ambiguous and strategic. Todd is the perfect docile citizen, willing to play along with a simulation and ready to take orders in the atmosphere of militaristic preparedness. While Todd falls into the demographic that might be inclined to favour firearm usage, he does not pack one in his kit and abjures violence in any form. While the CDC graphic is clear enough that zombies are not real—Todd wakes up from a nightmare *about* zombies, it is also clear that threats to the state do break down barriers. It is also clear that threats fictive or real, of zombie or viral influenza have the possibility of breaking confinement and contaminating docile citizens and turning them into monsters. As such, the ambiguity of the graphic novel with respect to zombies lies in the way it sees zombies both as a threat to the presence of docile citizenry and also as a kind of weakness within the citizenry that needs to be handled with care. Todd's reluctance to do violence to his elderly neighbour (the newly-turned zombie, Mrs. Clements) demonstrates this care for a demographic which has become wayward due to a viral outbreak. As noted, earlier, Julie also explicitly directs Todd to avoid hitting the zombies with their car. It seems that the notion of a

sudden transformation does not preclude the possibility of recovery. Care, whether exercised by an individual or by the state, shown to the infected becomes part of the conversion of drastic militaristic response to better resource management. If the cultural history of the Hollywood zombie has been punctuated by the possibility of a near-total breakdown of the bonds between the state and its citizenry, the CDC graphic novel attempted (in 2011) to recuperate and recover the damage done to that relationship, not without some irony.

This paper has examined the World Health Organisation's simulations of pandemic outbreaks from 1995 to 2018. In examining its discourse of constant vigilance, the paper has emphasised the nature of WHO's responses and the use of militaristic rhetoric within the neoconservative framework of "securitisation." One argument frames the CDC's role (in the graphic novel) as a public relations damage-control exercise to offset the less-than-flattering portrayal of the organisation in a popular television show (Cantor 141). This paper sees how part of the CDC graphic novel's ambiguous approach to a zombie outbreak results from a re-directing of WHO's militaristic response to a more muted but nonetheless militaristic approach to supply-chain management. Instead of depicting soldiers and protagonists (such as Todd and Julie) shooting /hurting zombies, the graphic novel represents them actively avoiding any drastic show of violence. The violence is re-directed by positioning the CDC's militaristic preparedness as an efficient supply-chain management system.

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