What Will They Do Tomorrow? Post-apocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract

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Warning: This article contains minor spoilers for some post-apocalyptic fiction, including the texts 'Alas, Babylon' and 'Speech Sounds'.

In popular literature and film, the world ends again and again. A supervolcano erupts under Yellowstone National Park (Mulligan, *Ashfall*); a pandemic disease runs out of control (Boyle, "28 Days Later;" James, *Children of Men*); there is nuclear war or nuclear accident (McCarthy, *The Road*; Shute, *On the Beach*; Frank, *Alas, Babylon*). We consume these stories in great number and with pleasure. But not, I believe, because we delight in tales of mayhem or destruction, nor because we deeply worry that the world might end. We consume these stories because we are deeply curious about what the survivors will do. How might they start over again?

Hobbes

Postapocalyptic accounts thus ask the question posed in the theory of the social contract: how and why might a group of people, living without the conveniences and comforts of an organized society, come together to create such social organization? The traditional social contract theorists (Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau) were not thinking about life after a cataclysmic event; they were asking about what makes a government legitimate. But they posed the question of legitimacy as the question of how and why an individual could agree to live under a government. Hence the fiction invented by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679): the state of nature. Imagine life without government: "wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal" (Leviathan, ch. XIII). This state of nature, presented by Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau as an imaginary space, is brought to life in postapocalyptic fiction. Though we may no longer need to rehearse the arguments of traditional social contract about the relation of legitimacy to consent, we can use postapocalyptic fiction to think through the question that still confronts us every time we are faced with trying circumstances: how might a group of people decide to live together peacefully and in accordance with some set of rules? In creating states of nature, the postapocalyptic narrative acknowledges that **we** decide how to live together, and goes on to imagine the kinds of rules we might choose.

For both social contract theorists and postapocalyptic accounts, the quality of life in the state of nature shapes the nature of the agreement to live under a system of rules. For example, Hobbes emphasizes that the state of nature is famously a "war of all against all," a place where life is "nasty, poor, brutish and short." This is because we are all equal and share the same desires, at least potentially. Since no one of us is naturally strong enough to win every time, we can never feel secure that we will be able to satisfy our desires without the interference of others. The result is a constant state of conflict between human beings. But we all also desire peace. And so we are willing to give up our right to everything and agree to put someone else in charge of making and then enforcing rules that would determine, for example, property rights. The violence of the Hobbesian state of nature combined with our mutual desire to avoid such violence creates a contract that emphasizes a sovereign's need to establish rules and punishments. Many current postapocalyptic accounts emphasize this kind of contract – the Governor in *Walking Dead*, the Christian America movement in *Parable of the Talents*, the refugee camp in *Ashfall* – because of the violence of life without the contract. However, if that violence is created externally – as in zombie postapocalyptic

accounts, for example, then the move to a strict central authority is in violation of the spirit of Hobbes' argument, which describes humans as equal and the circumstances of the violence as emerging from that equality. External sources of violence and fear complicate this picture (particularly when the humanity of the zombies is itself in question). An additional complication is the presentation of those who have no interest in their own survival: roving gangs of homicidal humans may well be part and parcel of the more violent postapocalyptic text. But they have no counterpart in Hobbes' understanding of human behavior.

Locke

States of nature do not all need to be "nasty, brutish and short." For John Locke (1632-1704) the state of nature is not such a violent place. Instead under Locke we see a state of nature of "industrious and rational" (*Second Treatise*, Ch. V.33) individuals who simply want to work their land and "improve the earth." Humans are capable of working peacefully, but there are limitations to how much we can improve the earth without the "conveniency" of a government that will facilitate the building of roads and the establishment of a currency that will aid everyone in accumulating more. If under Hobbes we move from the state of nature to civil society out of fear of violent death, for Locke we make the same move out of a pragmatic recognition that to live without government can be inefficient. This desire for convenience is less often seen in postapocalyptic accounts that relish the presentation of violence. But the sensitive reader of these texts should understand the Lockean moments that are often present. For example, many accounts will contrast a group of survivors with their less rational or less admirable counterparts. The short-lived television show *Jericho* (CBS), set in a small Kansas town after nuclear war, and the current *Revolution* (NBC), which takes place post-EMP, both show primary communities that band together against a more disorganized outside world, and also against those who are portrayed as coming together out of more destructive ends. These texts illustrate the Lockean idea that tasking someone with the authority to enforce the rules is a more efficient way of accomplishing what we could do on our own. However, both of these "rational and industrious" communities come under threat (from Locke s "quarrelsome and contentious" (Ch. V.33)) quite quickly (in *Revolution*, in the very first episode), illustrating that the value of efficiency may not make for great visual entertainment.

Pat Frank's novel *Alas, Babylon* (1959), a best-selling account of life after a massive nuclear war, also follows the Lockean model. The novel has very little violence and very little fear. Those characters who are primarily motivated by fear (the elderly residents of a "snowbird" hotel) die out quickly; most of the action follows the inhabitants of the "big house" on River Road, owned by Randy Bragg. Life in Fort Repose, Florida after the nuclear exchange emphasizes human hard work, know-how and ingenuity. Those who thrive do so by returning to work the land; there are citrus groves, fishing, aardvark steaks and the search for a salt lick. Threats that arise are dealt with, and it is in confronting those threats that a social contract emerges – but not out of the fear that the residents of Fort Repose have for the "coyotes." Instead there is a calm recognition that appointing someone to deal with the problem would free up time for others to spend their time more wisely.

Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) shifts our concern about the state of nature from our immediate bodily survival or the protection of our property to the state of our soul: living alone in nature is potentially peaceful. But living this way fails to provide the foundation of civil and moral liberty: the freedom found in "obedience to a law that we prescribe to ourselves" (The Social Contract, Bk I.8). One mode of Rousseauean account is in the more solitary postapocalyptic texts. Here it helps to have a real semblance of nature (none of the wholly destroyed natural world of McCarthy's *The Road*). Marcel Theroux's *Far North* follows a woman whose family has resettled as Quakers in Siberia who must reconsider the idea of living communally after plague and war have radically reduced the population. While she fails to enact a social contract she thinks through life in nature vs. life in community recognizing the moral value of legitimate community.

Rethinking the Traditional Contract: Octavia Butler

Exploring postapocalyptic accounts means bringing an analytical eye to the moments of intersection with the social contract thinkers. But often the accounts themselves resist a single interpretation. This may well be an indication

that the presumption that we are all similarly motivated is inaccurate. Octavia Butler's short story "Speech Sounds" takes place in Los Angeles, three years after a plague that has produced varying inabilities to speak, to read or to understand spoken language. The protagonist, Rye, describes a city that is clearly a state of nature: "There was no more LAPD, no more any large organization, governmental or private. There were neighborhood patrols and armed individuals. That was all" (92). Rye's world is violent: always armed, she worries about how long she can hold off her male neighbor who already has forced three women to grow his food and service him. Rye acknowledges that "people might very well stand by and watch if he tried to rape her. They would also stand and watch her shoot him" (95). But in this violent world there are features that are not Hobbesian: people help strangers, set up quasi-commercial bartering networks, and Rye is willing to risk her own security to rescue the two small children left abandoned after the brief knife fight that kills her companion Obsidian.

"Speech Sounds" is a useful postapocalyptic text to think through the idea of the social contract. We have a Hobbesian setting with some people acting as Hobbes thought they might, others acting as Locke would imagine and finally, Rye herself, who in adopting these children sees the initial moments of a community to provide a Rousseauean way for her to regain her sense of being human. Rye almost drives away without the children and after changing her mind thinks "she would not be able to live with any other decision" (106). Butler's story confronts two important questions raised by recent critics of the social contract (Nussbaum, Pateman, Mills). Who is described (implicitly or explicitly) as coming to the contract, and why are they are willing to enter into that contract? Traditionally, both the social contract texts and the postapocalyptic fictions describe adult men entering contracts of "mutual advantage." The critical consumer of postapocalyptic texts will see the ways in which some of these texts understand adult males as providing the wherewithal for community life emerging out of a clear sense of individual benefit. But she will also learn to find the moments in other postapocalyptic accounts that expand both the range of *who* comes to the table (this is particularly evident in the recent popularity of young adult postapocalyptic texts) and the reasons *why* collective living is worth choosing.

Postapocalyptic accounts allow the reader or viewer to think through human nature absent the constraints of society. Consumers of these texts should ask themselves how well the text understands our various motivations for the difficult and yet necessary work of learning to live together.

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Claire Curtis is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the College of Charleston. She is the author of Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: "We'll not go home again" (Lexington, 2010) and other articles on the intersections of utopian and dystopian fictions and our understanding of political community.