What Does the Zombie Apocalypse Reveal About Canada-US Relations?

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On 14 February, 2013, the Honourable Pat Martin, New Democratic Party Member of Parliament for Winnipeg Centre, stood up in the Canadian House of Commons to thank the government for putting into place emergency measures to combat a potential invasion of zombies. Speaking on behalf of the Conservative government, the Right Honourable John Baird, Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated he was '*dead*-icated to ensuring this [zombie apocalypse] never happens'.

This exchange was in reference to a planned civic disaster training exercise organised by the government of the province of Quebec. And while demonstrating a level of bonhomie not generally associated with the fierce tribalism of Canadian parliamentary banter, I believe that the entrance of zombies onto the floor of the House of Commons represents more than a momentary flirtation with irreverence. Rather, the discussion of the zombie apocalypse can tell us much about contemporary threat construction and Canadian anxieties underpinning Canada-US relations.

The deployment of the zombie apocalypse for the purposes of conducting civil defence drills is not unprecedented and has been one of the Centre for Disease Control's most popular campaigns. Conveniently, a simulated zombie invasion allows for the engagement of a range of emergency services, security infrastructures, and unorthodox crisis management techniques without the requirement of a backstory that might inadvertently cause offense or be interpreted as a plausible precursor to an impending disaster. Moreover, the zombie is amorphous and thus an excellent cipher for contemporary fears of pandemic illness, social unrest, and even the loss of individual agency. Within popular culture, the zombie threat has thus become understood as existential. Whether in Raccoon City, London, or rural Georgia, the appearance of the zombie is eschatological. Life may go on, but it is not life as it was known before. Therefore, as James Berger argued in a recent essay on e-ir.info, the threat posed by the zombie is one that 'puts the contemporary social order radically into question'.

But what is often overlooked is that the zombie is also implicitly understood as a geopolitical threat. Gaston Gordillo argues that a core element of popular culture treatments of the zombie apocalypse is a 'territorial disintegration…[that results in] the production of walled, fortified spatial enclaves'. But regulating flows into a territory is not just a concern for fictional characters in cultural artefacts like AMC's *The Walking Dead*. As Martin opined on the floor of the Commons, 'a zombie invasion of the United States could easily turn into a continent wide pandemic if it is not contained'. From popular culture we know that the natural advantage of the zombie horde is a relentless–and resilient—mobility that enables the undead to swarm upon the living. As 'zombies don't recognise borders', preventing the zombie apocalypse remains ensconced in metaphors of containment and buttressing physical barriers to mobility. Therefore, stemming an influx of zombies is little different to measures of fortification undertaken to manage other unwanted flows in a global age such as avian flu, Islamic extremism, illicit drugs, or undocumented migration.

But within the Canadian context, I want to argue that there is another implicit risk within the geopolitical imaginary of unwanted flows that has taken on zombie-like characteristics: the Americanisation of Canadian political culture. Historically, fears of absorption by the United States have been a part of Canadian security discourses. More populous, economically dominant, and animated by ideologies of exceptionalism and manifest destiny, anxieties

about the undue influence of its neighbour to the south were once a very public Canadian preoccupation. The value of retaining a distinctly Canadian political culture was evident through myriad exercises from using multilateralism as a way of balancing against US power, to media regulations prescribing levels of Canadian content, to the championing of the concept of human security. But over the past decade, as structural economic changes from successive free trade agreements, post 9/11 security integration, growing state militarism, the embracement of environmental deregulation, and the increased availability of American news media take hold and create a new normal within Canadian political discourses, the differences between American and Canadian political cultures begin to be a matter of degree rather than substance. Like the zombie horde, American political culture does not respect its northern border, massing, swarming, and disrupting traditional social democratic leanings and potentially leaving a leaner, meaner and less distinct society in its wake.

From this perspective, one can view the zombie exchange in a different light. Psychoanalysts argue that humour is both a means of sublimating anxieties into a more manageable form and a way of challenging potentially destructive thought processes. As a member of Canada's only national leftist political party, Martin's comments are more than Parliamentary horseplay. They were rich with political subtext, challenging both the Americanisation of Canadian political culture and a Conservative government that has facilitated it.

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