

Theory Z Reconsidered: Organizing The Living Dead

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Introduction: Staying Dead In A Pulse-Centric World

With the rise of the zombie armies in China and South Africa (Brooks, 2006), it has become obvious that organization studies needs to re-assess the pulse-centric worldview it has commonly adopted. Whereas organizations of the living follow fairly simple, socially defined structures, zombie organization is clearly much more complex, for a number of reasons – not least due to the fact that the undead represent such a wide range of functionalities, from fully mobile with limited sentience to mindless writhing masses of putrefying body-parts. With limited language skills but with very focused interests, zombies might even be said to represent the ideal post-post-industrial worker (cf. Clegg, 2006; Ouchi, 1981). Similarly, the issue of leadership among the living dead remains almost completely unstudied (Bass, 1985), even though Romero (2005) has clearly indicated that this is a logical next step in zombie evolution. This paper will draw upon a wide range of documentary evidence and prior research to investigate what lies beyond the ideologically created notion that organization necessarily involves breathers, and thus paves the way for an organization theory of the living dead.

Zombies, i.e. the living dead, have rarely if ever been the subject of a sympathetic reading in the social sciences. In fact, much of these same social sciences have completely ignored and marginalized the dead class, creating a state of affairs where the assumption is that only the living and the breathing should be included in our theorizations of society and organization. This “pulse-centric” worldview has further assumed that the capacity for breathing and logical thinking is necessary for establishing organizations and for keeping organizational processes rolling. Even though organization studies has recently presented a number of new theoretical avenues that on the surface seem to go against this fascination for breathers – see the interest in ANT (e.g. Lee and Hassard, 1999), objects (e.g. Fleming and Spicer, 2005) and processual approaches (e.g. Rehn, Strannegård and Tryggestad, 2007)

– this has not been extended into any deeper critique of how the living have been made into the *sine qua non* of organizational analysis. Regardless of the way in which for instance a small gaggle of the recently dead could very well take over a small city if the conditions were right, and the fact that an army of the undead might well wipe out humanity as we know it, organization studies still wants to deny zombies their agency as parts of a potential organization of the undead.

I will not dwell too much on the reason for such anti-dead bigotry, but instead try to address the situation by discussing the reasons why a study of zombie organization is necessary and how this could be theorized. In so doing I will highlight both the unique circumstances of unliving organizations, point to the potential in these, and discuss some of the particular challenges inherent in organizing the living dead (cf. Yukl, 2002). I will argue that whereas organizations of the living may exhibit more variation than those discussed here, this does not mean that we cannot learn much from paying attention to how a radically different form of life (well, kind of) structures goal-oriented behaviours (cf. Vroom, 1964). Further, in order to develop organization theory it is critical that we explore the margins and alternatives of organizations as we know them, and in order to do this we need to find the fault lines of our thinking, explore the alien lands. And here be zombies.

One of the most important things about the living dead is their position as a radical Other. Zombies represent something truly abject, something that might stand as the very definition of *das Unheimliche*. Julia Kristeva (1982) has pointed out that when we are subjected to something that threatens to break down the barriers between subject and object, something abject, we react with a very specific kind of horror, with a “casting off” that she calls abjection. This trauma is not merely a form of queasiness or fright, but stems from a break with the processes that populate the world with meaning, quite literally being divorced or cast off from what normally keeps one connected with the world. A zombie is both alive and dead, both animate and inanimate, seemingly still part of humanity but at the same time clearly inhuman. The living dead thus represent a cipher, something which forces us to consider what it is in ourselves that makes us human (or not).

In other words, if we want to understand the limits of organizational thinking there are few better candidates than the creatures that challenge our very image of what constitutes a subject, the object with a subject’s face, the true Other – the living dead.

Zombie Organization

On a structural level, the organization of the living dead is a decentralized but highly focused emergent form, eschewing complex chains of command

for a mode that could be described as “embodied empowerment” (see Spicer and Böhm, 2007). In each swarm, every single zombie is acting individually and according to his/her instincts. Even though there is some evidence that individual zombies will gravitate towards each other and thus form groups and gangs (i.e. swarms), the central aspect of how the living dead work towards collective goals (even though these goals can only be understood as collective on an abstract and aggregated level) lies in the instincts of each specific zombie (Turner, 1987; Ouchi, 1981). What has amazed researchers is how effective this approach can be. Even though zombies in themselves have, at best, a limited sentience, zombie swarms have shown the capacity to grow into hordes – defined as consisting of at least 500 zombies with no more than 15% “partials” (i.e. zombies that have had their general mobility and effectiveness seriously impaired by physical damage, e.g. missing limbs). In rare cases, hordes have sometimes grown into armies – defined as consisting of at least 5,000 zombies, with no more than 20% partials (definitions by Fulci, 1989). There is still some debate regarding how we should understand even larger units, as zombie armies tend to break down into minor armies (that may still follow each other) at some unspecified level; however, some insist that we should use the term “necroarmata” for a zombie horde that includes more than 100,000 zombies.

The question as to what drives zombie organization has been fiercely debated. It is well known that the living dead seek out the living and attempt to attack them, but the exact reasons for this are still unclear. It has been ventured that zombies are driven by “rage” or “hatred” towards the living (see e.g. Matheson, 1999), but this seems like too simplistic an explanation. From what we know, the undead simply do not have the mental capacity for complex emotions (although there are differences between animated corpses), and there are reports of mangled carcasses that keep on attacking even when this is completely meaningless – such as in the celebrated case of the Salford half-head that tried to bite a passing human even after losing its entire body as well as its lower jaw. As terms such as rage and hatred refer to emotions that have to be understood through levels and difference, the unrelenting motivation of the zombies should be conceptualized differently. Others have tried to understand these killing instincts as something more biological, and argued that it is the need to feed on human flesh that is the underlying driver (Cleggy, 2003, see also Shamir, 1991). Logical as this might seem, it poses some troubling questions. Is it nourishment that they are after? Why do they not eat animals? Are humans simply the easiest prey?

Zombies do eat human flesh, and have shown a particular predilection for brains. Exactly why they do this is not clear, as it has been proven that they can survive for years without it, and seem to sustain themselves on altogether different kinds of energies. It has been suggested that they simply

like it and are drawn towards both humanity and killing out of some form of primal instinct lodged deep within the hive mind (see Foote, 1951). More interesting than trying to coax out an essential motivation for this behaviour is looking at what kind of effects it creates. Immediately upon becoming one, the lone zombie will – whether this is due to rising from the grave or by being “turned” due to having been bitten by another undead – try to seek out living humans and attack them, trying to bite, kill and eat. There are variations in this behaviour, as some seem most keen on biting and may not necessarily try to kill, whereas others may be so preoccupied with feeding that they’ll let other humans pass by without attacking them. Still, zombies are driven by very simple principles. The interesting thing to observe is how the sheer doggedness of your average undead creates conditions where we can find that the aggregate behaviour of a gaggle of zombies becomes both unexpectedly creative and starts to show synergies. But before we can explore this further, we need to look at how such organizations/aggregates might become possible.

The Varieties Of Zombie Interaction

As organization is commonly held to be a matter of interaction, the issue of zombie interaction needs to be probed. Whereas breathers have a wide range of interactive skills – including but not limited to language, empathy and performative utterances – the living dead are, by their very physical being, limited to a far more restricted palette of options. If we discount the most overt and obvious forms of human-zombie interaction, i.e. the aforementioned killing and eating, we are left with a scant repertoire of ways in which interaction can take place. Based on this, one might even be tempted to claim that the living dead do not engage in meaningful interaction at all. However, if we look at what little we do know, not only can we find interaction patterns, we can also see a marked difference between human-zombie interaction and zombie-zombie ditto.

In-group interaction between the living dead is not easy to decipher. As there seems to be no real language between them (one should further note that people who have turned into zombies might not have shared a common language before they became the living dead), many have argued that, in fact, they do not communicate at all (Jones, 2006). However, if one studies a swarm, one can note in their behaviour several subtle clues that there is not only interaction, but also something that mimics social behaviour. To begin with, there is surprisingly little jostling or any form of physical contact. In fact, even in a horde, one can note that there is a very even distribution of bodies, and that individual zombies will match both their speed and movement to their surroundings. This is no mean feat, particularly if we take into consideration that physical disabilities such as missing an arm or

having half of one's ribcage torn out may well make moving more difficult. Still, the horde's movement pattern holds, suggesting that the living dead are well aware of their surroundings and their brethren. In fact, it takes a barrier (e.g. a fence or a narrow passageway) combined with something desirable on the other side (e.g. warm human bodies) to depart from this order. Something similar can be observed in feeding situations. As long as there is enough human flesh for everyone, zombies will quite peacefully share a body, such that one gets the innards while another one gnaws away on arms and legs. Whether or not there are individual taste-preferences remains unknown, but is not unthinkable. There have also been claims that one could find similar social hierarchies as have been observed in primate behaviour (cf. Stanford, 1999) in the ways in which zombies share desirable brain-matter but this is hotly disputed.

Feeding also provides further clues regarding interaction among the no-longer-living. If meat is scarce, zombies will at times act in a hostile manner towards each other, try to take morsels from each other, and snarl at rivals. Whether such warning sounds should be understood as a primitive form or approximation of language is of course difficult to say, as many animals exhibit similar behaviours, but at times these sounds have exhibited a range of communicative properties. In addition to the warning snarl and the attack shriek, a number of other sounds have been noted. The most common of these is the tell-tale groan, a low rising and falling sound that all who have heard it will remember. In fact, it is so connected with the living dead that some have adopted the derogatory term "groaners" in connection with them. The use and meaning of this sound is hotly disputed. Some claim that it is merely an automatic reaction, and meaningless except as a practical warning sound (Jones, 2006). Others have theorized, however, that it might be a "social sound" that is used to call the swarm together and further convey some information between zombies (O'Doherty, 2007). This could explain the ways in which groupings are created and upheld seemingly without any intelligence driving the process, and also how the aforementioned order in movement can be achieved. It should however be noted that this is highly speculative and that we simply do not know enough to validate such a theory. As a side-note it should be pointed out that it has been suggested that the sounds are in fact merely a false trail, and that zombies react mainly to olfactory stimuli, i.e. smells, and that they actually dislike each other's scent. This highly interesting hypothesis has not, however, been tested.

Another fascinating matter in the (possible) social order of the living dead has to do with the varieties of being. As we are talking about the animated dead, there is a range of ways in which these can appear and function. Some may well be almost identical to humans, with the main outward signs being a characteristic pallor and a milkeness of the eyes. Others, particularly those that have decomposed or otherwise been subjected to physical trauma, may

be much more grotesque in appearance and functionally disabled (e.g. have their entire lower body severed or entirely lack arms and legs). This makes it difficult to talk of a generic zombie; however, at the same time, all zombies show similar behaviours and instincts. But as there have been cases of zombies assisting less able ones – by dragging them along for instance – these variations might point towards some form of proto-social order, or at least remnants of social feelings.

All in all, the evidence does point towards some level of social organization in the interaction between zombies, even though this might be more akin to the organization of primates or social insects than to human breathers. Some of what we know would suggest that there might even be complex social hierarchies among zombies, as well as communication and possibly even sentiment. Other observations suggest that we may in fact be dealing with emergent behaviours created by less than intentional means, and that we should be careful about ascribing too much to zombies just because they have human shape. The same sense of abjection that makes us not want to think too much about the living dead may also influence how we interpret their behaviour, and make us see them as more human than they really are.

This obviously leads us into the issue of human-zombie interaction. Together with hopes for a cure to whatever ails those who rise from the dead (or at the very least a vaccine against the infection they tend to carry), the holy grail of zombie research is to find a way to communicate and hopefully interact with the living dead. Some of the more optimistic scholars (see e.g. Mangold, 2005) have suggested that we might be able to use conditioning and Skinnerian techniques to “discipline” zombies away from their aggressive and cannibalistic ways (here, I will not go into the philosophical intricacies of whether or not zombies should be called cannibals, anthropophages or necrophages (see further Rehn and Borgerson, 2005)). Empirically we know that people have had some success in keeping captured specimens in chains and partially interacting with them. The most famous case would be that of “Bub”, detailed in Professor Romero’s seminal work *Day of the Dead*. For reasons unknown, Bub was able to show emotional responses, seemed to have trace memories, and even exhibited a limited capacity for self-discipline, i.e. choosing not to attack and kill individuals that he seemed to empathize with. However, one should not make too much of these individual cases, as they represent aberrations and because repeated attempts to replicate them have ended in researchers having either been bitten and “turned” or simply eaten. And although the (highly) independent scholar Rob Rotten did do some action research on the possibilities of intimate human-zombie interaction – his *Porn of the Dead* (2006) is considered by some to be a milestone – this has been condemned by most serious researchers, and it has been suggested that he has used living humans and staged a lot (if not all) of his depictions.

The overwhelming consensus in the field seems to be that there is little hope for interacting with the living dead, as their instincts have a tendency to take over and as they always seem to turn against humans, regardless of how sedate or pacified they at times may seem. Non-confrontational contemporary research on the risen dead has thus focused on other potential uses, and it is towards these we will now turn.

Labour And The Living Dead

No discussion on zombies would be complete without noting the ways in which the actual living dead have been mixed up with the idiosyncratic labour policies of certain voodoo houngans, who have created their own zombies for both ritual purposes and menial tasks. A voodoo “zombie” is a manmade slave that shares some physical traits with the risen dead, but is actually something else entirely. Even though popular culture often confuses the two, the created zombie is still a living (if damaged) human being. In short, the method of creating such a thing involves poison, impeccable timing, and a certain ghoulish curiosity. The process starts with the houngan (a priest of sorts, sometimes referred to using the term witchdoctor) creating a “death powder” – a potent neuro-toxin which renders the subject functionally comatose. Even though this poison does not kill (if correctly made and applied), the person who has been poisoned will appear dead, and is thus normally buried. This part is critical, for it is the prolonged period in a casket with a limited air supply that drives the transformation of the victim. While buried alive, asphyxiation will set in, leading to brain damage. The houngan will try to extract the victim at the exact moment when this brain damage has wiped out most of the higher brain functions but still left the “zombie” capable of performing menial or arduous tasks. If successful, the poisoner will now have an easily-led worker at his disposal who will not be missed (as he (or she) is “dead”). Obviously this process is fraught with difficulties. If the brain damage is too great, the zombie becomes worthless as a worker, and if the brain damage is too mild the victim may in fact be uncooperative. However, when it works it is not only a practical way to obtain good help, it is also a symbolically important success for a houngan.

This has led some (e.g. Tlee, 2002) to suggest that the living dead could be utilized as a form of labour, and the total potential annual labour market value of the zombie armies has been estimated at 17 billion USD (*ibid.*, estimate not including the potential killing and eating of living colleagues). There are many obvious benefits to such a perspective. Even the brain-damaged worker of the houngan was capable of doing hard labour when properly managed, and the sheer resilience and low maintenance costs of the living dead might even be said to represent the ideal post-post-industrial

worker. While they are not particularly suited to knowledge intensive work, the cost-effectiveness of zombies in manual labour cannot be over-emphasized. However, this places great demands on the manager and, as it remains unclear whether zombies can be trained at all, this may merely be a hypothetical potential.

If we instead look at the way in which swarms of the living dead do things, i.e. enact emergent labour, we find three critical components. The main strength of and threat posed by the undead lies in the sheer numbers of the zombie hordes. Simply put, they can always throw more bodies at a problem. In addition to this, we can observe that they are exceptionally resilient and will keep working even after being shot or otherwise mutilated, that swarming behaviour can result in “outside the box” solutions, and, through infection, zombies can reproduce very rapidly, ensuring a constant workforce. For instance, when faced with an obstacle, a swarm may well form a wall of undead bodies, where a piling tendency will create a situation where zombies come from the back part of a swarm and climb over the others and thus, by extension, surmount the obstacle (Brooks, 2003). In other words, the living dead can achieve things labourers might very well struggle with, and, with the capacity of swarms to go on and grow through infection, they can turn into a kind of unstoppable force. This would support some of the claims made by Tlee (2002), but not answer the question of how this can be controlled and managed. We might in fact face a situation where there are two completely different forms of the labour process – one living and one dead.

This leads us to the question of whether there can be something that might be called zombie leadership (cf. Bass, 1985). Romero (2005) has suggested that not only can there be such a thing, in fact it is a logical step in their evolution. The most important evidence we have of this is through a case history reported in Romero’s work, in which a zombie he refers to as “Big Daddy” clearly adopted a charisma-driven leadership position and led an army in a fairly well-organized war party. Big Daddy not only took it upon himself to lead the swarm that grew into an army, he also showed the capacity to delegate minor tasks and even conduct limited forward planning. Whether this is additional evidence that the living dead in fact have different levels of awareness and cognitive skills, or whether it should be understood merely as a random occurrence showing the power of emergent behaviour in crowds, remains contested (Yukl, 2002), but it is obvious that other members of the swarm/army showed deference, and looked, to Big Daddy for clues as to what to do. In other words, we can see among the animated dead at least some rudimentary forms of leadership, but much more evidence and research is obviously needed before we can say anything more about this phenomenon.

Regardless of whether it is driven by emergent behaviour or leadership,

a zombie army does pose a threat to its environment and can actually be a very efficient aggregate actor. Combined with the exceptional and directly monomaniacal focus of these hordes, this obviously also makes them a direct competitor to the organization of humans – taking the issue of strategic positioning to its logical extreme.

From Global Bio-Politics To Necropalypse

At the moment, uprisings are at an all-time high. As Brooks (2006) has pointed out, the necroarmatas of China form a global threat, not entirely unlike the way in which some wanted to portray the army of Chinese labourers as a threat that destabilized the global economy. Although there is no direct evidence that there is a link between, for instance, climate and the animation of the dead, we do know that some areas are less afflicted due to the limitations of, for instance, soil, geographical position, or cultural context. For instance, areas where cremation is popular will have less bodies to animate. Similarly, it has been shown that the very wet soil of Mississippi made an uprising ineffectual simply because most of the corpses were rotten to the point of falling apart.

This said, most areas of the globe have enough corpses to create an effective army, and the infection can spread rapidly from there. Critical, then, to both the global bio-politics of the living dead and the potential survival of the human race is the matter of great bodies of water. As zombies cannot really swim, and as they quickly get entangled and lost when submerged, the most potent barrier is often a body of water. For a zombie uprising to spread globally, it is not enough for it to start and reach critical mass, it must start, in almost all cases, in at least two places at the same time to overcome the problem of crossing water. Obviously, the more conflagrations there are, the greater will be the chance of the dead taking over the world. The sheer improbability of this may be the main thing giving humans the upper hand in the emergent conflict.

ne·crop·a·lypse: n. Common vernacular for the total sum of the changes that will be experienced across all aspects of life at the point when the animated dead have risen in sufficient numbers to thoroughly disrupt the normal order of the world.

The logical end-point of zombie organization is not the army or the necroarmata. Rather, it is the post-apocalyptic world, the point at which the necropalypse has progressed to the stage when there are simply no human beings left (or at least very few), i.e. when the animated dead have taken over. It should be noted that we know very little about what might happen at this point. It is possible that the living dead will either cease their activities, lacking anything to hunt/chase, or mill about in an aimless manner, becoming

little more than a mass of flesh without either directions or goals. Some have even suggested that after a while zombies will simply slip into a kind of dormant state similar to (yet) another death, as they would no longer have anything to continue for (see Parand, 2006).

All the models that have been run on critical-size zombie uprisings show that the necropalypse is almost inevitable if necroarmatas are allowed to grow enough, or if more than five of them on at least three continents emerge at the same time. In other words, large-scale organization of the living dead is in direct competition with the organization of the living, as these two have incommensurable goals. A more complete understanding of this process thus requires an organizational understanding of apocalypse in more general terms (cf. Rehn, 1999–2000). From a more pragmatic perspective, the important aspect lies in the obvious eradication of all known organizations during a necropalypse. Rather than seeing this as complete disorganization, I would contend that this is in fact a radical break with how we perceive the act of organizing. As we have adopted a pulse-centric world-view, we have difficulties accepting that the necropalypse is a valid organizational form, even though it is an extreme one.

At the moment we are having difficulties fitting this kind of radical risk into our models of the organized world, as we are not conceptually capable of handling the complete destruction of all human life. In this way, the zombie stands as signpost of sorts indicating the ways in which organization theory needs to develop in order to fit in the potential of the world, both to accommodate and eradicate us.

Implications For Research

I have tried throughout this text to highlight the fact that the organizational processes of the living dead are something that deserves to be taken seriously by organization theory, and that, in the rotting face of this, we might actually have to overhaul our notions regarding agency and the limits of the discipline. What a theory of zombie organization can show us is not only a novel form of being in the world, but also some things about how the field of organization studies has created for itself a set of ideological boundaries beyond which it simply cannot think. In the same way in which an individual is confronted with serious issues regarding mortality and the subject/object-divide when faced with a zombie, the organizations of the living dead force the discipline to consider just what we are prepared to accept and look at when trying to develop our field. The obvious question being posed here is one of research ethics. As the animated dead are “against” the living, and possibly even their antithesis, we have to consider what the implications and possibilities of a theory of zombie organization are.

One could argue that it is imperative that we study the undead as they represent such a threat to our continued existence. Through having a better understanding of their limits and potential we might be somewhat better prepared when the grand necroarmatas start marching, and this pragmatic benefit does carry a lot of weight. And as zombies do not read academic journals (or anything else), there is no real risk in doing so. However, it has been questioned whether we can ever really understand the living dead, and one could criticize the ways in which living scholars make themselves interpreters of the undead. Still, as they clearly cannot write themselves, nor narrate their feelings and logics, this debate does seem somewhat scholastic. A more difficult issue is whether studies on this matter should focus purely on understanding the matter, or from the onset state that the desired end-state is to end the zombie plague. If the necroarmatas can be seen as having a kind of emergent intentionality, can we then deny the living dead their right to agency? I shall not, however, address these complex ethical issues here.

All in all, we can establish that zombie organizations do exist, do show characteristics different from those of the organizations of the living, and do represent a developing and rich area of study. Rather than marginalize and ignore the dead class, we should take this new development seriously and engage with this novel bit of organization.

Implications For Practice

The practical benefits of an increased study of the organization of the undead should be glaringly obvious. As zombies are a part of the contemporary economic nexus, it will be increasingly important to make links to the alterity that their organizations represent, if we want to position humanity better in the approaching global war and if we are looking to extract value from this often untapped resource. As I have pointed out, the potential of utilizing, for instance, a zombie workforce is undeniable, and could serve as a daring new frontier in outsourcing, particularly as many corporations are today finding the previously so popular BRIC countries less and less cost-effective.

To this we can add the fact that management techniques developed for zombies could be adapted for their breathing brethren. As control of the undead is demanding, a method that works well here is likely to be efficient in other environments as well. In this way, the leading of zombies might be a way to break with the increasingly cumbersome leadership techniques adopted by contemporary organizations, and to usher in a more targeted motivation strategy. Whereas HRM has been shown to result in diminishing rates of return, ZRM could improve the bottom line and remove some of the current fuzziness from the task of manager.

Zombies also stand as an excellent arena for experimenting with evidence-based management (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006). As the undead can easily and cheaply be replaced, the practicing manager is given ample space to test out new and interesting management techniques. Whereas living workers are likely to complain if motivated by, for instance, a good whipping, such limitations do not exist when managing zombies. This will give the manager the possibility to experiment and take away some of the frustrations he or she might encounter when managing the living. In this way, a zombie is often preferable to a living worker.

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