



Capitalist Realism and the Post-Apocalyptic Community of *The Society*

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“What if we like didn’t take stuff ... sharing ... it could be like ... socialism”

(*The Society*: E03 05:39)

Introduction

The age of neoliberalism has successfully spread the idea that we live in a world devoid of ideology. In this way, the perceived absence of ideology has become the dominant ideology. Francis Fukuyama’s infamous idealist notion of the ‘end of history’ – neoliberal capitalism – is “accepted [...] at the level of the cultural unconscious” (Fisher 2009: 6). At the current stage, capitalism seems to be the only option, a constant, never-ending reality. In this context, Fredric Jameson famously wrote, “someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (Jameson 2003: 76).¹ This idea has been adapted and popularised by Slavoj Žižek who insists in his 2005 documentary *Žižek!* that:

Thirty, forty years ago, we were still debating about what the future will be: communist, fascist, capitalist, whatever. Today, nobody even debates these issues. We all silently accept global capitalism is here to stay. On the other hand, we are obsessed with cosmic catastrophes [...] So the paradox is, that it’s much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism. (Quoted in Beaumont 2014: 79; see also Žižek 1994: 1)

Jameson further argues that we can now “witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world” (Jameson 2003: 76). With rising class disparity, technological innovations, and, most importantly, the climate crisis, not only the theoretical engagement with (post-) apocalyptic scenarios has increased but also the number of fictional representations of growing economic and ecological anxiety. While

¹ This idea may be based on Jameson’s misremembering of a text by H. Bruce Franklin on J. G. Ballard. Further explanation for this can be found in Qlipoth (2009). For the sake of this paper, Jameson’s statement will stand.



some of the latter focus more on the causes or the process of the apocalypse, this paper is concerned with its aftermath.

My paper will ask how a social formation emerging from an apocalyptic scenario is imagined in critical theory and contrast the findings with a fictional representation in a television series. For the latter I have chosen *The Society* (2019) by creators Christopher Keyser and Marc Webb. The series is fit for comparison because, on the one hand, it was produced by and aired on the popular streaming platform Netflix and can therefore be considered a mainstream representation. On the other hand, the series is suitable because, on first impression, it appears to break with Jameson's original statement and change it to "the end of capitalism can be imagined (only) simultaneously to or as a result of the end of the world". In *The Society*, the protagonists explicitly engage with non-capitalist social formations, however, as will be argued below, these are only temporary and their long-term goal is a return to normalcy, i.e. capitalism. Moreover, the series claims to be part of a contemporary discussion. In interviews, Keyser has described it as a "kind of post-Parkland conversation about what this generation of kids is thinking and how they're interested in remaking the world in some ways" (Dibdin 2019). Keyser refers to a perceived rise in teenage activism and political participation after the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida. While the activism Keyser alludes to here is specific to gun restriction, Generation Z's transformative potential is tested out on multiple, controversial issues throughout the series. Some fictional influences cited for *The Society* are series such as *The Leftovers* and *Lost*, but the most important intertextual reference is William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* which continually gives the series a dark undertone and suggests that the characters' efforts are ultimately doomed (ibid.). At the same time, Keyser maintains that "although the show has the spectre of chaos hanging over it, part of it is also potentially optimistic" (ibid.).

As I will show, *The Society* conforms to science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson's observation that contemporary dystopias focus mostly on our social fears, they "[present] a metaphorical vision of our current moment" and are uninterested in "some future that might actually come to pass" (Robinson 2018). In an interview Keyser stated that he is "asking whether we [as a civilization] could've done better" (Dibdin 2019), hereby linking fiction and reality. Keyser aims for his production to discuss contemporary issues in the context of his fictional world, which ties in well with Peter Frase's argument that "speculative fiction [may be used] as a tool of social analysis and critique" (Frase 2016: 25). Thus, the series – perhaps inadvertently – also reflects the assumptions of our cultural unconscious.

In order to analyse how *The Society* discusses the im/possibility of non-capitalist futures in the context of a post-apocalyptic scenario, I will ask how its fictional characters' adaptation to the end of the world is judged and, consequently, what light



their achievements to form a new 'society' are portrayed in. Ultimately, I will emphasise the cyclical character of *The Society's* scenario and its adherence to capitalist realism by failing to imagine a coherent alternative to a capitalist system.

"Socialism and socialising" – *The Society*

The 2019 Netflix series *The Society* consists of ten episodes and marks around ten hours of screen time. In the pilot episode, approximately two hundred 16-to-18-year-olds return from a school trip to find their suburban hometown completely emptied. After a night of failing to get in touch with their parents and destructive partying in the local church, they start negotiations on how to handle their situation. The first three episodes lay out the premises for the students' personal dystopia. They soon realise that their town has become a sort of island, as they are cut off entirely from the outside world by a deep forest. The main characters are introduced while the teens start taking sides. Some of them choose a pragmatic approach, while others party all day and play games at night to relieve their frustration. The series establishes these sides in the intro of the first episode where the two main characters, Cassandra and Harry, are pitted against each other, and continues to deepen this divide throughout the following episodes. Cassandra represents the idea of finding collective solutions while Harry, coded quite pronouncedly as child of one-percenters, argues that everybody should be allowed to keep what's theirs, take what they want, and live as they please.

A range of other characters are introduced in the process, among whom are: Allie, who is Cassandra's younger, more sociable sister; Campbell, the town's own psychopath; Will, a black boy who is sent from one foster-home to another; Kelly, the privileged, popular mean girl at school; Bean and Gordie, who are in charge of the scientific input of the series, and a number of mildly intellectual football players.² At a meeting in episode three the students decide to make Cassandra the leader and follow her rules (*The Society*: E03 07:01). The rules establish a collective approach to the teen's predicament: houses will be shared, meals eaten communally in the cafeteria, and everyone will have a job assigned to them by rotating worklists, in order to handle the threat of resource scarcity. This collective solution is successful for about 50 mins of screen time until Cassandra is killed at the end of the third episode. The following episode shows the chaos ensuing her death. The teens loot, fight, and slack on their communal duties until Allie reluctantly steps up as interim leader, promises to enforce Cassandra's rules and instates a makeshift police force, the Guard, made up of the former football players. Episode five shows the arrest and trial of the murderer Greg Dewey, who is found guilty. Allie instates the death penalty and executes Dewey in episode six. The series then makes a five-month time jump that sees Allie's rules implemented and functional,

² Grizz, who is arguably the most intelligent character of the series, is an exception to this.



although dissent is brewing. The driving plot of the last three episodes circles around the elections that Allie called at the end of episode seven and a search party that leaves to find farmland and comes back with good news. The series ends with a cliffhanger as Harry, Campbell, and the recently introduced character Lexie stage a coup and, with the help of the Guard, seize power and imprison the former leaders.

Capitalist realism

Mark Fisher's concept of 'capitalist realism' builds on Jameson's comment that the end of the world is easier to imagine than the end of capitalism (Fisher 2016: 2). According to Fisher, the sense that capitalism has become the only practicable system in politics and the free market the only "viable" (ibid.: 2) economic system is omnipresent. It has become difficult to imagine any "coherent alternative" (ibid.) system. This realism is reflected in the (fictional) utopias and dystopias that the dominant culture produces. These imaginary futures used to function as a "pretext for the emergence of different ways of living" but now appear rather as "extrapolations or exacerbations of [our world] than an alternative to it" (ibid.). Instead of focusing on future *possibilities*, such cultural productions are now caught in the spectre of capitalist realism, where every alternative seems *impossible*. This correlates with Robinson's "double action" of science fiction, which consists of two "lenses": firstly, the science fiction mechanical lens that imagines "a future that might actually come to pass" and thus acts as a "proleptic realism", and, secondly, a lens that provides a "metaphorical vision of our current moment" (Robinson 2018). Similarly to Fisher, Robinson argues that modern dystopias predominantly rely on the second lens, eschewing the possibility of a different future in favour of the seemingly inescapable drudgery of the present.

Although the first season of *The Society* does not fully answer where the group of teens is or how they got there, it introduces multiple theories that lead the viewer to believe they have been trapped in a parallel universe. The protagonists question the fate of their parents; are the children being punished for their parents' mistakes or have they been saved from the repercussions of their (in)actions, their failure to handle the crises of their world? Depending on the fictional and real outcome of these scenarios both may be argued for. While the series does not "imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" (Jameson 2003: 76) as other works of apocalyptic fiction do, it operates under the assumption that the end of capitalism is only imaginable after the apocalypse. Even then, though, I argue that the series fails to imagine a *coherent* alternative, thereby adhering to capitalist realism.

This may already be observed through the post-apocalyptic context *The Society* is set in. As Leif Sorensen argues, the post-apocalyptic has to be distinguished from the apocalyptic. The former is concerned with the aftermath of a given catastrophic event



whereas the latter is set during the process of the end of the world, where an ending is unavoidable (Sorensen 2014: 562). According to Sorensen, most works of post-apocalyptic fiction take the form of either a narrative of the “return to normalcy” or the “rise of the post-apocalyptic new normal” that sees an adaptation to the crisis (ibid.).³ *The Society* is intended to offer a critical reflection on the question of whether “we [as a civilisation] could have done better” (Dibdin 2019).⁴ A range of controversial contemporary issues, such as gun restriction policies, sexual and gender violence, the death penalty and, finally, the opinion that “Young Americans are embracing socialism” (St. Félix 2019) are discussed. In regard to the latter, the series observes the teens attempting to implement collective ways of living. They momentarily exist in a social formation without capital, labour, and production, where they are able to make decisions and create new rules.⁵

Yet, the ‘socialism’ that the series presents has the character of a social experiment rather than a serious alternative. While *The Society* supports collective solutions as (fictionally) necessary for survival within a world of resource scarcity, it restricts their durability and extent by linking them purely to brute survival and hardship, rather than to any long-term changes and possible utopia. Moreover, creator Keyser has said that the teens exist in a world that does not *yet* have capital and labour (Miller 2019), which gives the experiment even more of a cyclical character. Either they will be reintegrated into capitalist society when their parents save them, or they will eventually build their own capitalist system. Thus, the first season leaves room for both the possibility of a return to normalcy, i.e. a return to the world of their parents, or an adaptation to the new post-apocalyptic normal in their parallel universe.

But what form does this adaptation take in the short-term, that is throughout the plot of the first season? What possibilities are presented as viable in the long run, in case a return to normalcy is impossible? The series partially appeals to the possibility of ‘doing better’, but not to the radical change that would be necessary to counteract the real crises of late capitalism. As I will show throughout my paper, it ultimately argues more conservatively than advertised. This can be understood through Robinson’s use of Greimas rectangle, where not only utopia and dystopia are opposites, but also anti-utopia and anti-anti-utopia (Robinson 2018). In its discussion of non-capitalist possibilities, *The Society* plays into the anti-utopian notion that “the idea of utopia itself is wrong” as “any attempt to make things better is sure to wind up making things worse, creating an intended or unintended totalitarian state, or some other such political

³ Sorensen presents a third option, namely the “absolute ending” (Sorensen 2014: 561) that most creators of fiction shy away from. He explains this form by means of Colson Whitehead’s novel *Zone One*.

⁴ Keyser unfortunately does not clarify whether this applies to historical or future events.

⁵ In season one, hierarchies like sexism are addressed, but, thus far, race, and class are mostly implicit. Keyser merely claims that these “need to be re-litigated in a world in which there are no givens” (Dibdin 2019).



disaster” (ibid.). An example of this is its partially anti-communist reasoning. While the series may not be categorically anti-utopian, it nevertheless fails to be anti-anti-utopian. It does not take the “necessary next step following the dystopian moment”, that is it does not constructively engage with “utopian thoughts and ideas” (ibid.). Therefore, the series’ dystopia is “stuck at a level of political quietism that can make it just another tool of control and of things-as-they-are” (ibid.). Following Robinson, I will demonstrate that *The Society’s* main deficit lies in its superficial engagement with alternative future scenarios.

“Well, socialism it is” – Four Futures

In a book of the same title, Peter Frase imagines four futures for life after capitalism. Frase does not claim to make accurate predictions but concentrates on observing broader trends and their repercussions, the most important of which are climate change and technical automation. The proposed futures distinguish themselves by a combination of either abundance or scarcity with hierarchy or equality (Frase 2016: 29). Rentism and exterminism are presented as possible dystopias. The former is built on a ruling class elite that creates artificial scarcity and thereby hierarchy. Exterminism portrays the consequences of exponentially increased automation that would render the working class superfluous to the needs of the ruling class. Left without the means for their reproduction, this would culminate in the demise of a large part of the population. When based on abundant resources and equal participation, communism would reimagine work and leisure. In this utopian scenario “conflict [would] no longer [be] based on the opposition between wage workers and capitalists or on struggles over scarce resources” (ibid.: 67). Socialism, according to Frase, would be a utopia that, albeit founded in the scarcity of resources like water and electricity as well as limitations of the physical environment, would still allow “a world of freedom” (ibid.: 118) and equality. The book assumes that any climate catastrophe will not render Earth uninhabitable but rather happen gradually, accompanied by growing “struggles over spaces and resources” (ibid.: 20). Hence, the major concern is not whether the apocalypse is survivable but *who* will survive it.

The Society does not give a definitive answer to such speculations. Keyser has said that a hypothetical second season would discuss aspects such as class (Dibdin 2019), but seeing as the series has been cancelled, this fact will remain unknown. Thus far, class differences are mostly implied. The main characters parade their wealth and privilege through expensive cars, clothes, and mansions and mostly plan on attending Ivy League schools.⁶ Working class characters may exist but are not identified as such.⁷ Early on,

⁶ It is not unrealistic that it would be mostly the one-percent who may survive the apocalypse. In fact, Frase gives the example of the company Vivos which building a cross-over between luxury apartments



characters born into privilege, like Harry, argue that in these times they should “stick with [their] own” (*The Society*: E01 33:53). Yet, the ensuing conflicts are not necessarily grounded in class struggle and addressed only in Harry’s election speech in episode nine, which will be discussed below. Therefore, if at all, it is a struggle from above. Furthermore, only one character, Lexie, counters this when she points out that Harry is merely interested in his own and the other rich characters’ gain (ibid.: E09 49:55). Ironically though, she too lives in a house that takes up the entire frame of a shot due to its size (ibid.: E04 05:44).

Interestingly, the series does make explicit reference to socialism on two occasions. First, Sam signs: “Socialism and socializing ... are we in an episode of *Riverdale* or Soviet Russia?” (ibid.: E03 11:23). This utterance mostly translates to scepticism towards the idea that the teens could manage the community on their own, as he is standing between recently hung-up prom posters and worklists. More telling is a scene that shows the footballers (aka the Guard), lying on a football field in their gym clothes, visibly hungover from ten consecutive days of partying, discussing this idea. During their conversation, the camera intersperses shots of the boys from an implied overhead-angle and bird’s-eye view:

Jason: I’ve been thinking...what if we like...didn’t take stuff...like food or whatever. Wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, right? Sharing...it could be like...socialism. There’s no I in team, right? [...]

Clark: Erika give you that talk? [...]

Luke: Well it’s not like it worked in China...socialism.

Jason: It kinda worked. Everything’s made in China.

Grizz: China’s a poor example. The Party took complete priority over the workers. In reality, we’ve never seen a true socialist state.

Clark: Maybe all the Chinese women said they wouldn’t put out, unless all the men got onboard.

Jason: Gwen say that too?

Luke: Well, socialism it is. (ibid.: 05:41)

Mentions of socialism in the text inspire mostly ridicule in the viewer, though it is not entirely clear if this is directed at the concept or the characters. On the one hand, the football players themselves are mocked, while, on the other hand, their reluctance to

and radiation proof bunker into a mountain in Germany for a capitalist elite to survive any disaster (Fraser 2016: 132).

⁷ Will forms an exception to this, yet it is inconclusive whether this is intended to reflect his class identity or the fact that he grew up in the foster system.



share is emphasised. Accordingly, the theory that socialism is unachievable due to human selfishness is reinforced. This is achieved by the setting of the scene as well as the presentation of the characters, and intensified by the incoherent speech, the modifiers, and the irritated facial expressions. It also ties in with the question of whether their failure to see themselves building a community based on equal participation and shared access is not merely a failure to provide a viable alternative to the capitalist society they grew up in but also a direct result of the capitalist realism that has shaped their ideas on the im/possibility of alternative visions. Thus, it is crucial to examine the way in which this topic is framed fictionally. The teens sole goal is survival, which is why they only engage in essential work, in their case cooking, laundry, and garbage duty plus organisational and entertainment committees⁸ as well as the Guard – whose members are the only ones that do not rotate jobs.

According to Frase, work in a capitalist society can have three purposes: providing the money necessary to survive, ensuring the continued existence of society, or personal fulfilment (Frase 2016: 44). In the series' fictional scenario, work solely serves the second aspect. This interpretation of the people's attitude to a reorganised way of working becomes important in the context of the other arguments the series provides concerning a post-capitalist system.⁹ Due to low prestige, garbage duty is the least desired – presumably in the fictional and the real world – so it seems quite purposeful that the series predominantly shows this work. Work scenes at garbage duty have rather bright high-key lighting and sometimes grey skies overhead which pair well with the disillusioned faces of the teens. Most notable are a shot of Helena's¹⁰ hands that are bloodied from her hard work (*The Society*: E01 13:42) and, some episodes later, a similar shot of Harry examining the blisters on his own hands (ibid.: E07 08:44). It is salient that *The Society* only shows this seemingly all-consuming job and cooking as opposed to the other myriad of activities the characters must somehow be undertaking off-screen, e.g. gardening, planning and the aforementioned laundry.

Presenting communal work in this tedious, painful, and overwhelming way, it can be argued that its evaluation is biased from the beginning. This pattern, then, is found in most of the related scenes and in the majority of figures. Grizz and Sam as well as Kelly and Will are exceptions to this. The first couple falls in love over gardening, an extra task, rather than an assigned job. The latter are initially seen in the cafeteria, where their scenes are tinged in warm light and they seem content (*The Society*: E03 14:28). Kelly arguably has the most character development in the series. She finds her purpose in

⁸ For example, the Committee on Going Home and the Committee on Resources, whose members are seemingly chosen at random or by Cassandra.

⁹ The sequences showcasing this work start at 13:32 of episode 3.

¹⁰ A character mostly known for taking on the role of pastor.



helping her classmates and thus becoming a valued member of the community.¹¹ However, their scenes are not equal in screen time to the negative portrayals and are presented as a minority; the majority are unhappy. Harry's failed adaption to the new status quo receives far more coverage, examining the change from a capitalist's perspective. Harry is extremely frustrated and exhausted, finally drifting into depression and drug abuse. The redistribution of houses (ibid.: 15:26) is seen from his perspective and so are many of the work scenes (cf. ibid.: 21:30; E07 02:11). Harry is overwhelmed and feels wronged by people taking what is his "as if nothing of [his] means anything" (ibid.: E06 10:38). To him, being equal with his classmates and contributing equally to the community feel like he is "nothing" (ibid.: 10:28). Harry's perspective culminates in his election speech:

A lot of things now are very different from when we first got here. Maybe in the beginning, we needed to give up everything that we had. All of our freedom, our possessions, our identities, all for the greater good. Maybe we needed to turn over every decision in our lives to become the ants in the colony that we are right now. But now, this place works. And I say it's time to give back what's rightfully yours. Control over your property, control over your destiny, control over your own lives. (ibid.: E09 47:05)

Ironically, it is uncertain what property other than his house Harry is referring to, given that these 'possessions' are his parents', and he is therefore defending inherited wealth, not something that he has achieved himself. The misconception that socialists want to take people's property is not new, yet often fails to establish the difference between personal and private property. 'For the greater good' may reference the misconception that socialism does not leave room for individuality. By the negative use of his ant-metaphor, Harry argues that not everyone should be a worker. Allie answers with a more rational – although pessimistic – speech that points out that their current system, however frustrating, is the only viable option for the survival of all and the viewer is urged to agree with her, but, tellingly, she does not get to decide the fate of their community. Instead Harry, Lexie and Campbell assume power by the final episode.

The series adheres to the idea that collective responsibility and solidaric behaviour is impossible without enforcement. The seventh episode begins with a voiceover of Becca stating:

Six months ago, we were children. This is who we are now. We eat and live communally, we even sweat communally. This is all according to Cassandra's rules. Now, there are Allie's rules as well. A midnight curfew, mandatory weekly town

¹¹ Kelly helps take inventory of the resources, plans prom, and becomes a community doctor.



meetings and the community doctrine: those who don't work, don't eat.¹² We found a balance between doing what's expected of us and finding happiness where we can [...] We waffle between following the rules and bending them, constantly worrying that if we bend too far, this whole rickety structure might topple and break. Because we know that we're always one dumb move away from ruin. (*The Society*: E07 00:18)

The monologue, while accompanied by the series' signature tense violin and piano music, underlines the instability of the system and once again points to the discontent of the majority. What is more, the series depicts work as an all-consuming activity that allows for little freedom, which for many working-class people it also is under capitalism. However, this would be entirely dependent on the conditions of a future society, e.g. on resource scarcity.¹³ Studies have found that worker productivity has tripled since the 1930s, yet this increase is neither reflected in wages nor in free time – although it could be in the future (Fraser 2016: 15). This negative relationship to work is also manifested once the Guard is shown enforcing the worklists (*The Society*: E07 01:26). They visit to inquire why Lotus has not attended work in three days. The girl's costume and make-up indicate that she is very ill, but she insists that she can work anyways, because she dreads having her rations cut. Although the Guard leaves her to get well, the scene still conveys the strictness of the 'community doctrine'. It is a warning of a system where equal work is a condition for the fulfilment of basic needs.

The series intends this scene to speak to its fictional scenario and perhaps comment on socialism as a construct but ignores that this situation is already the norm under capitalism; without sick leave or a permanent full-time job, wage workers cannot afford to miss workdays and are forced to go against their well-being in order to gain the money necessary to survive. Aaron Benanav demonstrates that this trend has only intensified in recent decades. The precarity of "so-called non-standard job categories", that is "part-time, temporary, or otherwise limited [employment]" (Benanav 2020: 52) has increased drastically due to low labour demand: "60 percent of jobs created in OECD

¹² This references the aphorism "He who does not work, neither shall he eat", previously used by Paul the Apostle and cited by Vladimir Lenin, in the New Testament and *The State and Revolution* (1917), respectively.

¹³ For an example of what a radical reorganisation of agriculture might look like see Jasper Bernes (2018). Bernes states that, after having achieved the „communization“ (Bernes 2018: 358) of agriculture which entails the localisation of food and overcoming „the division between town and country“ (ibid.: 364) (through re-localisation), "nearly everyone would have a hand in growing the food they eat" (ibid.: 362): "[A]griculture would doubtless become more effort intensive in the developed world, as breaking with the world market will leave many without the machines and fertilizers and pesticides that industrialized agriculture uses today. This is not such a problem: as a share of total human effort, the amount of time devoted to agriculture in countries such as the U.S. could increase by a factor of ten and still not account for a very large part of people's overall activity. In the developing world, agriculture would no doubt become less effort intensive by eliminating the need for the poorest producers to work the most marginal plots of land with the worst techniques and equipment" (ibid.).



countries in the 1990s and 2000s were nonstandard” (ibid.: 53). In 2015, 74 percent of the global workforce had to work on “temporary contracts or else informally”, while only 26 percent “had permanent employment of any kind” rendering “the term nonstandard employment [...] clearly a misnomer” (ibid.: 55). Benanav predicts that the rising unemployment due to the COVID-19 crisis will further the developing forms of “underemployment” (ibid.: 56), seeing as workers will have no choice but to accept intense employment insecurity as they cannot stay out of work for long. *The Society*, however, sees the link between work and basic needs as a telling product of its alleged proto-socialism and misinterprets it as specific to its fictional system although it is already the norm under late capitalism.

“Who’s gonna have all the power?” – A character case study

The characters of *The Society* are emblematic of the series’ subscription to the conservative idea that the return to Hobbes’ ‘state of nature’ is always near. As mirrored in the characters’ behaviour, individual desire will undo any collective politics without a State as a sovereign. In order to formalise the ideas that the different characters represent, it is helpful to consider the principles future social formations may be oriented towards that Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright have proposed in *Climate Leviathan*: the dichotomies capitalist/non-capitalist and planetary sovereignty/anti-planetary sovereignty (Mann & Wainwright 2020: 29). The emerging scenarios are, in this case, possible trajectories dependant on global responses to climate change, but will serve just as well when the second category is changed to sovereignty/anti-sovereignty in general. In Mann and Wainwright’s analysis, the emerging social formations could take the form of “a capitalist Climate Leviathan [based on planetary sovereignty]; an anticapitalist, state-centered Climate Mao; a reactionary capitalist Behemoth; and an anticapitalist, anti-sovereign Climate X” (ibid.). Each of the main characters of *The Society* represents a specific approach to the subject of power and authority that drives the plot of the series. At the centre of this is the idea that there are good and bad leaders that will decide any future development virtually on their own.

From the start, Cassandra is presented as a saviour figure and made out to have a certain quality that makes her the only natural leader. Curiously, this is not so much shown through her actions as repeatedly told to the viewer (cf. *The Society*: E01 28:37; 31:11). The character’s name refers to the oracle Cassandra who was cursed to predict, for instance, the doom of Troy but to never be believed. *The Society*’s Cassandra is true to this telling name when she warns about the scarcity of resources and highlights the need to work communally, but few people believe her. Cassandra’s costume and mannerisms emphasise her position as a natural leader – for example her rather mature way of dressing. This maturity is emphasized by way of her chronic heart disease, which



adds to her overall seriousness and makes her seem wise beyond her years. Nevertheless, in the very first scenes of the pilot, the viewer sees her through other characters' eyes and perceives her as bossy and annoying. From this point on, she is consistently antagonised by other characters, which immediately creates an ingroup-outgroup tension.¹⁴ She and Harry are introduced as opposites that will represent different sides of every subsequent argument.

Cassandra's death prompts Allie to assume leadership. Before this moment, Allie had symbolized the middle ground between Cassandra's responsibility and Harry's play by sharing intimate scenes with both of them and partaking in their ideas for the island. Allie wears soft colours and comfortable clothes, has long hair and is generally petite. Prior to her lead, viewers only take note of her as Cassandra's younger sister. Allie seeks out power for safety. She is often shown grieving, near her sister's grave or in her own bed(room), leaning on other characters for support and surrounded by the Guard for protection (cf. *ibid.*: E06 37:33; 42:59). She is a leader that does not feel capable of leading and is often pushed into decisions. This is clearest when she has to decide on the punishment of her sister's murderer Dewey. She tells her friend Will "I don't want this, any of this. I don't wanna ... make the rules. I don't wanna be responsible for everyone. I don't wanna be responsible for avenging my sister's death. I quit. I quit. I don't want it" (*ibid.*: 22:03). After Cassandra's murder the entire town goes into a state of panic and chaos, so in order to make the people and herself feel safe, Allie instates the Guard to enforce her rules, holds the first trial, instates gun restrictions, house raids, a makeshift prison and finally, implements the death penalty. The execution scene (*The Society*: E06 28:07) is a pivotal point for her character development, which is announced by the interspersion of shots of Dewey's corpse and close ups of Allie's face as she reacts to the irreversibility of her actions.

Thus, the scene illustrates the argument that the sovereign, Allie in this case, is the only one who may legitimately use violence and thereby maintain order. This point is also evident in the fact that, even though she is met with doubt in some places, Allie is accepted as the only person who *may decide* on how justice is to be served in the first place (*ibid.* E05 47:53). Moreover, it can be observed in the arguments presented for the implementation of a (very small-scale) prison and, more generally, concerning safety. The show tries to convince viewers that the town's people would not be safe without a punitive system. The town's girls address the apparent inevitability of rape under their conditions, now that "there isn't anyone to say no" (*ibid.*: E03 02:14) and "everything that kept [them] safe is gone" (*ibid.*: 02:12), which again translates to the perceived necessity of a sovereign. In doing so, *The Society* stresses its dystopian conditions by juxtaposing these to the before, thereby ignoring the normality of sexual violence in pre-

¹⁴ She is never invited to parties (*The Society*: E01 02:57).



apocalyptic times. After the execution Allie says to Will “I’m in charge now, really in charge” (ibid.: E06 45:23). The series develops this moment into a coming-of-age process for her: her colour scheme changes to darker colours, she now ties back her hair and wears mostly tight-fitted black clothes and a jacket that resembles military green. By means of her new-found self-confident stance, she goes from being a younger sister to the leader. Her need for safety, however, continues.

On the other side, Lexie wants power in order to fulfil her personal vendetta against Allie.¹⁵ She is introduced fairly late in the series, her only previous appearance being in a short scene where she paranoidly locks herself in her house for days after Cassandra is murdered (ibid.: E04 05:49). In her election statement she speaks very emotionally, with a nervous voice and sometimes exaggerated gestures. People do not easily listen to her. She is unreliable because it is unknown what ideas she stands for and she has no political plan.

Harry searches power to restore private property. This is emphasised by routinely showcasing his wealth. Harry owns a Maserati and a Porsche, lives in a mansion that can later house twenty people and appears either in an expensive suit or at least in a Marco Polo shirt wearing a signet ring.¹⁶ When he works in the communal kitchen, his usual appearance stands in stark contrast to the work clothes and his habitual arrogant, confident manner changes to disgust (cf. *The Society*: E03 21:30). Harry finds working in the cafeteria and garbage duty “fucking humiliating” (ibid.: 23:24). As opposed to his ex-girlfriend Kelly, who is similarly privileged but changes throughout the series, Harry is always visually connected to his wealth. Early on, he shows Kelly his father’s safe containing multiple gold bars and tells her “you can’t trust anybody, all you can do is have an advantage and [money] is mine, this is the only one that I have” (ibid.: E01 33:07). When Kelly refuses to join Harry’s side, he tells her “you have to stick with your own” (ibid.: 33:54). Harry struggles because he “[doesn’t] know who [he is] in this place” (ibid.: E06 10:21) and feels that he has been “humiliated” repeatedly by Cassandra (ibid.: 10:52). He requests that Kelly “stop dismissing [him] like [he’s] nothing” (ibid.: 10:27). After the students first meet in the church to discuss their plans, Harry is frequently paired with Campbell and they are often positioned next to each other in shots.

There is significant opposition between Harry’s and Allie’s approach to the system they would ideally support, but in the end neither is able to imagine a functioning society without a sovereign. Harry is committed to private property and, by extension, capitalism and Allie to her alleged proto-socialism. They believe an alternative that is

¹⁵ Allie did not sanction the Guard after they abused and humiliated Lexie during her arrest (*The Society*: E08 33:02). Lexie was the first person to publicly criticize Allie and thus became the latter’s prime suspect after she and several other people were poisoned during a dinner party.

¹⁶ This is especially noticeable in his election speech (cf. *The Society*: E09 46:22).



non-capitalist *and* has no central authority impossible. Within the Hobbesian logic of the series, then, Campbell is the series' chaos incarnate. He desires power for power's sake. Campbell is distinct because he is the only physically imperfect character. In contrast to the others, he has blemishes, beard stubbles and sneers a lot. The shots he is in frequently have a threatening atmosphere. He is positioned so close to the other characters that he sometimes invades their personal space, and his scenes are often accompanied by menacing or generally dark music (cf. *ibid.*: 20:38). The viewer does not see scenes through Campbell's eyes but rather perceive him through others. It is established immediately that he is either distrusted or feared by various characters, such as most of the town's girls (cf. *The Society*: E02 14:50; E04 13:58) and even his brother Sam. In every crisis, he is first to be suspected. This foreboding takes up increasingly more screen time after it is revealed that Campbell was diagnosed as a psychopath in his childhood (*ibid.*: E04 48:04). His menacing behaviour is also mirrored in the abusive relationship to his girlfriend Elle. He is not only possessive of her but also physically abuses her on various occasions. As the series progresses, Campbell is increasingly portrayed through the prism of Elle's terror (cf. *ibid.*: 49:57; E06 07:35; 20:39; E07 28:52; E09 08:06). Campbell is manipulative and often shown on the outskirts of a shot as he is supposed to be in control behind the scenes (cf. *ibid.*: E10 52:59), for example when he starts influencing Harry by dealing him drugs. Campbell is the mastermind of the coup in the final episode (*ibid.* 11:31). He successfully pushes Harry, Lexie, and the Guard to take power by force.

In the end, the characters' individual desires and interests for power stand in the way of a truly collective process of decision making. It is another example that illustrates how *The Society* portrays socialism as dangerous – as argued above in relation to work – or impossible to carry out due to such highly individualist behaviour. At the same time, it ignores how what is perceived as flawed 'human nature' is facilitated by the capitalist social formation the characters grew up in. Neither the idea of democratic socialism nor the direct participation of everyone really occur to the characters – not even to Cassandra or Allie. The former asks for a vote of approval when she takes the lead, but then coerces people into a unanimous decision, saying that it cannot be done otherwise (*ibid.*: E03 08:41). The latter's desire for power blinds her to the fact that she could have let someone else run for her collectivist ideals in the election. Sharing the responsibility to govern themselves equally, among all people in their town, seems infeasible. This trajectory intensifies with the series' intertextual references to *Lord of the Flies*, so that the viewer constantly expects the outcome to be total chaos of the Hobbesian kind.



“We’re living in the Dark Ages. Brute force wins.” – A *Lord of the Flies* retelling

As previously noted, Keyser and Webb have cited *Lord of the Flies* as their primary inspiration. This is evident in the basic principles of *The Society*: the island character of the town, the youth of the protagonists, as well as the idea that they might have been saved from the faults of their parents. Both works of fiction stress the importance of the new rules – which are admittedly quite simplistic in *Lord of the Flies*: keep the fire signal going, only speak when you have the conch, and follow Ralph. It is remarked that “the rules are the only thing we’ve got” (Golding 2011: 99). This idea is also found in *The Society*, where the principles for surviving are termed ‘Cassandra’s rules’ and in a later episode of the same title ‘Allie’s rules’. This in itself seems odd since these rules refer to the shared responsibility over every aspect of life and are crucial for the survival of everyone yet are denominated as individual campaigns assigned from above. Moreover, the title of the episode that shows Cassandra’s murder – *Childhood’s End* – is reminiscent of the final words of the book: “Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man’s heart” (ibid.: 225). Whereas *Lord of the Flies* has the Beast, *The Society* has Campbell. Golding’s boys fear the Beast and come to centre their behaviour around it. The character Simon realises that the Beast “[is] not something you can hunt and kill” but rather “part of” (ibid.: 158) the boys, the part that Ralph later calls the “darkness of man’s heart” (ibid.: 225). To the question of why Campbell is the only person not compelled to share his house, Allie answers: “He infects things. He’s contagious. If he wants to put himself in solitary confinement that’s okay with me” (*The Society*: E06 22:02). Campbell and Allie are the characters that fictionally embody Hobbes’ state of nature and social contract theory, respectively, whose logic underlies *The Society* as well as *Lord of the Flies* (cf. Hobbes 1994 [1651]).

For Hobbes, the sovereign needs to have undivided and unlimited power in order to avoid the horrors of civil war.¹⁷ The only way to true peace is by absolute obedience to the sovereign. If this is not given, civilisation will return to the ‘state of nature’, where there is no government or at least not one with sufficient recognised authority and law enforcement. *The Society*’s characters repeatedly stress that they merely “play government” (*The Society*: E04 06:41), that the installed institutions, like the court, are not real and therefore have no authority¹⁸, and question Allie as a rightful and competent leader. According to Hobbes, individuals will act out of self-preservation, which is their ‘right of nature’, a right that is unlimited due to individual judgment. This opens a state of ‘all against all’.

¹⁷ This point of view is heavily influenced by the events of Hobbes’ time, namely the English Civil War. For a useful introduction to Hobbes and social contract theory, see Sharon A. Lloyd and Susanne Sreedhar (2020).

¹⁸ Cf. Dewey’s resistance to be tried.



What I will call ‘the masses’ represent this idea in the series. The population of New Ham starts at 225, of which the viewer comes to know approximately 20 characters by name.¹⁹ The named characters are representatives of opposing sides, of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, but the masses are unknown and as such often not included in decisions and insufficiently or belatedly informed. The masses are a perfect example of Hobbes’ theory that most people are emotional and driven by fear, so far that their behaviour is self-destructive because they lack long-term judgement. The first episodes open with shots of rubbish everywhere, leftovers of parties past, and hungover teenagers that would rather satisfy their short-term needs – or, in one scene, turn to paganism – than actively plan for their survival (cf. *The Society*: E02 00:18; E03 00:18). This behaviour culminates in a sequence that shows the looting of stores and violent fights among mostly male characters in a commonplace depiction of Social Darwinism (ibid.: E02 52:50). Fittingly, this sequence takes place at night and is accompanied by a thunderstorm and unsettling violin music while the main characters watch the destruction without interfering, like a kind of elite. The masses are simultaneously undifferentiated as compared to the main characters and their ascribed desires for authority, and yet apparently driven by self-preservation played out as individualistic, chaotic action and complete disregard for others. This stands in stark contrast to what Rebecca Solnit reports in *A Paradise Built in Hell*. Here, Solnit argues that disastrous events, such as Hurricane Katrina, rather generate a “purposeful hope” (Out of the Woods 2018) in what Solnit names disaster communities (cf. Solnit 2009). These (temporary) communities, built on mutual aid and collectivity, often function more effectively even than international aid and logistics, yet are met with violent responses from the state, so as to “impose order” (Out of the Woods 2018).²⁰

This Hobbesian understanding of the masses is also reflected in the teens’ attitude towards food rationing. Kelly argues that “people won’t like that” (*The Society*: E02 22:00) and indeed they do not. There are multiple instances of unknown people taking what they please and stealing food even after the rules have been established (cf. ibid.: E01 26:20; E04 11:14). This egoism climaxes after Cassandra’s death: the masses take the subsequent uncertainty as their cue to completely disregard their work shifts (*The Society*: E04 07:37), roam the streets in armed “packs” (ibid.: 16:59), and perform armed robberies over yellow Gatorade (cf. ibid. E04 19:23 in the context of E03 14:08). This sequence of mass panic has its showdown as people point guns at each other in the cafeteria (ibid.: E04 26:34).²¹ Equally astonishing is the disregard that the main

¹⁹ The fictional town of West Ham, Connecticut is renamed New Ham (*The Society*: E07 42:01).

²⁰ The collective Out of the Woods takes this notion further and argues that we should strive for “disaster communism” in order to resist the “vicious cycle in which ordinary disaster conditions exacerbate extraordinary disaster events, in turn intensifying the original conditions [of disaster capitalism]” (Out of the Woods 2018).

²¹ This is the only scene in the series that is accompanied by hip-hop. This is another example of the rather conservative arguments the series makes, in this case, that rap is aggressive.



characters show for the masses, as evident in the following scene where Will and Allie talk about the need to start farming:

A: What authority do I have? To tell them to do that, you know, the fact that my sister died five months ago and that I inherited her job?

W: If you're so worried about it why don't you call elections? [...]

A: That's a terrible idea.

W: Okay. That's what a dictator would say.

A: Don't be an asshole. If we call elections, you're asking them to pick sides. It'll be us against them. That's how it works. We're not ready for that.

W: They trust you, Allie. They'll vote for you. (ibid.: E07 11:36)

It is unclear why a select few characters should be the only ones enlightened enough to recognise the long-term dangers of a take-what-you-want attitude. While people might not want to vote for Allie, they would arguably vote in a way that ensures their own survival. But the series takes a different path and lets Campbell take power from behind the scenes by staging a coup. This further advances the Hobbesian notion that people like Campbell who naturally enjoy “[pulling] the strings a bit” (ibid.: E10 41:25) will end up imposing their will upon others by exciting a premature defence reaction. In addition, Hobbes argues that people will obey as long as they feel adequately protected by the government: when this condition is not met, chaos will ensue. Campbell again makes a case for this argument when he convinces first Harry, then the Guard, and finally Lexie of his insurrection: “[People] don't give a shit about democracy. They just wanna feel safe. And who's gonna make them safe? Allie all alone or the Guard?” (ibid. 19:58) and later: “We're living in the Dark Ages. Brute force wins” (ibid.: 38:00). There is some resistance, but finally, the majority of the masses is gullible enough to believe the ‘fake news’ that have been spread (ibid.: 43:48).²² By a combination of formal devices, character development, and plot, Campbell and Harry repeatedly disturb a collective system and increasingly play the part of messengers of the impending chaos. They are ‘the inevitable’, the doom of the community and the defining threat to everyone in New Ham.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Society* consistently argues more conservatively than claimed by Keyser. While it does make a good case for strict gun laws, probably the issue it is most concerned with given the reference to Parkland, it falls short of its other ambitions. Most

²² They convince everyone that Allie and Will would have manipulated the election in their interests.



importantly, *The Society* subscribes not to “what this generation of kids is thinking” (Dibdin 2019) but to an overused view of human nature, which is clear by the allusions to Hobbes’ social contract theory. As Mann & Wainwright put it, “The critique of radical democracy or communism [...] is rarely that Left politics are ethically unjustifiable. It is that they are fundamentally naive, utopian, unrealistic and so on” (Mann & Wainwright 2020: 21). This is evident in every one of the aspects that this paper has analysed. It is obvious in the references to *Lord of the Flies* whose author incidentally compared his own ‘dark side’ to the Nazis’ and wrote the book out of that ‘self-recognition’ (Bregman 2020). Furthermore, it is present in the devices the series uses to frame its ‘communal’ social formation, e.g. in the depiction of work, leisure, interpersonal relationships, and in its presentation of existing, pre-apocalyptic issues as elements specific to dystopia. The behaviour shown by the masses further proves this thesis because, as explained above, it supports Hobbes’ theory in every aspect. There are some notable exceptions to the general trend, such as the character Kelly. Coming from a background of privilege, she undergoes fundamental character development and works against her own class in assuming responsibility. However, Kelly is not the driving force of the series. In the end, what dominates is the main characters’ strive for power and so are their reasons for wanting it. Their individual desires disrupt any collective solution. As the series progresses, Harry and Campbell receive growing amounts of screen time. Together with what they represent, namely capitalist as well as Social Darwinist approaches, the overall tense set-up of the series, its harsh portrayals, and the ever-climaxing plot, it builds itself up to unavoidable chaos.²³ The viewer expects the teens to fail, which becomes ‘the inevitable’²⁴, a kind of “mood of perpetual predetonation” (O’Sullivan 2017: 206).

Finally, the story of the ‘real *Lord of the Flies*’ offers an alternative to this conservative view of human nature: in 1965 six boys were stranded on an island until they were rescued 15 months later. They countered a pessimistic view of human nature and lack of imagination when they formed a small commune on the island that survived extreme scarcity and other dire conditions. The boys gardened, trained, kept a signal fire burning throughout their entire stay, entertained each other, healed a broken leg and, most impressively, settled all their disputes collectively. Capitalist realism is deeply ingrained in the first season of *The Society*. Even on the premises of a relatively fresh start, with countless opportunities for change toward a utopia within the post-apocalyptic, the series is limited by its judgment on im/possible futures. It circles back to the incapability of imagining a *coherent*, functioning alternative to the current

²³ This might have been partially rectified in a hypothetical second season, yet the serial’s genre conventions are such that they can only ever be considered one season at a time and may change meaning over time.

²⁴ A concept constructed upon Alfred Hitchcock’s notions of ‘surprise’ and ‘suspense’ (cf. Sean O’Sullivan 2017: 204).



capitalist, nation-state-centred system. Even in an imagined scenario where production, labour, and capital do not exist, “capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (Frase 2016: 8).

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