

Post-apocalyptic television: TV's *Revolution* and the metaphysics of (electrical) power

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Introduction:

We lived in an electric world. We relied on it for everything. And then the power went out. We weren't prepared. Fear and confusion led to panic. The lucky ones made it out of the cities. The government collapsed. Militias took over, controlling the food supply and stockpiling weapons. We still don't know why the power went out. But we're hopeful that someone will come and light the way.

-- Expository voiceover, first half season of *Revolution*.

Revolution is a post-apocalyptic television series, aired on NBC, about the inexplicable loss of electrical power, and the subsequent collapse of the United States' social order. It's about a power vacuum, if you will. This premise may reflect contemporary anxieties about (and ambiguous attachments to) the current socio-technical regime, but its anxiety is articulated in terms familiar to contemporary conservative politics. Here's a North Carolina Tea Party member on climate change: "The politicians and those people—celebrities. Most of them may or may not believe it, but it's an opportunity for them to gain power" (quoted in Greenberg, Carville and Seifert 2013). How do we make sense of this reaction? What are the articulations at work in this understanding of the world? Oil, coal and gas corporations work hard to associate themselves with key concepts in American self-identity—Freedom, Liberty, etc. (Huber 2013). However, these associations need to make sense to people in their everyday lives in order to gain traction. Micro-practices, everyday

habits, routines and an idea of the normal must cohere in these commonsense political postures; indeed, without these linkages, these claims would fail (Tsing 2004). There is no essential link between conservatism and anti-environmentalism; rather, this backlash against environmental policy from conservative publics is an accomplishment that requires work to maintain. *Revolution* centers on the question of electricity and social power, but the answers it suggests, however ambiguously, avoid any serious consideration of social change or collective action.

If we agree that the environment is an overdetermined category, how do we understand the relationship between nature and culture? Often, this relationship is understood in a unidirectional way, as a lot of attention is paid to the influence of human cultural categories like race, class and gender on our relationship with the environment. Ecological feminisms and environmental justice scholarship in particular have traced the way that the colonizing logic of human oppression echoes that of the objectification and commodification of nature for human use (Plumwood 1992; Bullard 1992; Stein 2004). However, the work of science studies scholars like Latour and Haraway suggests that this notion of causality (human to nature) remains caught within a culture/nature dualism that is foundational and stubbornly persistent within Western modernity. The dual meanings of power that *Revolution* employs (i.e. social influence and physical force) roughly follow the divide described by Latour in what he calls the constitution of modernity, which conceptually divides the world into the social and natural realms which constantly produce and disguise their many hybrids (Latour 1993, 30).

Underlining the idea of materially enacted hybrid networks, Latour argues that there is no such thing as “culture,” but only natures-cultures (104). Instead of imagining agential human cultures with differing approaches to an inert object, nature, the notion of co-produced natures-cultures pushes me to question how contemporary material culture (so deeply dependent on fossil fuels) shapes the affective dispositions and relevant categories of American life. In other words, what difference does fossil fuel energy make? What do we make of the possibility, often realized, in my anecdotal experience, of maintaining frigid temperatures in a Midwestern house on a 90 degree summer day?

The problem is how to approach such a question of the taken-for-granted material grounds of every day life methodologically.¹ In this paper, I’m making a preliminary approach via popular culture. Why do representations of apocalyptic scenarios such as that in *Revolution* link loss of electrical power to social chaos? Is this simply common sense, or realism? In his new book, Latour describes the evil genius, “Double Click,” who claims to give “straight talk” with no representational strategies, figures of speech or other linguistic tricks (Latour 2013, 124). This is an argument for skepticism when confronted with a seemingly transparent truth. As Shove demonstrates, naturalized social categories such as comfort, cleanliness, and convenience have all been historically co-produced within complex “socio-technical regime[s]” (Hughes in Shove 2003, 12).

¹ This is very much a problem. Approaches to this study of the taken-for-grantedness of fossil-fuel society that I’ve considered include auto-ethnography, photo-voice interviews, focus groups on climate change and environmental issues, and participant observation with conservative and other publics.

Co-production, as a theoretical principle, suggests that the material organization of life (the use of natural affordances, the arrangement of the body in the built environment, technologies, and so on) is simultaneously constitutive of cultural categories, affective attachments, and imaginative possibilities. In addition, social and cultural categories help determine the development of material resources, which also therefore materialize cultural formations in their manufacture, use, and distribution. Cemented in structures, and reinforced through path dependence, these materialized patterns can gain obduracy, and become difficult to dislodge (Shove 2003). This has led me to question the extent to which it is possible to imagine the fundamental restructuring of everyday life that the current environmental crisis suggests is both necessary and inevitable from within a nature-culture structured by fossil fuel dependence. At least it seems necessary to consider how the United States' fossil fuel dependency shapes the ways in which we imagine ourselves and our possibilities. I argue that the influence of coal, gas and petroleum on the most intimate details of our everyday lives has a profound effect on our senses of the human. This paper explores the signification of electricity as naturalized social power in *Revolution*.

My previous work explored how the practice of mountaintop removal coal mining represents an enactment and reaffirmation of certain American cultural formations (especially masculinity, whiteness and a objectifying relationship to land). In addition, I was interested in how the coal industry has constructed its economic and cultural hegemony in Appalachia and the connections between this hegemony and Appalachian cultural marginalization. As Huber demonstrates about

petroleum-fueled automobility, electrification has become an essential entitlement of American national identity (Huber 2013). Electricity and its conveniences are identified with modernity, hygiene and normalcy. The national imperative for electricity produced from coal is central to the coal industry's operation in Appalachia and elsewhere. Simultaneously, lacking power is a major signifier of backwardness in rural Appalachian communities, which helps reaffirm the site as a sacrifice zone (Scott 2010). This suggests a link between electricity, civilization, and historically developed notions of the human, which pushes me to explore how acquisitive hyper-individualism is reinforced in our lived environments.

Therefore my current project develops this work into an exploration of the impact on everyday consciousness of electrical power and fossil fuels. In my first step in this direction, I explored the imaginations of space produced in NASCAR's patriotic aesthetic of speed and branded commodity consumption (Scott 2013). The current paper is the beginning of a consideration of how electrical power co-produces conceptions of power and personhood. In other words, I'm interested in how air conditioning, lights, digital technology, smart phones, etc., are not simply conveniences or tools at our disposal, but are part of a co-produced nature-culture that mobilizes discourses of personal and collective power (Latour 1993). In other words, how does electrical power reinforce the distinction, which stems from modernity's colonial roots, between liberal ideas of personhood and what Allewaert calls the parahuman (Somers 1995; Allewaert 2013, 86)? This cyborg network of electrical subjectivity could contribute to a structure of feeling in which threats to one form of public power (fossil-fuel powered electricity) is felt as a threat to a

personal sense of autonomy (represented through guns, independence and masculinity) (Haraway 1991; Williams, R. 1978). This would help explain the sentiment expressed by a Tea Party member quoted in the NY Times, “They’re trying to use global warming against the people . . . It takes away our liberty” (Broder, 2010).

What Revolution should be able to do.

The focus of this paper is *Revolution*, a NBC TV series about a post-apocalyptic world afflicted with the sudden loss of electrical power (combustion engines, aircraft, and batteries also cease functioning).² The transformative point is called “the blackout.” In the show’s representations of the blackout, the entire globe is shown rotating with electrical lights extinguishing in succession. With the power apparently gone for good, society devolves to “fear and confusion,” leading to “panic.” The smart or lucky ones got of the cities. The others died there. The story takes up again fifteen years later, when the USA is gone, replaced by the California Commonwealth, the Plains Nation, the Wasteland (the southwest up to Idaho), a much expanded Texas, and most importantly for the everyday of the show, the Monroe Republic in the northeast to upper midwest, and the Georgia Federation in the southeast. In short, although national borders (i.e. with Canada and Mexico) are unchanged, the USA

² With the notable exception of guns, which are still functional in the post-blackout world of *Revolution*, this scenario (initially) mirrors the plot of the science fiction novel *Dies the Fire*, by S.M. Stirling (2004). *Dies the Fire* begins with an account of suffering, chaos and brutality, and particularly the vulnerability of the weak, in the aftermath of the change (when electricity, guns, batteries, engines, etc. suddenly quit working). (Note: Brutality/psychopathy a foil for heroic masculinity in these narratives?)

itself has reverted to a condition similar to that of the early to mid-nineteenth century.

The premise of *Revolution* is the loss of electrical power. The premise stretches beyond this to the cessation of engines in cars, trucks, planes and helicopters, but the loss of electricity is the main theme. The title features the increasingly pervasive 'on' button for computers and other electronic devices. Electricity is in essence, at least nominally, what the show is *about*. Therefore it is perhaps useful to think about that theme and what could be done with it.

Electricity production is responsible for over 30% of greenhouse gas emissions in the US (Environmental Protection Agency 2013), but is typically taken for granted in its almost invisible integration into almost every aspect of life. People tend not to consider electrical power very often, especially because we mainly consume it in the form of relatively intangible services that have become necessary for what is considered ordinary human life (Shove 2003). Air conditioning alone has become critical to international business networks that rely on a global culture of "thermal monotony" (Bragar and de Dear 2001). Air conditioning was created to ensure the ideal temperature for productive human habitation, but has been linked to the rise in obesity and other health problems (Shove 2003, 28; Alter 2012). Cox points out that regions like the US southwest, now seen as uninhabitable without benefit of air conditioning, have been inhabited for thousands of years thanks to creative ways of building and organizing activity (2010). Given the widespread naturalization of electrical climate control, it is perhaps worth noting how this

technology can produce an embodied sense of stasis or suspension from the material processes of weather or embodiment (Hitchings and Lee 2008, 252, 261).

Electrical heating and cooling enable a suspension of seasonal variation in activity that fundamentally alters the everyday human relationship to planetary cycles. Shove points out that it has become normal to experience a distinct division between the controlled climate indoors, and the unpredictable outside weather (2003, 27). This high degree of separation between inside and outside resonates with the association of modernity with choice and control, and tradition with routine prescription, emphasizing the modern subject's appearance of rational choice. We "control" the climate indoors, we say, thus disguising how little reflection is paid to decisions about indoor temperatures (Wilk 2009).

In actual blackouts, loss of power is most dangerous because of the threat of exposure to extreme temperatures. Loss of power is life threatening in extreme heat or cold, especially for the elderly. It is not, however, a given that social order would collapse. Trentmann argues that social systems can have more or less "elasticity" depending on various factors, including the degree of inequality and access to alternative affordances (2009, 75). Given the reduction in forests in the US, it could be interesting to explore how people would deal with the cold. Current building practices assume air conditioning and electrical lighting, enforcing the necessity of these services.

Brox describes a similar influence on temporal arrangements afforded by electrical light (2010). Artificial lights began with fires, and for most of human history were rare and expensive. Candles and lamp oil, the most common pre-

electrical sources, were animal products, and were therefore a constant flickering, odiferous reminder of people's dependence on creature life. Electrical light on the other hand, as it has developed currently, is increasingly unwavering, dependable, and brilliant, lighting every corner of every room in our homes. More energy efficient forms like CFL and LED continue the pattern of refinement and clarity in electrical light development, sparking hurt feelings over the loss of the cozy warmth of incandescent light (Johnson 2013). Again, what type of lighting is seen as normal or comfortable varies widely in time and place (Shove 2003). But electric lights have been quite obviously central to the development of the modern capitalist economy, stretching work time and consumption time as well as creating the bright lights of urban commerce.

The resulting "light pollution" has been linked to disruptions in circadian rhythms and even to cancer, not to mention its serious effects on wild life (Chepesiuk 2009). In a world without electricity, light would probably regain some emotional impact as the cultural signifier it has been for most of human history (it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness). The sun would again dominate human consciousness and establish the categories of time and possibility. It is not clear where candles would come from if electrical power no longer facilitated drilling for and processing petroleum products like paraffin. As Brox makes clear, tallow candles derived from animal fat were expensive and stunk, making staying up late a luxury for the rich.

The most taken-for-granted categories of everyday life are implicated in this materialized structure of feeling, as Harris demonstrates in her examination of the

post-war suburban house. The racially segregated and rigidly gendered living arrangements of the Cold War suburb helped construct an ideal of privacy, leisure, and independence that is arguably central to the rise of neoliberalism in American political culture, as it worked actively to diminish notions of collectivism in favor of individualized and naturalized nuclear family existence. Nuclear families nested in idealized privacy where electric appliances and power tools enabled them to imitate the position of the ideal liberal individual whose material needs were taken care of by servants (Harris 2012).

The simultaneous rise of fossil-fuel based automobility and air-conditioned, well-lit privacy has been well documented. Automobility allows the free flowing movement of (privileged) citizens around a national territory (Urry 2000; Scott 2013). In addition to making an imagined given, natural, human “life,” more convenient, these technologies enable a “corporeal regime,” a set of embodied practices that produce a prosthetic expansion of personal effectiveness (Carolan 2009, 3; Latour 1993). Online communication, satellites, and smart phones increase this expansiveness and flexibility. The performativity of nature implies that our cultural categories and emotions cannot be thought of separately from our affectively lived material conditions or bodily hexis (Carolan 2009; Bourdieu 1998). In other words, to what extent are the American cultural ideals of individuality, autonomy, and self-determination bolstered by this everyday electrical subjectivity?

It was this kind of exploration that I was optimistic enough to hope for when I learned of a new TV show about an inexplicable loss of electrical power. I hoped to see some kind of reflection on the role of electricity in our everyday lives, and to

some extent these details are here—people do use torches and fire (when camping, at least). However, *Revolution* manages somehow to explore one of the most crucial substances in the world, electricity, and do so in an almost completely anti-material way, without any engagement in the kinds of questions that it seems to demand—how did they stay warm? How did they cook their food? What kinds of things did they eat?

Through this paradoxical centering and evasion of the materiality of electrical power, *Revolution* evokes, while simultaneously denying, the widespread feeling of precarity or ontological insecurity that is characteristic of the contemporary moment (Berlant 2011, Beck 1992). The housing crisis is one instance, as is the reported reluctance of millennials to strive for the formerly accepted signs of adulthood, a house and a car (Schwartz 2013). The shrinking polar ice cap. Too warm winters in Siberia. Out of control wildfires in Australia. The so-called zombie attacks in Florida a few years ago were barely a surprise to a public that has grown accustomed to mass school shootings and other signs of doom. The recurrent western cultural narrative of millennialism is resurgent in environmental and economic panics, zombie apocalypses, and other representations of societal collapse. As Latour would have it, the constitution of modernity is in crisis due to an ecological rejection of its categories (2013). The nagging inevitability of unsustainability infects even fossil fuel boosters, who advocate intensified drilling, fracking, and militarism in defense of the American way of life (Huber 2013).

In the Biblical sense, apocalypse is revelation, or an unveiling. Apocalyptic scenarios often serve as reminders of things presented as fundamental truths

(Williams, E.C. 2011). In environmentalist circles, this truth is basically summed up as in a diagnosis of our blind and unsustainable alienation from nature. But the feeling of impending doom is generalized beyond environmentalists. The ever-popular zombie apocalypse is another way of thinking about the truth of human nature—Are we really just hungry bodies? Have we already lost our individuality to rampant consumerism? Are we the real monsters? In Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, the herculean effort required to remain civilized is revealed through a father-son relationship. In the sudden drastic climate change movie *The Day After Tomorrow*, our vulnerability to nature and the fickleness of international power are revealed when US climate refugees start begging for entrance to Mexico.

Revolution offers the opportunity to give a real consideration of what electricity does for us, how it is involved in the co-production of everyday life in our housing arrangements, clothing and food, even the social organization of labor. The dual meaning of power (material force and social influence) is literally materialized in the US electrical grid, from its sources to its distribution, and exploring these connections could make a really fascinating science fiction series. Unlike other current apocalyptic scenarios in popular culture, *Revolution* doesn't address what causes the blackout (at least at first). There is no nuclear war (as in the 2006-2008 CBS series *Jericho*), no plague that causes the breakdown of public utilities (as in the 2008 BBC series *Survivors*). The crisis is the simple loss of electrical power. For this reason, the grounds for my disappointment in the show (its lack of materiality, its strange lack of curiosity about the effects of the blackout) are what I found necessary to analyze. If electricity in the show does not signify that force or

substance that stabilizes the temperature, eliminating seasons; that allows us to re-organize time, eliminating night; and enables the mass production of commodities, eliminating scarcity, what does it signify?

Thesis:

Revolution is framed by the seemingly inexplicable loss of electrical power (and of aircraft and motorized vehicles). The cause of this loss of power is a mystery for most of the first season, and there is absolutely no reference in the first season to any actual source of electricity, whether that be coal, nuclear, wind or solar, etc. Later, a nanotechnology called nanites are discovered to be responsible for the failure of electricity and they can be turned off and on without reference to a grid or power source. Thus the environmental/material context of electricity is completely off the table in the show.

This framing references the zeitgeist of uncertainty about current energy systems but avoids a critique of those systems. Especially in the beginning of the first season, the loss is expressed through “fairy-tale physics” in the words of one Internet commenter. In its imagined frontier geography and its aesthetic, the story is resolutely focused on the American family as the basic unit of society, or as the essential human nature revealed by the disaster. Through these framing choices, *Revolution* mobilizes libertarian definitions of freedom, post-feminist patriarchal masculinity, and a post-racial (yet neo-confederate) affective stance. This reworking of post-apocalyptic fiction for a gun-loving paranoid America may enable

conservative publics' participation in the current flows of fossil-fuel based anxiety while keeping an eye on the simultaneous threats of feminism and gun control.

Method:

This project is a textual reading of the world the series constructs. I seek to understand how the ubiquity of electrical power shapes a particularly disconnected environmental consciousness that makes sustainable transformation difficult to imagine. Examining *Revolution's* remarkable disinterest in the material reveals the corporeal regime of everyday life in fossil fuel society through a tracing of the threads that help make sense of narrative choices, omissions, and aesthetics. My argument draws on the world of the show and its narrative arc in the first season only. This paper will not include the second season, and I must admit some surprise that the show has been renewed for a second season, as it is not a ratings winner; its second midseason finale had 5.2 million viewers (Hibbard 2013). Produced with the participation of J.J. Abrams and Jon Favreau, *Revolution* has so far lacked the widespread appeal of the most popular shows on TV recently, like *Lost*, *Breaking Bad* or *Scandal*, despite the hiring of actors such as Elizabeth Mitchell (from *Lost*), Billy Burke (from *Twilight*), and Giancarlo Esposito (from *Breaking Bad*), and efforts to develop a fandom through social media, online wikis and discussion boards. However, the show does make sense to some viewers and I supplement my textual reading with some of the on-line discussion of the show from blogs and its Facebook and Twitter pages. Without making a judgment on the intentions of its writers and directors, I would like to explore how the universe of the show often resonates with

libertarian trends in the current political and cultural context, and with events in the public sphere.

Analysis:

In my own view, *Revolution* is unappealing television with a perceptibly conservative habitus. Its failures may be symptomatic of conflicts in its narrative structure, or simply of unskilled writers. Reflecting its executive producer J.J. Adams, the show calls on the aesthetic of *Lost* and other science fiction series, but its repetitive and usually humorless plot lines more frequently echo the national security drama of *24*. The loss of electrical power throws the world into chaos, and essentially seems to have fractured the social contract. Without electricity violent crime becomes rampant, social order breaks down and many people die, especially those in the cities. Vigilantism eventually gives rise to new republics and territories that replace the old US, which has crumbled but is still represented by a group of rebels who secretly venerate the US flag.

The most pressing concern for the characters on the show is security. The blackout effectively initiates a power vacuum, bringing in an era where protecting the family is paramount and falls (naturally) to family patriarchs. It is a world of compounds and medieval-style suburban villages. Many of the first episodes concern the Monroe Militia and their efforts to maintain a monopoly on guns; the premiere features a shootout between crossbow bearing regular folks and rifle carrying militiamen. Next, we see Captain Neville (played by Giancarlo Esposito, an actor of African-American and Italian heritage) of the Monroe Militia shoot a white

man (a secret US rebel) for concealing a firearm (and a flag) in his farmhouse. Soon enough, the plot focuses on the existence of amulets that have the power to bring electrical things back to life (with no sign of a grid or power source, and no notion of the effects of fifteen years of disuse on iPhones or engines). The primary use this power is put to is weaponry. The Monroe Republic uses it to send drones and helicopters against the rebels. In other words, the show makes the connection between power and POWER entirely explicit. But while the hybridity of the two meanings of power (physical force and social influence) are more obvious than usual, it's also taken for granted and unexamined, in a process described by Latour as the double movement of proliferation and purification. By examining the presences and absences in the depiction of the blackout, it may be possible to pin down what electricity signifies in the universe of the show as well as in a broader context.

Civil War imagery

The first most striking visual image from Revolution's universe gives the impression that the post-apocalyptic truth revealed about America is the Civil War. The Monroe Republic is a military dictatorship (run by the Monroe Militia). General Monroe and his minions wear extremely stylized green uniforms. In their high-collared Steampunk coats, they resemble (unaffiliated) Civil War officers, a slick signifying trick which ambiguously identifies them with oppression (the South?), but places them in the North, making the sin of the South stand in for federal (Union?) overreach. The first several episodes manage to create a sense of "confusion and

panic” through a series of similarly floating signifiers. Giancarlo Esposito is Captain Charles Neville, a Militia man in charge of collecting illicit guns from the public. In the Monroe Republic, heroin is legal, diamonds are currency, and the first law is that only the Militia can have guns. The American flag is taboo. As mentioned above, a pivotal scene features a clever reversal, when Captain Neville and the Militia search a man’s house, and upon finding a gun and an illicit American flag, shoot the man summarily. Here, the US flag potentially becomes the equivalent of the Confederate flag (as it exists in some conservative eyes), a taboo but beloved symbol of a “lost cause.” This parallel is all the more obvious in light of the current discourse of gun control overreach in conservative publics, which is frequently argued in terms of a Southern logic of individualism and states’ rights (MacClean 2007; Weiner 2013). On *Revolution*, the rebels keep the American flag hidden in their closet or tattooed on their back. Meanwhile, the Monroe Republic is sometimes the Confederacy (via use of (multi-racial) slavery), but also clearly linked to the Union; its seat of power is Independence Hall in Philadelphia and its ironfisted rule is an instantiation of libertarian fears of overweening federal power.

Revolution also plays with American national identity. All the main characters are American (excepting one unfortunate British woman and two Latinas from El Paso of ambiguous national identity). The majority are white. The geography of the show naturalizes the national geo-body of the United States to the point that all the newly emergent fiefdoms of the post-blackout era are contained within currently existing national borders (except Alaska and Hawaii) (Thongchai 1993). The rebels align themselves with an embattled American identity; proclaiming “We didn’t let Al

Qaida beat us” as they resolve to “die as Americans:” i.e. those who don’t let others push them around. (Don’t tread on me.) These rebels are contrasted with the sadistic psychopaths in Monroe’s militia, who torture any dissenters or suspected disloyal members. These stories resonate with the currently charged question of which of us are the “real Americans,” as well as the recurrent threats of succession of red states from blue. As mentioned above, although the electricity has been dead for fifteen years, a small number of people are equipped with special pendants that enable electrical devices to function. The narrative arc soon becomes consumed with the threat of General Monroe gaining control of this power, and using it to spread the Monroe Republic “from sea to shining sea.”

Fairy-tale (meta)physics

The magical electrical amulet plot line underlines the show’s moral and symbolic linkages between political, electrical and embodied power. By the end of the season, the viewer begins to consider that it might be best for everyone if the power stays off. *Revolution* suggests that electrical power is corrosive of the natural patriarchal moral order that operates through kinship, loyalty and the fight of good against evil. Two characters exemplify this theme. On the one hand, in a transformation similar to that of John Locke on *Lost*, who regained the use of his legs magically on The Island, Captain Neville is shown to have gone through a significant transformation. Before the blackout, he hides his aggressive nature from his wife and child (he boxes with a punching bag in the basement; only accidentally losing his temper and beating his neighbor, a bully). He is clearly a meek rule follower who spends his

days in an office cubicle. When the blackout happens, Neville is evidently liberated to let his naturally violent temperament flow, and he quickly rises to the top in the Monroe Militia. His physical dominance also makes him the natural leader of his family, who he endlessly schemes to protect.

For white computer geek Aaron Pittman (Zack Orth), on the other hand, the blackout destroys his illusion of power. As Aaron tells the children in his charge at the beginning of the premiere, “physics went insane.” Before the blackout, he is incredibly powerful and wealthy, a Silicon Valley CEO on top of the world, a computer genius, married to a beautiful Asian American wife. All this power and success comes despite his overweight, nebbish demeanor. Once the power goes out, everything changes. Aaron’s vast knowledge of technology and computer coding is useless; he flounders in having to take care of his wife in this new world. He nearly poisons her with bad water due to his ignorance and becomes dependent on a group of alpha males to protect her. Humiliated by his failures and inability to protect, he sneaks away one night, leaving his sleeping wife in more the manly and capable hands of this group of new friends. As the series begins, he’s a teacher of young children in Ben Matheson’s suburban compound.

While Captain Neville grows more and more ruthless in his fight to protect his family in the new world, Aaron faces a series of challenges that essentially demand that he “man up.” Can he light a fire using his car keys quickly enough to save his friends? (Yes, he still has them in his pocket after fifteen years and apparently matches and lighters have also stopped working.) Dare he risk his life to save his friends? An exchange between Captain Neville and Aaron underlines the

point, as if it weren't obvious already: Neville explains that before the blackout, he was stuck working in a cubicle for people like Aaron. After the blackout, a sort of natural order has been reestablished, as Neville puts it, "Now look at me and look at your fat pockmarked ass."

The old order, the time before the blackout, is made to signify a kind of softness as well as a corruption of natural morality. Charlie Matheson (Tracy Spiridakos), a healthy young woman shown hunting in the first scenes of the premier, was an unresponsive preschooler, transfixed by a video screen, in the moments before the blackout. The story of Maggie Foster (Anna Lise Philips) further exemplifies this point. A white British medical doctor, she was in Seattle for a conference when the blackout happened. She was preparing for a glamorous night out while skyping with her children when the power went out in a dramatic scene. She then crosses the continent (on foot) to find a boat to Britain, only to find that passage by boat is impossible because of salvage and Militia confiscation. Finding her on the verge of suicide, Ben Matheson (Tim Guinee) brings her into his family, which is missing a mother. For fifteen years, Maggie holds on to her nonfunctioning iPhone, which holds the only pictures she has of her children. Her failure at this essential role of mother is evident in her unfortunate choice to be in Seattle at the time of the blackout. Her redemption comes from mothering Charlie and Danny Matheson (Graham Rogers) whose own mother is missing as the series begins. The fraught relationship between Charlie and her stepmother ends when Maggie dies due to a lack of medical resources after a run-in with an armed and dangerous loner.

The chaos that erupted after the blackout is unexplained and unexplored—the series simply assumes the breakdown of society without electricity or cars. But order is reestablished through the agency of (white) military folks like General Monroe and Miles Matheson (David Lyons and Billy Burke). Through their ruthless and psychotic use of force, they restore a semblance of order in less than 15 years. But the US has been pushed back into a frontier geography of competing territories and republics. The ambivalence of the show provides some complexity, in the contradictions of an eternalized natural patriarchal order versus a previous corrupt political regime in which social order is so ephemeral that a loss of power destroys the nation. Electrical power is corrosive of natural order and morally, yet people hold on to their useless but formerly fabulous commodities in a way that reveals the metaphysical power these objects represent. While the social order is fragile, acquisitive individualism persists.

The show's post feminism and post racism is also exemplified by the story of Nora Clayton (Daniella Alonso), a Latina from El Paso. When first charged with an impossible rescue mission by his ostensible niece (and possible daughter), Miles seeks out Nora, who is an expert in blowing things up. Soon enough it turns out that Nora's fighting spirit comes from feminine tragedy: a miscarriage and broken relationship. She turns to Miles. Later, when her sister tries to make her betray him (in the name of family solidarity), she abandons her blood relative for her new family with Miles. Finally, she sacrifices herself for Miles and his blond sister-in-law/erstwhile lover Rachel Matheson (Elizabeth Mitchell) (kathrynthegr8 2012).

Family is the source of both morality and weakness for the characters. This framing echoes the neoliberal political philosophy that makes the family the only unit of morality (as in Margaret Thatcher's famous words, "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.") Positioning the family as the only source of social order against the chaos of crime or corruption of politics is inherently patriarchal and based on a naturalized value hierarchy of physical strength. Questions of kinship ties, hidden paternity, and failed motherhood are the principal sources of drama, while physical violence is expansively celebrated in Western-style shootouts, torture scenes, and massive displays of weaponry.

The parallels to present anti-gun control rhetoric are striking; the first episodes focus on the problem of access to guns. In a bloody shootout, Nora, Charlie and Miles steal a high-powered weapon from the Militia—the ability to kill to protect one's family is highly valued. Unlike many popular culture sci-fi heroes, Miles kills often and easily. As in the national security drama *24*, in *Revolution* there is no question of the right to stand one's ground, and no other way of interacting seems possible. Charlie's choice to spare an enemy from immediate death soon proves to be a symptom of naïve idealism. The injustice of the militia's monopoly on guns is evident as well, and this monopoly leads to tyranny, as the heavily armed militiamen freely enter private space to kill and arrest with impunity, torture dissenters, and in one instance, use enslaved people to move heavy machinery.

The metaphysics of electrical power

Despite these hints of how things work in the first episodes, *Revolution* departs almost completely from a consideration of the material effects of the blackout. Some of the basic questions it raises are how does someone keep track of an inoperative iPhone for fifteen years, while apparently going through an apocalypse? What about Aaron's car keys, kept in his pocket for fifteen years, although he has moved across the country from his (inoperative) car? The Monroe Militia's Steampunk/Civil War uniforms also suggest that someone is manufacturing cloth and style, but no evidence of this is offered. Viewers complain on the show's Facebook page about the actors' Abercrombie styles that show no wear and tear. I'll give the show a break on details of baggage and bathroom, but it is notable that the clothes never vary according to climate, and the characters are never too cold or (almost never) too hot. If the present ideal is a global mono-climate modeled after southern California, the post-Apocalypse looks like one as well.

Revolution also leaves materiality far behind with its notion of how the electricity disappeared and how it comes back. Certain characters carry necklaces, essentially flash drives, that have the uncanny ability to turn the power back on. In the universe of the show, electricity is not something that is produced in time and place (i.e. in power plants) but rather an immanent force that exists (or not) and makes iPhones, computers, and helicopters function. As mentioned above, one Internet commenter referred to this conceit as fairy tale physics. This representation reflects what Latour refers to as the constitution of modernity, the necessary purification and proliferation of hybrid social and natural forms. Electricity is ambiguous here, moving between natural and social contexts. In its

immanence, electricity is naturalized, a given characteristic of the affordances of American life (iPhones, stereos, computers)—this reflects the normal affective disposition of modernity. As in the automatic gesture towards the light switch when entering a room, even when the power is off, this is an expression, perhaps, of the prosthetic empowerment offered by electricity. However, electrical power also stands for corrosive modernity and macro-scale power, and in this sense it reflects the modality of culture. For Latour, modernity, the state of being that tells itself that nature is separate from the cultural, is actually dependent on the proliferation of natural-cultural hybrids. Subjective social forms (nation, militia, compound) are depicted abstractly without reference to empirical manifestations/ structures, but also given meaning through reference to the seeming impenetrability of an objectively natural nuclear family form. We moderns, he suggests, make sense through networks of translation, creating quasi-objects that we must then disguise from ourselves to maintain the distinction of nature and culture. *Revolution's* version of electricity reveals itself as just such a hybrid or quasi-object. (Latour 1993, 55)

There is no grid, no way of producing candles, in fact there is little attention paid to the embodied experience of being without power. The details of everyday life are almost never given attention. While this is not unusual on TV, because the framing device for the series is the loss of lights, more could be expected in terms of night scenes, star gazing, etc. In fact, *Revolution* is singularly uninterested in the night. Similarly, difficulty in moving around the continent is nonexistent. Regardless of the lack of motorized power (which doesn't make sense anyway), distance proves

no obstacle for the characters, as they travel rapidly from Chicago to Philadelphia, from Philadelphia to Colorado, and from Philadelphia to Atlanta and back, almost always on foot, with little to no difficulty, experiencing little variation in temperature or exposure to the elements. Neither do weather and time have any effect on devices or machinery, as electricity, the immanent substance, can reawaken them in an instant.

So why does the loss of electricity lead to social chaos? The science fiction commonplace of social collapse after a blackout is usually bolstered by whatever disaster causes it, be it nuclear war, zombie apocalypse, or super plague. In *Revolution*, the blackout is the disaster. Why do we find it so easy to imagine the dissolution of social institutions (nations, militaries, communities, etc.) with the loss of electrical power? The logic seems to rely on a tension between violence (or physical power) and authority (political hegemony). According to this story, human nature is violent. Without the conventions of normalcy, represented here by modern electrical conveniences, civil authority, and automobility, people revert to barbarism. Fathers must protect their families and their property from outsiders. Women are at the mercy of the men who they are associated with—all are mothers, daughters, wives or prostitutes. But this perspective also suggests that this is the natural order of things, and that electricity, an artificial power, in the wrong hands, leads to tyranny and is corrosive of the natural order.

Revolution's post-apocalypse suggests ambiguously that this natural order is the future; in other words we go back to tradition in the future. This is most notably signified by the frontier landscape, but this is a backwards future, where social

order has reverted to family compounds and fortresses, but in which everyday life is basically unchanged, and technology remains an immanent potential. What kinds of people populate this backwards future? A predominant theme in *Revolution* is the contrast between the feminized softness of the time before and the necessity of hardness after the blackout. This resonates with the common concern in American culture for the softness of civilization, the loss of manhood in the city, and the virtue of proving one's self in the wilderness. This is a characteristic of white masculinity in American history (Haraway 1986; Braun 2003). Yet as Haraway documents, this masculine adventuring is contingent on the labor and structural support of many usually invisible others. As Harris writes about the post-war suburbs, these single family homes and yards enabled a relationship to space and nature that mimicked the posture of the ideal liberal subject, the leisured landowner, whose ease was guaranteed by others' labor and whose self-determination was guaranteed by a rational independence (Harris 2011). *Revolution* gives us a post-apocalyptic version of this, where the embodied needs of the characters are elided through the lack of a serious engagement with the materiality of power. The post-blackout apocalypse destroyed the (unnatural) social order, but because this collapse is metaphysical, not material, it does nothing to the prosthetic empowerment of the characters, their naturalized mobility, and other signs of American national identity.

Conclusion:

Maybe losing electricity wouldn't be so bad after all; *Revolution* would have us consider the possibility. The story operates in a frame of corrupting ease; Neville's

true character was hidden until the blackout. Aaron's manhood turns out to be ephemeral, leaving him to be tested in a natural arena—one where only physical power matters. Without the trappings of the social contract, power is revealed to be an individual attribute, defended by patriarchs on the basis of kinship ties. This is the terrain of libertarian individualism.

Even a casual survey of traditional and social media reveals a network of articulations in the conservative imagination between climate change policy initiatives and gun control. In libertarian and other right-wing publics, these two issues are linked. The infamous Koch Brothers and their Tea Party machine have no doubt contributed to the manufacture of this apparently unified stance on otherwise seemingly disparate issues, but these connections resonate more widely in libertarian circles. While there is no necessary connection between right-wing politics and anti-environmentalism, they've achieved a naturalized unity in US culture. Tea Party reactions to climate change initiatives reveal a felt connection in conservative publics between climate policy such as carbon taxation systems and perceived anti-second amendment initiatives such as strengthened background checks on gun purchasers.

Revolution is a paean to physical strength, a post-feminist and post-racial frontier landscape where sisters can rescue brothers from trains, where race doesn't matter (until it does). All connection is framed through the discourse of familial loyalty, in the post-apocalyptic landscape, kinship reigns supreme. For the main characters, we see no real motivation for action beyond the necessity to protect and defend family. This is the only motivation available, besides

psychopathic loyalty to the previous regime or misguided nostalgia for the electrical past. *Revolution* tells a story about human nature that is essentially libertarian in its denial of community ties or moralities, echoing the hyper-individualism that has arisen in US culture since the post-Second World War period established widespread dependence on fossil fuels in everyday life.

This prosthetic empowerment afforded by electrical augmentation of individual effectiveness, or electrical subjectivity, enables a relationship of refusal with materiality and ecological entanglements as well as a defensive individualism based on a denial of collective social and material structures. The most significant omissions in *Revolution's* narrative are those around the physics of electricity, light, and power. No grids, no fuels, no problems. *Revolution* plays on the contemporary preoccupation with power and energy without a serious engagement, in fact through a conservative refusal of the reality of unsustainability.

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