

Beyond Prepper Culture as Right-wing Extremism: Selling Preparedness to Everyday Consumers as How to Survive the End of the World on a Budget

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Introduction

Should the ethical, political and social currents in contemporary survivalist “prepper” cultures in the United States be dismissed simply as little more than the theory and practice of anti-statist, right-wing extremism? Known right-wing extremist groups, like The Base, The Oath Keepers, or The Three Percenters, which have been tied to the January 6 riots at the U.S. Capitol, clearly express prepper and survivalist themes in their rhetoric. Yet, are there many more folds in the largely “known unknown” features of “prepper cultures” that far beyond the activities of these three right-wing, self-styled militia groups?

Instead of fomenting insurrection against “the deep state” in Washington, DC, prepper cultures also increasingly link their followers to climate change adaptation as many devotees prepare to cope with a wide array of artificial and natural disasters (Pennington, 2014; Mattoon, 2016; and, Hollerman, 2016). Arguably, a “prepper” ethic is embedded deep in the possessive individualism of liberal society. A seventeenth-century sense of accumulating greater wealth through focused personal labor by extracting greater stores of valued materiel, holdings of land, and stocks of precious metal specie, for example, represents considerable preparation for dealing with possible disasters. More on point today, however, a contemporary prepper subjectivity can be tied to personal capabilities and plans to procure individual wants and needs now from the abundant outputs of industrial democracy’s factories and farms, regardless of one’s political predilections, to store for use tomorrow when such abundance no longer is readily available

While these behaviors are known, they are not well-known. Prepping to survive adversity in future crises or catastrophes appears to be an amalgam of “consumer cultures” drawing from today’s mass produced abundance plus “saver cultures” always cognizant of how modern urban life can easily be disrupted or even destroyed. Prudence dictates purchasing more than is needed now to be ready to satisfy as well as defend most wants drawn from hidden personal bunkers for a certain future period in times of severe crisis. Such “bunker” culture clearly conveys these intentions in the original Scots word “bonker,” which meant a compartment, chest or box used for permanent preparation, long-term storage or defensive action. Preparedness itself from this perspective, then, becomes another range of vital products sold in multiple markets to consumers steeled to survive various catastrophes through savvy budgeting, smart shopping, and strategic planning. Its extent and complexity are restricted by income level, information availability, and interest in public affairs -- as the devastating and unequal outcomes of many natural disasters underscores year after year across the U.S. Nonetheless, it appears “prepper” behavior is a lesser-known dimension in “consumer” behavior across the U.S., and it is not solely a right-wing paramilitary extremist preoccupation.

Do its root parameters, in fact, arise from other extreme, but different perils, namely, twentieth contexts of global war? In such conflicts, the ordinary flow and volume of commercial exchange, anchoring industrial consumer

life and international trade, often were quickly put into “temporary suspension.” Such disruptions in the civic and commercial contexts of relative peace in large-scale international war usually lasted “the duration” of such hostilities, because nation-states and their imperative military logistics typically redirected the flows of mass industrial production toward wartime needs rather than civilian wants. Hence, for many decades, the basic individual subjectivity of modern industrial society to some degree has presumed “the consumer” can, must and will be “a prepper” at the state’s command.

To learn more about these “known unknowns” behind “prepping” leads one to World Wars One and Two as well as the Cold War. Shifting from a nuclear apocalypse to the climate change calamity today, how do the premises of industrial consumerism shape the strategies of different social strata adapting to ecologies ravaged by worsening climate change? Too many tactics implicitly appear to accept the most embedded beliefs of neoliberal culture: society does not exist, collective action is impossible, individual initiative is everything. Yet, can climate change futures in neoliberalism’s ruins be continuously gamed, like global war futures, in material and practical strategies, which might buffer the individual and society against “temporary suspensions,” to the extent that the privileged and powerless both imagine them in the present? The preppers of the world arguably appear to believe they can. In facing the calamities of climate change today, then, the final irony of gaming to survive such calamities is how today’s stressed ecosystems are undermined to fuel mass markets with a bounty of goods and services. A tragedy behind such consumerism unfolds as the farce of prepperism. A few individuals and groups with the means buy in bulk as well as train to behave are prepping ahead of great disasters. They struggle to procure and protect the right mix of goods and services to perhaps survive amid devastated ecologies trapped in small artificial hidden ecologies, like time travelers, until Nature and Society might, once again, restart anew, if and when they can crawl out of their apocalypse-proofed rehabbed Cold War missile silos weeks, months or years in the future (see Survival Condo [<https://survivalcondo.com>], 2021).

This preliminary study, therefore, explores the strange conjunctures of right-wing extremism, the general populist discontent with today’s governing elites, and a widespread sense that systemic crisis that express their capacity during times plagued by infrastructure failures, contested elections, and institutional gridlock. In another sense, these trends also are intertwined with “environmental politics” inasmuch as the artificial ecologies of advanced industrial society are degrading the natural ecologies of the planet, but more people are asking what can they do in order to avoid this sustained degradation in small familiar spaces they inhabit with their families, friends and neighbors. Hence, what might be learned from how some Americans, from “the Base” of the Make America Great Again movement to less organized networks of autonomist, anti-fascist, anticapitalist elements associated with the “It’s Going Down” movement, are perhaps new cultural models for adaptations to these complex “climate changes” in the U.S.?

As a case in point, do these developments require rethinking the meaning, purpose, or significance of the estimated 3 to 4 million self-identified “survivalists” in the U.S. today? While they might be only one to two percent of the American population, the bubbles of contingency upon which these millions balance their identities between the roles of “ordinary consumers” and “extraordinary preppers” are suggestive. On the hand, “survivalism,” “prepping” or “hoarding” arguably are pathologies in mass consumer society, because believers in these behaviors expect the mega-machineries of total abundance, like computer networks, electrical grids or oil pipelines can and/or will fail soon. On the other hand, however, are such preppers simply more attuned to starkly embedded oligarchic forces at work behind liberal America’s consumer society that dictate how the Internet operates, impose public deregulation as individual choice or expropriate public and private lands to pump fossil fuels through pipelines from sites of ragged extraction to points of wasteful use only for the profit of a few like themselves?

Those already evident realities are signaling “the incommensurabilities” of the ecological strife, green civil war or environmental exhaustion that will be, or indeed already have been, sparked by climate calamities. Outside of the European Union or United States, thousands are again streaming every week out of Africa, Central America and the Levant to climb over the wire fences into Ceuta, wade across the Rio Bravo or set sail in overladen boats for Lampedusa to catch transportation to Spain, Del Rio, Texas or mainland Italy, seeking work, safety and opportunity. Why do they take these risks? Such displaced souls would agree with Hobbes about how “the state of nature” can

overgrow and then disrupt the degraded environments they are escaping, “wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, there is. . . .worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short (Hobbes, 1998: 84). Yet, are the places of refuge they seek to enter really interested in seeing them arrive?”

Many preppers deeply fear the men, women, and children fleeing such conditions to find ways into the E.U., U.S. or any other safe haven. Yet, there also are preppers who already are suspicious about their neighbors one street over, in the next building or the apartment below them. The stereotypical “prepper” from the National Geographic Channel’s “Doomsday Preppers,” for example, usually is depicted as white, male, suburban/exurban, middle to working class. Fixated on facing some coming cataclysm that fascinates them, ranging from another global pandemic to a nuclear war, they are convinced their outdoor living skills, good marksmanship, technical acumen, clever home renovations, and/or prescient shopping will enable them to survive with body and soul intact (Garrett, 2020; Mattoon, 2016; Pennington, 2014; and, Crawford, 2010). Consumers, who are also avid readers and cost-conscious, can turn to the “#1 Amazon Bestseller in Survival and Preparedness,” Jonathan Hollerman’s, *Survival Theory: A Preparedness Guide* promising “How to Survive the End of the World on a Budget” (Hollerman, 2016). Still, this price-conscious imaginary of doomsday, which is shared by many affluent white suburbanites and rural residents, occludes other overlooked, like-minded compatriots in different demographic niches, namely, non-white, female, Latinx, or Native American groups.

There one discovers many different “ordinary consumers” stocking up as extraordinary preppers, who proudly present themselves as “Afrovivalists,” “BattleX,” and “Dark-Skinned Preppers” (see *The Afrovivalist*, 2020; *BattleX*, 2019; *Black Prepper*, 2020; and, Adewunmi, 2018). Their “prepper ethic” is a more discreet current in the current crisis, but minority group consumers and citizens also harbor very similar anxieties about the present. Are these groups really that different or have recent events, forces or pressures revealing that a “prepper ethic” is becoming more commonly shared? Where has this root subjectivity in advanced industrial countries come to be? Why does it persist? And, how is it morphing into tactics for adapting to climate change? These are critical questions for environmental political theory, and this preliminary discussion begins to explore them.

A Genealogy of Preppers

Despite common understandings about “preppers” and their elaborate rituals of preparing for doomsday events in tales about right-wing fringe movements, strange religious sects or future primitivist clans, is “the prepper” only “a consumer” getting into a state of readiness for when the “temporarily closed” signs go up on the doors of their favorite shopping destinations? Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the halting recovery across the U.S. from this global disaster (Wall Street Journal, 2020), such situations no longer seem exceptional. After 9/11 or around the regions struck by massive North American blackouts during 2012, 2003, 1977 or 1965, such developments of readiness do not seem at all strange. Yet, are there other deeper sources in American prepper culture occluded in prejudicial presentations of the “Doomsday Prepper” televisual aesthetic? Indeed, is a preparatory stockpiling sensibility an implicit necessity of modern life, which unfolds with the development of consumerist “industrial democracy” in the Gilded Age, the American service state of the Progressive Era after 1914, or total war mobilizations in World Wars One and Two, and the Cold War? Prepper behavior today too easily is derided as a mildly neurotic deviation or an odd-ball underground movement. Yet, in consumerist industrial democracy, has not the federal government repeatedly also praised and then essentially directed its citizens to fundamentally embrace this identity and such behaviors as an imperative personal responsibility in every household for over a century?

Before 1991, as surreal as it seems in 2021, the civic duties of smart shopping implied having enough household necessities on hand to shelter in place with one’s family during a thermonuclear war that might last three days or for years. This eventuality would often be cited regularly during random tests of the “Emergency Broadcast System” on radio and television networks in brief “public service announcement” (P.S.A.) clips. “Air raid” sirens would wail in cities and towns. Brief lessons at school, in print and soon online would instruct citizens about how to “duck and cover,” “find nearby civil defense shelters” or “stock up and survive a disaster.”

These core messages, first circulated during the 1950s and 1960s, were a bit disingenuous. Atomic bombs were depicted as dangerous threats, but clever citizens with thorough “personal preparation,” like those needed to survive a blizzard, hurricane or tornado, could survive the horrendous conditions created by nuclear war essentially by gathering from all of the necessities to sustain their own complete household ecosystem. Through such temporal imports from lost normal milieus, each household was asked to stockpile whatever was needed to endure even massive attacks plus everything required to make their future survival a plausible possibility for the days, weeks, or months that would pass before the “all clear” sirens would be heard. Washington essentially commanded every consumer “to be prepared,” and always bear in mind -- no matter where or when they moved -- such extensive personal advance preparations were mandatory for society to survive and prevail in a nuclear exchange.

The consumer, then, was mobilized as the ultimate line of final defense by actively preparing each shopper to survive and then thrive in the blasted burnt ruins of irradiated states. While this civic expectation seems insane, the most reliable environmental conditions beyond that geopolitical crisis when “mutually assured destruction,” or the MAD strategy, triggered quick or protracted nuclear exchanges would depend upon pre-positioned canned, freeze-dried, powdered, or vacuum-packed goods purchased from antebellum suppliers. Ironically, in the packed vacuums of industrial commodity fetishism, a few human beings like the cockroach and sewer rat, might therefore survive nuclear war deep underground with those prepared consumers who could thrive on the canned cultures of mass consumption. The citizen as the consumer had a never-ending responsibility, namely, acquiring the logistical stores for such logistical resilience.

Such prepper behaviors were the official badge of individual reliance, as millions of potential “megadeaths” lived actual “microlives” ready to be counted upon, should they survive, to reclaim, rebuild and reassert their individual and collective lives after any nuclear nightmare. Such measures could only strengthen such chosen citizens, like those in the Western bloc of liberal democratic capitalist nations, by anticipating how the public might have access to environmental services in the future by conveying them from the past in blast shelters they made in basements, caverns, mines or tunnels. Attaining such readiness, to a real extent, was individual freedom itself. Think back to “Burt and Heather Gummer,” or Reba McIntire and Steve Gross, living off-the-grid outside of the old tiny crossroads town of Perfection, NV in “Tremors,” well-armed and fully stocked in a fortress-like house, waiting for “the end of the world as we know it” (Underwood, 1990) in their overstuffed underground bunker. They had good vibrations, ready for anything -- even the “graboids” who did not think before they broke into the wrong basement full of devout believers in the Second Amendment.

At its roots, “prepping” comes from “prepare,” which draws from a common Latin term “*praeparare*,” combining “*prae*,” or notions of “the before-hand,” and of “*parare*,” or “to make ready.” Who prepares, what is readiness about, why act beforehand, who decides such readiness is required, and how this future could be concocted effectively says much about the scope of prepper consciousness. It recognizes the stuff of consumer subjectivity is purposely assembled, created, manufactured, or readied for use, after circulating as raw materials, constituent components, or stand-alone units in local, national, or global exchange, before arriving in stores to be purchased and used by ordinary consumers. Wartime blockades, mobilizations, or shortages have created “temporary closures” in these commodity chains. Still, the sustaining spirit of this material ecology on which in each techno-scientific process for production/circulation/accumulation/consumption rested could, and would, keep the faith that “normality” eventually must be restored after such “closed times.”

Prepping, then, springs forth, not as a deviant libertarian style of self-reliance, but rather as one more variant of the foundational political subjectivities programmed into the everyday life of industrial societies to nurture unending economic growth. In times of global conflict, this disposition can be tied directly into a technocratic command-and-control regimen shaping all citizens and subjects to comply with its material demands for implementing “total war” during the twentieth century. Often attributed to General Eric Ludendorff, who elaborated this idea in a short 1935 book, *Der totaler Krieg*, as part of his strange collaboration with the new National Socialist party and the regime led by Adolf Hitler, the practical basis of the concept came from “the Hindenburg Program” of the German General Staff to mount a more extensive national mobilization in Germany and Austria-Hungary during the military stalemates of

1916 on the Western Front.

Beset by a sea blockade, and surrounded by its enemies of the Triple Entente on all sides, Imperial Germany saw Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg with General Ludendorff, who led the German General Staff, override the Hohenzollern regime's Imperial War Ministry by establishing the new *Kriegsamt*, or Supreme War Office, to far more completely mobilize the economy of the Central Powers for all-out war production as a *Zwangwirtschaft*, or a "compulsory coerced economy." Labor, resources, technology, revenues, and transport within the Hohenzollern and Hapsburg Empires were put under the strict supervision of a railroad expert, General Wilhelm Groener. He, in turn, worked with the General Staff to rationally extract and fully utilize any available resources from the stocks of the Central Powers' coalition to enable it to prevail in the battles of World War I.

War no longer was conducted then only in the trenches of the Western and Eastern front. Every subject and citizen was directed to prepare for and contribute to this victory on "the Home Front" by being ready and willing to consume less now as well as produce more to fuel the state's military victories. Unrelenting hard labor, material sacrifice, financial support, and moral investment by the subjects and citizens of the Reich were critical for victory. And, they worked in parallel with the demanding discipline of the military's all-out struggle to prevail in the campaigns Hindenburg and Ludendorff conducted thanks to these newly added increments of forcibly extracted war materiel. Essentially every sector of the built and natural environment was mobilized for the continuous creation of more capital, labor, resources, and talent to serve the war objectives set by the *Kriegsamt*, and this interpolation of the nation-state's objective macrological strategy produced individuals who were trained, readied or shaped to execute its tactics as part and parcel of their nationalist micrological subjectivity.

Later relabeled "the command economy" by Ludwig van Mises (von Mises, 1936), "state capitalism" (Lenin, 1917) or "planned economy" by Joseph Stalin (Davies, 1998), this centralized reorganization of mixed, profit-centered economies into an autarkic material-maximizing mobilization system constituted a new material ecology to wage unrestricted submarine warfare, conscript slave labor from prisons, and substitute new technology-intensive weapons, like poison gases, for more labor-intensive divisions. It also brought long-range aerial bombardments by armed airships and later long-range winged-bomber aircraft to attack its enemies' reciprocal efforts to stage a total mobilization for war. Hence, in the United Kingdom, Imperial Germany, the Third French Republic, one can observe the emergence of early prepper-like ethics in the spirited protective "civil defense" efforts on their home fronts. There are continuous drives to collect discarded junk to produce war materiel by children, women, and the elderly back home. Such practices laid the groundwork for envisioning modern political subjectivity centered as much on "prepping for war" in economies of "mass destruction" as it was readied for a future of "producing peacetime goods" in societies of "mass consumption" after the final victory.

In America, President Wilson's admiration for Prussian governance triggered the formation of the Council for National Defense at the federal level during August 1916, but the brief duration of America's involvement in actual hostilities did not lead to much more than the Council's members touting broader morale-building and material marshaling activities at the state and local levels during that conflict. Nonetheless, an organizational precedent was set, and F.D.R. called upon the Council's designs in the late 1930s to prepare America's economy and society to create a more expansive "civilian defense" apparatus during World War Two. By 1943, it pulled together 11 million volunteers in 14,000 local defense councils to organize air raid drills, stage rare materials collection drives, plant innumerable "victory gardens," lead gas attack training, and establish first aid stations around the nation.

After Hiroshima, these groups were reshuffled in light of atomic weaponry during the 1950s to be on the watch for Soviet bombers, prepare fall-out shelters, and learn how to treat "radiation sickness." Prepping to survive nuclear bombing was promoted by Washington and every state government. The message to 1950s consumers was clear: **You Can Survive** You can live through an atom bomb raid and you won't have a Geiger counter, protective clothing, or special training. The secrets of survival are: Know the Bomb's True Dangers. **Know the Steps You Can Take to Escape Them.** (Office of Civil Defense/State of California, 1950: 3). In other words, "prepping" for a catastrophic event is a civic duty, and it pays off.

Solemn government broadcasts about such normalized preparations of brutal wartime suffering became more elusive after America and Soviet Union realized “nuclear parity” in the Nixon years as massive arsenals of thermonuclear warheads on ICBMs displaced a few dozen small atomic bombs on jet bombers as the core of their strategic forces. Yet, those who live in Los Angeles, New Orleans or Miami Beach now routinely hear echoes of such warnings about impending “natural disasters.” They are commonly repeated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) during earthquake drills, hurricane season and tropical storms “to prep” for the total disruption of public services, civic order, free travel and access to everyday necessities, which are basically, as Hobbes declares, “such things as are necessary to commodious living” (2008: 86). As the most engaged, but also more ineffective, offices of the American Leviathan, FEMA explicitly commands the residents under such emergency watches to expect the worse, namely, being thrown into the uncertain state of suspended, lost or inept conditions of “Leviathanlessness.” Implicitly, FEMA is speaking in Hobbesian terms. Its managers recognize devastation on the scale of Hurricanes Katrina in New Orleans or Maria in Puerto Rico, should “be perceived as what manner of life there would be, where there was no common power to fear; by the manner of life, which men that have formerly lived under a peaceful government” could very soon “degenerate into, in a civil war” (Hobbes, 2008: 85).

Here the climate change imaginary as well as the memories of high-level nuclear mobilizations during the Cold War become significant. The World Wars ended for most combatants and in many areas. Where they did not, civil strife, ethnic cleansing, wars of national liberation, smaller-scale conventional war continued across the world from 1918 to 1939, and then again, more widely and intensely, after 1945 during (and after) the Cold War. Nonetheless, at its core, the world economy’s “temporary closures” also ended in bouts of expanded productive prosperity. Never enjoyed fully by most, economic growth restarted, and the wartime mobilization of prepping for total victory, partisan warfare in defeat or sacrifice for statist autarky tapered down even in USSR until the 1960s.

Brushes with thermonuclear war in tense alerts during 1962, 1973 and 1983, however, raised the prospects of not merely the “temporal suspension” of consumption, but the “material end” of advanced industrial society as it has been known since the close of the nineteenth century. As lampooned with the notion of “the mineshaft gap” between the U.S. and USSR in the 1964 film, “Dr. Strangelove,” about the U.S. and USSR accidentally stumbling into a nuclear war in 1968, national planners did thoroughly contemplate what the scope, duration, and annihilation a full-blown thermonuclear war could entail “terraforming” spaces beneath the planet’s surface to preserve their state’s “national command authority” (Graff, 2017). All that was needed to be “prepped” was the will and means to migrate from the surface of the planet to subterranean spaces of vast mines for months, years or decades.

A “nuclear winter” such conflict could trigger for the Earth’s climate also was carefully modeled during the 1980s, setting the stage today for imagining comparably catastrophic alterations from other causes in the Earth’s climate in the twenty-first century. Prepping to survive doomsday, whether it snaps together in a week of hydrogen bomb explosions (Kahn, 1960) or slowly emerges over decades of excessive greenhouse gassing of the atmosphere (Nixon, 2011), the proponents of “survival theory” (Hollerman, 2016; Mattoon, 2016; and, U.S. Office of Civil Defense, 1966) continue to animate the theory and practice for “preppers” among the ranks of ordinary consumers in 2021. Today, however, under neoliberal conditions that favor individual initiative, they ironically still draw on the social capital of collective sacrifice that Washington valorized as practical points of civic faith during the Cold War. .

Prepping under Pluralist Conditions of Rule

Consequently, millions of Americans do appear to plan and practice strategically pre-figurative, post-apocalyptic household prepping on weekend shopping trips fully convinced that no matter what disaster befalls society tomorrow the shops will remain shuttered for a long time. At one level, “prepping is, at its heart, a kind of activism, a bulwark against the false promises of capitalism, of the idea of endless growth and the perpetual availability of resources” (Garrett, 2020). At another level, however, the algorithms behind the restocking programs in Costco, Gander Outdoors or Sportsmen’s Warehouse superstores lure certain psycho-demographic market segments down their aisles to buy their weekend camping needs as well as procure all their daily camping, fishing, and hunting essentials for months or years. This demand exists and sustains the always evolving niche markets of a multibillion-dollar business

selling “preparedness,” which is regarded by many of these buyers as capitalism reliably delivering the goods that preppers desire.

Whether it is vended as jars of organic peanut butter by the case, 1000 round bricks of .22 L.R. cartridges, black plastic buckets holding a week’s meals for four people in vacuum-packed bags, or MASH-quality medical kits sourced from around the world, there is a robust market for consuming the basic stocks of future household ecologies packaged to sustain everyday life today. Prepper “sportsmen” and “sportswomen” in tactical gear, who refuse “to trust business, trade networks, and markets to provide what we need, to not question the resiliency of globalization” (Garrett, 2020), shop daily under normal conditions to be ready for catastrophes tomorrow. Their objectives are clear: to accumulate complete stocks to supply their own stores of ecological services, which then are stacked high in the basement, hidden in the walls, or buried in the dirt around their last-stand rural retreats.

What do these peculiar activist trends reveal about a liberal democratic republic like the U.S.? Too many associate them only with violent right-wing extremist politics. Of course, the events of January 6, 2021, in Washington, DC, suggest that connection is not insignificant, but it is insufficient. Other people with different ideological perspectives recognize that politics under extreme conditions of social collapse will entail violence, and they are rightfully readying their preparedness.

In one register, over the past 15 years, “climate change” has taken on new meaning with every major power outage, hurricane season, blizzard white-out, heatwave, or protracted drought. These events are seen more as the forerunners of greater “climate calamity” incidents in which natural disasters trigger miserable distress. Prepping might prevent major misfortune or total loss in the future for those who are realistic now. In a second register, FEMA, Baton Rouge, and the City of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina in 2005; Washington, DC, the National Guard, and Commonwealth government during 2017 after Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico; or, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT), Austin, and hundreds of municipal governments during the severe polar vortex intrusions across the Midwest in February 2021 are vivid instances of tremendous chaos actually happening. These incidents made it blatantly obvious that advanced industrial life for most Americans is not fool-proof. In only in few hours, one can be forced to survive under conditions that are far from advanced, no longer reliably industrial, and often not really living.

These episodes also reveal the sub-political infrastructures underpinning the everyday civic life (Beck, 1992) overseen by America’s political superstructures are an unreliable tangle of corroded machinic ecologies too often run to the point of sustained collapse as well as worn-down cash cows operated to enrich pension funds, private equity firms, and professional consultants rather than deliver reliable public utility to their clients. Plainly, this terrain is a close study of “how everything can collapse” (Servigne and Stevens, 2020). Trapped in this situation, basic public services and regular store hours will rapidly be “temporarily suspended.” Basic public utilities are only one case in point. Pacific Gas & Electric or Southern California Edison in the 2020s must quickly impose rolling electricity blackouts for millions (after neglecting to routinely maintain their powerlines or regularly groom their grid easements for decades) to avoid sparking forest fires. Their customers, in turn, face entire towns burning down as well as forced emergency evacuations during heat waves, Santa Ana wind events, or extreme droughts. Not surprisingly, many consumers prep their own DIY-responses for coping with such climate calamities within their households alone or with a few trusted neighbors (Moses, 2018).

These recent events explicitly affirm the embedded beliefs of American neoliberal culture: society does not exist, collective action is impossible, markets are reliably efficient until they fail, and the individual is all that counts. If one wants a dependable, authoritative order, he or she will be disappointed. Far too many Americans do not see “that great **Leviathan** called a **Commonwealth**, or **State**” (Hobbes, 1998: 7) seated in Washington, DC, explicitly directs the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to brief its citizens about expecting to encounter occasional “Leviathanlessness” by commanding “consumers” to be “preppers,” since the “salus populi (the people’s safety) that is “its business” (Hobbes, 1998: 7) often does suffer “temporary suspension.” At FEMA’s website, Ready.gov, the U.S. state then extolls this implicit state of exception with appeals to “Build A Kit,” since “after an emergency, you may need to survive on your own for several days. Being prepared means having your own food, water, and other supplies

to last for several days” (Ready.gov, 2021b).

Consumers must be preppers, and their astute purchases must assemble “kit built ecologies” that ideally should fit into “a couple of plastic bags” with “a gallon of water a day for each person; several days of food (at least a three-day supply of non-perishable food); battery-powered or hand-crank radio and a NOAA Weather Radio with tone alert; flashlight; first aid kit; extra batteries; whistle (to signal for help); dust mask (to help filter contaminated air); plastic sheeting and duct tape (to shelter in place); moist towelettes, garbage bags and plastic ties (for personal sanitation); wrench or pliers (to turn off utilities); manual can opener (for food); local maps; cell phone with chargers and a backup battery disaster” (Ready.gov, 2021b). Of course, there are those who are too feckless to prepare, because they realize one can always rob these resources from the ready at gunpoint when needed (Osnos, 2016), while the ready also recognize they must be armed to deter such brigands.

From the scores, hundreds and thousands that have died on FEMA’s watch since 2003, astute survivors are learning how life in the U.S. unfolds now amid neoliberalism’s ruins. To the extent they grasp how fully its “the states of exception” recklessly throw “ordinary consumers” into “the state of exceptions,” “extraordinary preppers” now can shine by “prepping” their own ecological zones for intermittent, if not protracted, self-reliance in “All Hazards,” or what some label “The Event,” including such circumstances as “Emergency Alerts; Attacks in Public Places; Avalanche; Bioterrorism; Chemical Emergencies; Cybersecurity; Drought; Earthquakes; Explosions; Extreme Heat; Floods; Hazardous Materials Incidents; Home Fires; Household Chemical Emergencies; Hurricanes; Landslides & Debris Flow; Nuclear Explosion; Nuclear Power Plants; Pandemic; Power Outages; Radiological Dispersion Device; Severe Weather; Space Weather; Thunderstorms & Lightning; Tornadoes; Tsunamis; Volcanoes; Wildfires; and, Winter Weather” (Ready.gov, 2021a). This list will take a lot of shopping in the here-and-now to live with a slim hope of materially surviving the disastrous futures that may strike most of them, but this fact is at the bottom-line for consumers who are key parties to the crumbling social contracts of “the world’s last remaining superpower” (Pennington, 2014).

Drifting into prepper culture follows naturally from the neoliberal competition, aggressive survivalism, and winner-take-all mentality, which could be described as the terms of engagement in which most groups face the hostilities of “the new class war” (Lind, 2020). Living in a perpetual state of being ignored, neglected or unaccommodated in the increasing frictions of market competition between individuals and groups to adverse circumstances, a few increasingly refuse to compromise with government incompetence, corporate malfeasance or ineffectual expertise. In trying to mutually build a surreptitious accumulation of survival stores, family firearms, and bug-out bags, which they believe will afford them a commodious existence “after the crash,” the hassles of existing market society actually often put them at odds with the present, as a few right-wing militia organizations have done confronting the F.B.I. or local police. Eventually, the authorities often arrest them, strip them of their survival supplies, and leave them less prepped to face their worst imagined future conditions, even though many law enforcement officers share the same anxieties and have similar plans for survival. Yet, near the end of a world normally spinning around mass consumerism, industrial democracy, and civil order, can many ordinary consumers reasonably prepare for collective desperation, post-industrial oligarchy, and civil disorder?

After decades of neoliberal reforms, the American government lost much of its once robust capacity and has become increasingly ineffectual, incomplete, and inconsistent. So far, the inequalities of neoliberalism have rested mostly on the poor, struggling along the rural periphery, striving in among the precariat, and settling across the inner-city. They know they are superfluous, the unwanted others, maybe even the enemy. The “winners take all.” With their winnings, they are repositioning their ecological existence in more viable but also confined lifeworlds only for themselves in the short-, medium- and long- terms of the future.

The unprepared “loser get nothing” elements are left to cope with rapid climate change, deepening desertification, and frequent famine on the street. For the most destitute street people, then, doomsday is already here. One vision of things to come for all can be witnessed today in the degradation of this underclass. Their everyday life is entangled already in building narrow niche ecologies in run-down cities, under freeway overpasses, or on public beaches. There

they prep for greater disasters by trading in odious black markets, committing violent crimes, squatting in rag-tag tent camps, and engaging in freegan nomadic scavenging (Chandler, 2020a; and 2020b).

For truly wealthy consumers, prepping is more discretely sold in the clean green envelopes of well-stocked safe rooms, unmapped ranches in Idaho, ocean-going yachts with months of range or remote New Zealand farms (Osnos, 2017). Other more numerous strata in once affluent America now are squeezed between the homeless poor and the rootless rich, and they hoard their canned, powdered, and shrink-wrapped ecological caches in attics, basements, or sheds. Prepping with more limited financial means and maybe living payday to payday, these preppers consume strategically to supply the lifestyles behind their “sustainable materialism” by stockpiling an extended shelf-life and indefinitely storable stash of daily essentials. Can these “consuming for the future” preppers continue to believe they can “buy time” from neoliberal ecologies of overshoot? Many do. Yet, in such extremely “denaturalized ecologies” (Biro, 2005), is it not environmental overshoot that has robbed all life in these times and places of its resilience, making these mixed maladaptive prepping movements both seem imperative, and yet be likely unreliable?

The Qualities of Mutual Aid

In mapping the contours of “mutual aid,” Petr Kropotkin posited this human quality was integral to the evolution of humanity itself. Like many intellectuals during the nineteenth century, much of his work targeted the writings of Charles Darwin on natural evolution. Rather than regarding “the survival of the fittest” as endless pitched struggles of individuals against individuals, groups against groups, or nations against nations, Kropotkin took the opposite tack. By his lights, the evolution of humanity was sustained by an innate disposition of humans to collaborate productively in strong mutualistic support of one another in competition with other groups and against nature. Cooperation and mutual aid rather than competition and selfish conflict were the personal sentiments that gradually guided the social, moral, and ethical evolution of human beings.

A diverse range of mutual aid arrangements, according to Kropotkin, could be found in history, and he urged all to look beyond the boundaries erected in most Social Darwinist arguments, which focused more on selfish individualism or diffident helplessness, to search for any and all forms of mutualism at the core of humanity’s existence. How can his analysis of mutual aid shed light on the fruitless activities of mutual disaccommodation?

From the bottom of society looking up, on September 14, 2019, many thousands of Americans gathered at public parks, civic squares, or local churches around the country to celebrate “Guns & God Appreciation Day.” Such an event for most individuals living in elite communities concentrated in major cities on the East or West Coast seems almost incredible. Yet, those who attended these gatherings did so with the belief there are too many “God-free zones” to allow such out-of-touch elites, who are often aghast when hearing about these events, to impose “Gun Free Zones” in America today (Haug, 2010).

Holding these two beliefs about “Guns & God” may seem utterly implausible to upper-class middle suburbanites or downtown condominium dwellers; still, their prevalence must be put into a large cultural, economic, and political context of FEMA’s directives “to prep to survive on you own” rather than being dismissed, as Hilary Clinton did in 2016, as the delusions of “the deplorables.” With the erosion, decay, or even collapse of basic state functions, public health services, and business operations during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in many regions across America, ordinary working-class citizens have been, and continue to be left behind and ignored (Lind, 2020). Along with prayer, they believe having plenty of guns and ammo to remain, if needed, “tactically effective” (Luke, 2020: 186-191) is a basic civil right. Some are MAGA men and women, but many are not.

As their once more habitable communities in rural areas and inner cities became dead places and decaying spaces, what might prepper behavior reveal about mutual aid? For the truly survival-minded, it reveals much because no one person can easily cope with the near-anarchy found in many neighborhoods today. And, this reality becomes even more true if, and when, any consumers/preppers are forced to put their prepping into practice

during major disasters. Lone survivors rarely last long. Small communities for mutual aid have much higher chances because the practices of everyday life demand tactical coordination. As Mattoon (2016: 9) asks, “you are searching for food and water in an abandoned grocery store -- who is on guard; you are asleep -- who is on guard; you are cutting firewood -- who is on guard; you have food and are eating -- who is on guard; you are doing something that requires your full attention -- who is on guard?” If these questions cannot be readily answered by any individual, the strategic tragedies of living before climate calamities, global pandemics or nuclear conflicts as “a prepping consumer” all alone will turn into the tactical farces of “the consumable prepper” ready to be raided for her or his stores.

Mutual Aid Might Be Magnum Force

Desolation is not yet common everywhere. Where it has unfolded, however, its degradations are troubling. With abandoned farms, declining populations, food deserts, shuttered hospitals, closed mines, obsolete schools, derelict factories, bought-out banks, degraded infrastructure, and lost jobs, too many citizens are witnessing the general repudiation of post-World War Two liberal democratic capitalism’s faith in priming markets to fuel the expansion of state services as the dual panacea for pressing economic and social problems. As the growth of megacities has overshadowed depopulating rural areas, the one-time important role of the state in bridging urban/rural divides in civic life has lessened due to bureaucratic indifference, agency ineffectiveness, or resource inadequacy. Maybe President Biden will “Build Back Better” across the nation. Meanwhile, these neglected regions are more conflictual, corrupt, and crime-ridden.

Those left behind in such places already depend daily upon mutual aid: their communities have indeed been consigned to “the back row” where residents suffer insecurity, go without, lose hope, and feel unwanted. Because the state is distant, businesses have departed, non-profit organization assistance is intermittent, and public services are being privatized, deep fears arise. Getting access to basic needs for too many requires new tactics beyond neoliberal fables about the greater individual initiative. Put in this perspective, then, populist forms of mutual aid relate directly to waning government power and services.

Even before FEMA’s warnings about intermittent episodes of “Leviathanlessness” in massive disaster, the “liteness of the Leviathan” has loomed over such communities. As a result, declaring where you and your trusted neighbors live will be a “gun sanctuary” seems to be a smart strategic choice for otherwise defenseless neighbors who are, in the meantime, left with too few, or no, police units to keep the peace (Luke, 2020: 186-191). Those who protest “defunding the police”, are not necessarily right-wing extremists friendly to the Three Percenters or Oath Keepers; they are instead already coping with lawlessness and disorder. During January 2021, gun shops sold over 2 million firearms -- a 75 percent rise over January 2019, and most active January on record for gun dealers, while the F.B.I. recorded 4.3 million firearm background checks, the greatest monthly count since their system went online in the late 1980s (Long, 2021: A3). At the heights of the global pandemic, in the same month as the attack on the Capitol, and in the aftermath of a partisan insurrection that the police and National Guard forces barely contained, many ordinary consumers, who have never owned a firearm, took this step to be prepped for the greater disorder.

As was the case for some areas in New Orleans during Katrina or in Puerto Rico since Hurricane Maria, mutual aid did hold in some neighborhoods. Elsewhere, however, it can evaporate because the police, firefighters, E.M.T. ambulance drivers, emergency room doctors, respiratory therapists, who might be key mutual aid agents themselves, are already dead, incapacitated, or nowhere to be found. Such scenarios are what rightly inspire “dark-skinned preppers” and female “Afrovivalists” in New Orleans, Chicago, or Los Angeles since comparable event horizons are apparent already in their local urban dead zones. As Jason Charles, a firefighter and organizer of N.Y.C. Preppers assert, “It’s when law enforcement stops going to work, that’s when the breakdown begins. Now you’re talking about a free-for-all, every-man-for-themselves kind of deal” (Moses, 2018). What will make a difference in these chaotic new ecologies is “a good support group” and “what preparation...you have will be all you have to survive the event” (Mattoon, 2016: 9).

The political ecologies of prepping recognize nothing today is this fail-safe. When and where the cloak of normality is shredded by racism, neglect or indifference, preppers anticipate that fighting over control of what is left to be consumed will require conflicts, not unlike “armed revolution” to survive (Haug, 2016; and Carlson, 2014: 335-383). One might dress this violence up as democratic community defense, people’s war, or armed republican ardor, but the miseries of neoliberal disorder over decades sour those narratives, making many forms of mutual aid essential.

These scientific and technical revolutions behind mass industrial consumerism unfolded out of developing mass markets in a series of largely normal accidents, in which the key players sought to profit. This is how technocratic command-and-control capitalist life under the aegis of technocratic elites spins up economically, managerially, technologically today, and its subpolitical processes are not democratic (Mezzadra and Nelson, 2019). Capitalists are commanders, operators are oligarchs, and technicians are autocrats. If their work stops, slips, or slows, no democratic vote will necessarily restore it. And, if/when it resumes, the general public will not be served first. The commanders, oligarchs, and autocrats of the economy have the power, position, and privilege in the polis to act against the social needs of critical clients, democratic voters, and civic republicans quite effortlessly on the plane of “postpolitics” (Scerri, 2019).

How one survives in such new environmental conditions of developmental dictatorship, technocratic tyranny, and expert elitism is why “preppers” ask what must be done and then ready themselves to do it. They hustle to assemble the necessities of their own “storable materialism,” hoping to live on the fragile bubble between spoilage of their stock, consumption of their stores, and the reawakening of more normal trading conditions in society. Whether it is local mutual aid; a passport and a farm bought to escape to New Zealand; or perhaps sufficient arms and ammo to loot others for long months of total anarchy, they believe prepping will pay off. It is never entirely clear “We All in This Together,” because what “this is” looks altogether very different, depending on who you are, how you prepped, and what damage mutual disaccommodation did to you as your preparations were made to find your niche in these ecologies before the climate cataclysm and its ensuing states of exception.

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