

ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS AT THE END OF THE WORLD: PREPPING AS  
ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICE  
A DISSERTATION

by  
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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Environmental Politics at the End of the World: Prepping as Environmental Practice

This dissertation explores the practice of prepping, in which individuals and families prepare to respond to emergencies, disasters, or the collapse of society, without relying on social institutions such as the state or market. Based on ethnographic data, including interviews (n=20), participant observation, and analysis of online content (message boards, blogs, and social media), I argue that prepping is an environmental practice because it involves renegotiating the material flows of food, water, energy, waste, and other facets of material life to survive disaster or social collapse. This is related to the idea of risk society. By default, most households are reliant on collective public infrastructural systems such as municipal water provision, industrial food distribution, or the electric grid, a configuration I theorize as an environmental field. Preppers work to undo this default and minimize risk associated with it by emergency planning and becoming “self-sufficient”, in doing so modifying their ecological habitus to transpose elements of their cultural schema onto newly realized circumstances. I argue that self-sufficiency emerges as a culturally logical, embodied environmental response that serves as an emotion management strategy because it allows participants to reinforce valued cultural worldviews such as cultural individualism, ideas about human nature,

gender, racial and class privilege, and the logic of liberalism, to which they are culturally attached. Emotions play a key role in motivating action, and in shaping which actions are deemed culturally appropriate by a given group. Even as preppers engage in a critique of current institutions, they fall back on dominant ideologies that reproduce logics of masculinity, whiteness, and class privilege. This has important implications for an environmental politics concerned with environmental privilege.

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To the unprepared

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

When Benjamin found out his daughter's school didn't have an emergency plan for an earthquake, he was worried. Benjamin lives in a small city in Oregon, a state not known for regular earthquakes, at least not compared to its southern neighbor, California. But lately, citizens of Oregon had been told by scientists, public officials, and the media that they were due for the "Big One", a megathrust earthquake from the Cascadia Subduction Zone, a long fault line running from Northern Vancouver Island to Northern California. Unlike California's infamous San Andreas fault, in which blocks of the earth's crust slide past one another, thrust faults, like the Cascadia Subduction Zone, exhibit a dip-slip pattern, in which one layer of the earth's plates slips underneath another. Under the ocean, this motion produces tsunamis as the thrusting motion of the quake displaces a large column of ocean water. The effects of the Big One anticipated in Oregon are commonly compared to those of the deadly 2011 earthquake and tsunami that struck Tohoku Japan (Schulz 2015). The last time the Cascadia Subduction Zone produced an earthquake was in 1700, over three hundred and twenty years ago. Far from being comforting, seismologists believe that this means friction has been building up in the fault ever since.

Benjamin is a middle-aged man who immigrated to the US from the Caribbean and has lived in Oregon for many years, with his wife and school-age children. Benjamin told me that his inroad to prepping was the realization that his daughter's school had no real emergency plan for an earthquake, despite the fact that experts predict that Oregon is

on schedule to experience a major quake when the Cascadia Subduction Zone slips, something it has done every 400 to 600 years.

When Benjamin began to inquire around though, he discovered that his friends and neighbors were not really prepared. Most reported that they assumed that agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) would respond to a major disaster, relieving them of the responsibility of having emergency supplies on hand. But Benjamin had his doubts. Even as people were planning to rely on FEMA, FEMA was advising people to keep their own emergency supplies on hand, telling people that it would not have the capacity to respond to everyone in need immediately upon the event of a disaster (Ogrysko 2018). Benjamin told me,

FEMA keeps telling people to have a three-day backpack with food and water supplies, in case of an emergency. I checked with my friends...my subdivision is a thousand people and I reached out to every family.... And their idea of prepping is waiting for the government, FEMA, to show up. What people don't understand is that if the disaster's too big, FEMA might not show up for a week, 10 days, 14 days, so you're going to have to rely on yourself.

This sounds like a reasonable concern for a parent and a citizen to hold. FEMA itself was relaying a similar message, encouraging citizens to keep emergency supplies on hand. A three-day supply of food and water is a fairly minimal emergency supply, composed of things that many households probably already have on hand, or that could be organized with some minor effort. But Benjamin doesn't think that's enough. Three days is a minimum, and an insufficient one at that. His disaster scenario quickly spirals beyond a local earthquake with a three-day break in supplies. Certainly, if FEMA or another form of emergency support failed to arrive after a week or more, and all the infrastructure that Benjamin and his family depend on had collapsed it would be

insufficient. Benjamin not only thinks that it is likely that nobody would show up to help, but that after the earthquake, conditions would go from bad to worse. He continues,

In a disaster when there's no communication with Uncle Sam you're going to have panicking quite fast, and once they panic, it doesn't matter who you are... most people in this country, they have guns in their house. Americans, they all have guns, they all think they know how to handle guns, but they don't. But at the end of the story, if I don't have food, I don't have water, cause I'm not prepared, at the end, they are going to be killing each other for whatever supplies everybody has. So I see prepping as a step from ok, I have to know what to do in case this happened and civilizations start killing each other. Which is exactly what-- if you check history--its exactly what happened when the Roman Empire fell.

You have a vacuum of power. The government's not there to help them, that was the Roman Empire, all of a sudden you have crazy groups coming into power and killing each other and then the poor famers back there in medieval times they were ok, farming, and all of a sudden these armies come out of nowhere and kill them for food and women! Cause that's what they were doing.

Whatever. So. So I see...I'm a very smart individual. I'm sorry to say it, but I'm very smart, and I don't want to end up in a gutter and my wife and kids murdered because I wasn't ready for a situation.

In the story Benjamin tells about the catastrophic earthquake, the focus has shifted away from the natural disaster itself, onto a far more insidious threat: other people. In this scenario, the three-day break in supplies gives way to panicking hordes with guns— people who are presumably Benjamin's former neighbors and community members, but who now pose a risk beyond the initial earthquake itself. The scenario deepens, and we move from civil unrest, to the collapse of civilization on par with the fall of the Roman Empire. Once the thin veneer of civilization has collapsed, Benjamin expects violence and chaos to reign. In this analogy, the United States is the Roman Empire, at the end of its glory days, on the cusp of collapse following slow decline. Popular accounts of the fall of the Roman Empire point to internal economic collapse, over-expansion and excessive

military spending, and government corruption and instability (Andrews 2014). Not only must Benjamin worry about recovering from an earthquake, but now he must figure out how to defend against marauding hordes that would steal his food and murder his family. If nobody's going to show up to help, and those around him might go crazy and start killing each other, it is left to Benjamin to play the role of protector, and to be ready to stop roving armies from killing for food and women.

Why does Benjamin spiral so quickly from an earthquake—a natural disaster that certainly has the capacity to be devastating, but which has happened many times before without causing the collapse of an entire society—to the fall of the Roman Empire, and the impending fall of the society in which he lives? And what does he do in anticipation of this outcome? This dissertation sets out to answer these research questions: Why do preppers prep? And what is the significance of prepping to environmental politics, and citizen response to risk more broadly? I also address the following questions:

- What are preppers' motivations and justifications for prepping? Why do they choose prepping instead of other practices?
- How do preppers prep? What activities are people who "prep" doing?
- Who preps?

In the above story, Benjamin, and preppers like him, see a cautionary tale of social instability, and the failure of institutions to weather inevitable disaster. They also see an opportunity—the chance to live out cultural ideals of heroism and bravery that signal social value and individual self-worth. By resisting the cultural tides that they feel certain will pull most people into a state of panic, irrational reactivity, and loss of control; preppers see disaster as a chance to exhibit deeply valued traits like self-control,

rationality, personal responsibility, autonomy, and leadership—qualities that, in everyday modern life they are unable to perform.

The ability to embody these traits in the face of disaster is, to preppers, a signifier of self-worth, and also, of moral superiority, a distinction that marks them as special, and uniquely poised to think rationally, seeing through the fog that obscures the truth from everyone else. Preppers often distinguish between themselves and “most people”, with most people falling short of idealized behaviors. Survivalist blogger James Wesley Rawles, who is widely read among preppers, writes,

**People Run in Herds and Packs, but Both Follow Natural Lines of Drift.**

Most people are sheep (“sheeple“). A few are wolves that prey on others. But just a few of us are more like sheepdogs—we think independently, and instead of predation, we are geared toward protecting and helping others. People naturally follow natural lines of drift—the path of least resistance (Rawles n.d.)

Sheeple, Rawles explains, refers to people who “parrot the MSM” (mainstream media) “and who are in denial of potential TEOTWAWKI” (The End of the World as We Know It) (Rawles n.d.). In short, Rawles claims, and Benjamin implies, some people are *naturally* more inclined to think independently, act rationally, and protect others, due to inborn traits like intelligence, the capacity for rational thought and emotional control<sup>1</sup>. Everyone else is a potential threat. Ideas about human nature are called upon to delineate between the rational and trustworthy, and everybody else.

Rawles is one of the thought-leaders of survivalist prepping, the most transformative model of prepping which involves moving off-grid to life self-

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<sup>1</sup> These are traits that are not incidentally historically associated with men and masculinity (Plumwood 2002)

sufficiently;<sup>2</sup>his blog and works of both fiction and non-fiction are read widely in the prepper community. He is a white orthodox Christian who identifies as a libertarian, a political philosophy he believes is the most compatible with a survivalist mentality. He lives off the grid in the inland Northwest and has maintained a survivalist blog advocating self-sufficiency and emergency preparedness for more than a decade.

Benjamin is a man of color and an immigrant, with a Spanish accent who lives in a suburban style subdivision of a small city in Oregon. He identifies as a Democrat and is somewhat disdainful of religion, which, to him represents just another potential threat (“you’re gonna have to deal with all of the crazy people who are going to be thinking it’s the end of the world, Jesus Christ never showed up, so they’re gonna be doing all sorts of crazy things...” he tells me). Despite their major differences, however, Benjamin and Rawles both agree that “Civilization is Just a Thin Veneer” and that “In the absence of law and order, men quickly revert to savagery.”(Rawles n.d.). It is this belief more than anything that unites a diversity of people around the common practice of prepping. In the deep story (Hochschild 2016) that preppers tell, disaster is immanent, and when it falls, nobody is coming to help. Those who are unprepared, and prone to follow the pack, will either fall victim to the naturally unscrupulous (Rawles refers to these as wolves, but they are also referred to regularly as bad guys, criminals and thugs), or will panic, lose control, and join the unscrupulous in marauding hordes, bands of bad-guys and desperate citizens willing to do just about anything to get what they need. And need, they will. The

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<sup>2</sup> I discuss the various types of prepping in Ch III. Many preppers distinguish between survivalists and preppers but even those who believe they are distinct acknowledge that they share common roots. Rawles however equate the two, defining “prepper” as “Slang for a prepared individual. (A Survivalist).” (Rawles n.d.)

problem as preppers see it is that most people are entirely dependent on institutions to meet their daily needs—a condition of modern institutionalized material flows (Smil 2014) that preppers believe leaves those who depend upon them entirely vulnerable. Vulnerability is not a state that preppers, who believe strongly in personal responsibility and individual autonomy, can readily accept.

### **Why Do Preppers Prep?**

Who is responsible for anticipating, planning for, and responding to disasters? What kinds of institutional responses have citizens been promised, and what kinds of institutional responses have materialized during crises? Are political expectations for collective responses to disasters from federal agencies like FEMA reasonable, or do they reflect an unwarranted trust in the state? If the state can't be trusted, who can be? How should individuals navigate contemporary landscapes of risk? Preppers believe that most people in the United States (and indeed, in the world, do not adequately consider these questions. Being able to perceive risk despite political attempts to obscure it is a badge of honor for preppers, who are wary of mainstream institutional claims. To preppers, too many people have bought into the promises of the welfare state, trusting that the complex, state regulated political economic systems of distributing industrially produced goods and services will sufficiently provide for their well-being. As a result, more and more people rely on complex, interdependent, often bureaucratically and impersonally managed, chains of supplies that separate them from the basis of their survival.

Risk and dependence are both conditions of modern industrial society (Beck 1992, 2008; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982; Worthy 2008) but, as Kenneth Worthy (2008) points out, conditions of dependence are often rendered invisible by material

organizations of supply chains and what Schlosberg and Coles call material flows (Schlosberg and Coles 2015). This produces a sort of environmental alienation, in which citizens of modern economies are disconnected from the ecological basis of their own subsistence, what I call an ecological life support system (Worthy 2008, 2013). Risk society is a useful theory for understanding the circumstances that preppers are responding to. Risk society (Beck 1992, 2008) refers to the current state of modernity in which new dimensions of risk occur. Risk refers to the anticipation of future catastrophes. Although risk has always been present in human societies, late industrial capitalism produces new, unprecedented levels of global risk that societies must learn to live with. During earlier phases of modernity, industrialization was tasked with meeting human needs, under risk society, societies are tasked with responding to the risks that industrialization has produced. Responding to risk becomes the focus of new forms of social organization, including new markets, new social movements, and new cultural practices, like prepping.

While risk society (and attention to the structures that produce it) offers an important context for prepping, it tends to remain structural, macro in scope, and abstract. We might say that it lacks an accounting of experience, or agency, at least as a primary focus. Beck leaves the door open for agency of citizens in his theory, especially contained in the argument that risk society will by necessity produce new forms of social movement. But he states explicitly in his work on risk society that he is engaging in theoretical speculation, not empirical analysis of what people actually do (Beck 1992).

While material infrastructure and economic institutions shape this alienation, it is cultural processes that shape what people pay attention to, and how. Indeed, risk society,

and the risk positions that it produces, Beck argues, are not in fact material circumstances, although they are used to describe our perceptions of them. Risk, which refers to the possibility of future disaster (rather than disaster or harm that has already occurred), can only be made sense of through cultural filters that “frame” how risk is perceived (Benford and Snow 2000; Goffman 1974; Snow et al. 1986). Framing organizes experience, shaping how individuals “see” the world around them in reference to collectively understood cultural reference points. While individuals may adopt various frames, frames are derived from social structures, which serve as the “shapers of experience” (Goffman 1974:13)

In his essay on frame alignment, Erving Goffman takes on the W.I. Thomas dictum, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” and questions what we mean by “real”. Although Goffman agrees that things are “real” in their consequences, he challenges how we take this; consequences may vary in their significance and weighting (1974:1). Frames are one unit of culture, which can operate on multiple levels, in conjunction with others, such as beliefs, values, schema, discourse, narratives, and worldviews. A primary framework renders something that would otherwise be meaningless into something that is meaningful; frames can be organized into beliefs, which Goffman thought as a sort of a “framework of frameworks; a cosmology that unites members of a particular social group, constituting central element of a culture”. Various frames may derive from the same belief system (ibid. 27). Common units of culture like frames take on the function of uniting people into thought communities, as meaning is constructed by a group to define and explain reality and provide order to everyday life.

Culture plays a starring role in this dissertation, and I draw from a large and somewhat cacophonous cultural sociological literature to help explain why preppers adopt prepping as a viable environmental practice. In some respects, I am indiscriminate with my borrowing of cultural concepts from theorists across the spectrum; but in other respects, I am quite intentional about weaving together different tools that theorists have conceptualized to help understand the complexity of meaning that is involved in the fabrication of social life. Following a cultural turn in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bonnell and Hunt 1999; Sewell 1999), sociologists turned their attention to culture as an autonomous, causal structure that has explanatory power that, as William Sewell Jr. argues, continues to “perform valuable intellectual work”. I agree. At its root, attention to culture is attention to meaning systems, and there are many legitimate ways to focus attention on meaning. Although I believe there remains a lack of consensus in the field on what culture is, and what exactly it does (Patterson 2014; Sewell 1999), I believe there are also important discoveries and observations being made, that can be useful in explaining the emergence of social practices, in order to answer questions like, why do preppers do what they do? My reason for wanting this question answered is more than mere curiosity, but a conviction that what people do in reference to their perceptions of risk—environmental risk especially—has important political implications for how we systematically respond to unprecedented socio-environmental problem of global scale. An understanding of how people make sense of their circumstances, and the cultural tools (to rely on a hard-to-quit metaphor from Ann Swidler (Swidler 1986)) that they turn to in times of distress can illuminate both the challenges and possibilities of as of yet unrealized social responses to collective problems.

Key cultural concepts I make use of include Bourdieu's theory of practice, which, although not articulated as a theory of culture explicitly, does important cultural work in calling attention to the dynamic if not somewhat unyielding relationship between what Bourdieu calls "objective" social structures, and "subjective" agentic practice (Bourdieu 1977), William Sewell Jr.'s modification of Bourdieu's theory of practice (in conversation with Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration), and cognitive-cultural models from within sociology (Cerulo 2002, 2006; DiMaggio 1997; Pitts-Taylor 2014; Vaisey 2009; Zerubavel 1997) and from without (Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, and Braman 2011). I find particularly useful Matt Norton's (Norton 2019) attempt to synthesize cognitive and systemic theories of culture by calling attention to the mobility of meaning as social action is motivated by the relationships between actors and their social environments. My intervention here has to do with emotion, which I find gets underwritten in most accounts that take culture to be sufficiently explanatory (Norgaard (2011) and Gould (2009) are key exceptions).

The concept of schemas serves an important linking concept between cognitive, systemic and affective elements of culture if we recognize them as are more than simply cognitive, which Mustafa Emirbayer & Ann Mische do: "Schemas are corporeal and affective as well as cognitive patterns; they consist in the interpenetration of mental categories, embodied practices, and social organization" (1998:975). A reading of schemas that incorporate affective as well as cognitive readings of cultural codes offers the opportunity to render explicit the importance of emotions in shaping social structure via reflexive interaction between bodies, cultural interpretations, material transformations, and contingency.

Sociologist Karen Cerulo argues that Americans especially are culturally predisposed to focus on best-case scenarios due to the sociocultural phenomena of positive asymmetry, in which the “best characteristics and potentials of people, places, objects and events” are foregrounded in the cultural arena (2006:6); this can result in minimizing or ignoring risk, even when available information points to high likelihood of worst-case outcomes occurring. I find that Cerulo underrates the importance of emotion in generating the tendency towards positive asymmetry, but this is understandable given her reliance on an outdated model of emotion which pits affect and cognition in opposition to each other. Simultaneous to the cultural turn of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, an affective turn was underway, which revolutionized the study of emotion across the social and physical sciences. The result is a far more dynamic, understanding of the relationship between cognition, emotion, reason and action, that sees emotion as a driving force of human behavior, not a somewhat shameful vestige of our evolutionarily obsolete lizard brains (Feldman Barrett 2017; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Jasper 1997).

Despite this shortcoming to her cognitive focus, I find that Cerulo’s theory of positive asymmetry quite interesting for two reasons. First, it highlights how dominant cultural practices and discourse shape perceptions of risk. Secondly, it positions prepping as a puzzle. If Americans by and large tend towards positive asymmetry, which involves minimizing perception of risk, at times with catastrophic consequences (Cerulo gives the example of failing to anticipate the explosion of the Challenger, or the events of 9/11, despite, in both instances, copious amounts of evidence that pointed to the likelihood of disaster). Yet preppers are aware of and concerned about risk, even to the point of fixation. Why?

There are many possible responses to risk, including denial (Jacques 2006; Norgaard 2011; Zerubavel 2006), minimization (Cerulo 2006) or a range of individual responses, such as consumer action (MacKendrick 2018; Szasz 2007, 2011) or collective action (Brulle 2000; Gould 2009; Jasper 1997) . Benjamin’s opening concern with an earthquake, and the official response from his daughter’s school, could be dealt with in many ways. Benjamin could have followed the FEMA recommendation to store three-days’ worth of food and water and left it at that. He could have written an angry op ed to the local paper, demanding that the school board take on the project of ensuring local schools come up with plans for an earthquake. He could have banded together with other concerned parents and advocated for new laws requiring school buildings to be seismically retrofitted. But Benjamin did none of these things (at least not that he reported to me during our interview). He did work to get his daughter’s school to adopt an earthquake plan, and he also reached out to his immediate neighbors. But as he explained, over the course of a two-hour interview, his main focus was on preparing himself and his household to survive not only an initial earthquake, but the collapse of society that he thought likely to follow. Why?

The answer to this question is what makes prepping such an important practice to study in relation to contemporary environmental politics. A major part of Benjamin’s response to risk involves anticipating the types of disasters that might occur (things like earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, fire, bands of murderous, power crazy people, etc.) as well as thinking through how he will meet his bodily needs (and those of his family) in the event of infrastructure collapse. Disaster scenarios—stories that preppers tell about disasters that might happen, and how they would respond—are one of the main cultural

practices of prepping. The stories that preppers tell about disasters inform the material actions they take—acts like stockpiling food and water, emergency supplies, guns, and ammunition. Preppers also acquire skills that will help them in both a short-term disaster (learning how to communicate on HAMM radio for example) and a long-term collapse (learning how plant, gather, forage, or hunt for food, learning how to preserve and prepare food, and building rainwater catchment and storage devices, small-scale non-fossil fueled power generators).

I situate prepping as an environmental practice because both anticipating disaster and anticipating response to disaster involve thinking through their relationship to the environment. Benjamin opens our conversation about prepping with the story about his daughter's school not having an earthquake plan. He sees this event as the origin point of his process of becoming a prepper. In this exchange, Benjamin is not explicitly talking about the environment, at least not in terms that we generally associate with environmentalism. He's not concerned about polar bears or saving wilderness areas. But environmental themes are consistently present in his story, and those of other preppers. It shows up as the source of risk to human life and social stability, and it is also the source of survival—access to food, water, shelter and basic goods that humans need to survive. Environmental risk calls into stark relief the vulnerability of his material body, embedded in a cultural system that produces unprecedented levels of risk. His feelings about risk and dependence send an important signal to him that something's not right. Industrial modernity, with its complex supply chains and bureaucratic systems of organization, long framed as a source of protection, wellbeing and human longevity, are called into question, and seen, rather than a benefit, as an additional source of risk. The disconnect

between cultural ideals of modernity—reflected back to him by his friends and family, who are seemingly content to outsource earthquake planning to institutions like FEMA or the school district—and Benjamin’s embodied experience of risk, which grows stronger as he gains more knowledge about the conditions he and his family are in, are a source of discomfort that Benjamin must figure out how to manage.

How do people living in times of unprecedented risk—environmental, social, and economic, make sense of their circumstances? Of course, risk has always been a part of the human condition—indeed, some argue that modernity has minimized many historic risks humans have faced, and that life is better than ever (Pinker 2018). Medical discoveries like the germ theory of disease, and the invention of antibiotics minimize the risk of contracting some diseases or dying from infections, sewage systems whisk disease spreading waste out of sight, out of mind, and out of exposure pathways. Buildings and fossil fueled heating and cooling systems allow for precise thermoregulation of human bodies, protecting us from the vagaries of weather and the elements, for those who have access to them. All these things increasingly shape the modern human condition, it is true<sup>3</sup>.

But even as old risks become things of the past, new risks appeared in the boom of global industrialization that followed World War II, that past humans never had to contend with, and indeed, scarcely could have imagined. Widespread toxicity and pollution of watersheds, soil and air, such that chemicals, pesticides, persistent organic pollutants, hormones, and all sorts of compounds that didn’t exist a century ago now mix

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<sup>3</sup> Recognizing that access to modern infrastructure varies widely around the world, based on socio-economic status

in untested quantities and combinations in the things we eat, drink, touch, and indeed, our own bodies (MacKendrick 2018). Toxicity is not uniformly distributed, but disproportionately affects poor and racially marginalized communities (Bullard 2000; MacKendrick 2018; Pulido 2016; Taylor 2014b). Transnational pollution means that the flow of pollutants is no longer limited to a single locale and can have unintended consequences on even remote Earth systems, such as the burning of a hole in the atmospheric ozone layer. Many of the chemicals responsible for unintended environmental and public health problems, like DDT, chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and persistent organic compounds (POCs) were produced in attempts to solve other pressing human problems; for example DDT was widely used with the goal of eliminating malaria in Africa (Haas 2001). Rapid, and often unregulated proliferation of pollutants is one of many contributing factors to loss of biodiversity, as scientists document the current rate of species loss as a sixth mass extinction event (Barnosky et al. 2011). A rapidly changing climate due to excess human emissions of greenhouse gasses (GHGs) is further disrupting ecological systems humans rely on, not only threatening resource bases, but producing an unprecedented magnitude of disasters such as storms, fires, floods, droughts, and mudslides. The ongoing, persistent accumulation of risks is compounded by the constant threat of complete annihilation by nuclear attack that has been with us less than a century, but which has already profoundly shaped the landscape of risk.

Those who proclaim the modern era the safest era in human history, such as cognitive psychology Steven Pinker, are unabashed modernists, convinced that modern industrial progress makes us safer, happier, and freer than humans before us ever were (Pinker 2018) and determined to show it through the seemingly objective use of statistics.

But risk, as cultural theorists have long known, is not a numbers game, but a perceptual experience (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). And despite institutional efforts to maintain belief in modernity—what environmental theorists call the dominant standard paradigm, (Dunlap and Liere 1984)—modern risk acts as a specter to all the seeming gains bought by industrialization. In *risk society*, the success of industrialization in efficiently meeting human need is overtaken by the risks these same processes generate (Beck 1992, 2008; Cable, Shriver, and Mix 2008). Risk, Beck points out, is not the same as disaster—risk is the perception of what might happen, not what is actually happening. And living under the shadow of risks that could wipe out life as we know it requires new cultural strategies, once that risk can no longer be ignored. Prepping is one such strategy.

Benjamin and Rawles may not use the language of social scientists, but they are acutely aware of risk society as a condition of modern life. Having overcome the American tendency towards positive asymmetry, Benjamin does not stop with the problem of an earthquake affecting his daughters school; he begins instead to perceive risk all around him. What Beck (1992) refers to as his “risk position” puts him in a position of awareness not just of risk, but of the social, political, and economic dynamics that produce it, at his expense. A key factor that shape his risk position is trust in the institutions in which he is embedded. Like many Americans,<sup>4</sup> he is distrustful of the

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<sup>4</sup> In October 2019 Gallup reported that a near-record-high of 34% of Americans listed poor government leadership as the top problem faced in U.S. today. Another Gallup poll in January 2019 reported that American trust in the federal government’s ability to handle problems was at its lowest point in more than two decades. Only 35% of Americans reported “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of trust and confidence, while 43% reported “not very much” and 20% reported “none at all” (Gallup News Service 2019; see also Mettler 2018)

institutions that he depends on, not by choice, but by way of the social structures he is embedded in.

The story Benjamin tells about the spiral of events that might follow an earthquake—the event itself unfolds into the collapse of the modern United States, Roman Empire style—serves as a cultural strategy for alleviating some of Benjamin’s distress about risk and dependence. But telling the story alone is not enough. The story serves to distinguish Benjamin from his friends and family, the cultural rubes who are perfectly content to remain ignorant, and not know what he now knows. It sets up a plotline in which Benjamin is transformed from just another ignorant rube, into a reluctant, but potential hero, who turns knowledge into power by paying attention, seeking out the skills, knowledge and supplies necessary to survive “just about anything”, and prepares to survive the collapse. Preppers use scenarios like the one above as a method for working through feelings and ideas about the state of modernity and resituating themselves in relation to its structures and processes. But the story itself is just the starting point. The significance of the story, why it matters who is the hero, the villain, the victim, or the threat, is that the story informs practices, and practices have real political and environmental outcomes.

I call the story Benjamin tells the TEOTWAWKI narrative arc. TEOTWAWKI is preppers’ word for an important prepper concept: The End of the World As We Know It. TEOTWAWKI is the story not only of prepper fears, but also of their hope and anticipation for a new relationship to society. The story starts with a natural or a human-caused disaster, like an earthquake, a storm, a flood, a nuclear attack, or a political coup. Emergency services and government agencies like FEMA are underprepared and

overburdened, and so the help we have been led to believe will show up does not manifest. Americans who suffer from over-reliance on systems of distribution of basic supplies like food, water, fuel, and energy find themselves unable to meet their basic needs; they panic, they are armed, and they turn on each other.

Preppers, who have had the foresight to prepare, are at particular risk if panicking, marauding hordes know of their supplies. Preppers must not only be prepared for disaster, but to defend themselves and their stores of goods from people—including their neighbors—who are now acting outside of the realm of civilized morality. Benjamin’s version of the TEOTWAWKI narrative arc is one of many I sat through in interviews, events, and read in blogs, forums, emails, and message boards online. It is the core of the prepper story about why prepping is the most culturally logical practice they could adopt given the risks they face as modern citizens, and it begins and ends with the ability to access the environmental goods and services necessary for human survival, and the inability to trust both institutions and other individuals.

The meeting of bodily needs in industrialized, “developed” modern societies, is built into the social environment, what anthropologists and archaeologists might call systems of “material culture”<sup>5</sup>, and rendered invisible. This is all well and good, until the “Shit Hits the Fan” (SHTF), a graphic American euphemism that has been adopted as a sort of mantra by preppers. The phrases’ utility is in its lack of specificity; the shit could

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<sup>5</sup> Material culture is a complex social scientific concept that carries the weight of its history with it. See Hicks (2010) for a detailed discussion of this history. One important piece of this history is the problem of separating out cultures that do not have some material basis and materials that are not interpreted through a cultural filter. For the purposes of this analysis, I use the concept of material culture to identify the ways social habits, practices, and ideals become embedded in objects, bodies, infrastructure, setting, landscape, and other features that happen outside the minds of human beings (the mind itself being a form of material culture). I do this to make a case for the significance of the intersections of culture and materiality, not to reduce them to separate spheres.

hit the fan for a variety of reasons, all of which preppers must be prepared to respond to. The SHTF could be an economic collapse or the aliens coming. More likely, most acknowledge, it will be a major earthquake or storm that overwhelms the infrastructure of the region it hits, destroying roads and therefore disrupting transportation and the distribution of goods and services that modern humans depend on to stay alive.

It is in these storms, earthquakes, fires, floods, and tsunamis that we find environmental concern, hidden in plain sight, but beyond the limited framing of conventional environmentalist narratives. Preppers may or may not report environmental concern if asked, but they rarely do so in ways that would register on the measurements devised by social scientists seeking to assess the state of Americans' concern over climate change, or their likelihood to recycle. Preppers do not generally identify as environmentalists, but they are very aware of their precarious relationship to the environment, which is mediated by institutions like the agricultural industry, federal regulations, state and county governments, public utilities, and the mix of public and private organizations that manage national electric grids. The environment—and all the ways environmental disasters could devastate their lives, is rarely articulated as an interest or concern, but it is an ever-present shadow that drives the scenarios preppers anticipate and plan for. The ways people relate to what I call here “the environment” is shaped by cultural constructs—narratives that are familiar, accessible, and organized in ways that align with cognitive schema that are shaped over time by socialization into a given society (Bell 1994; Burningham and Cooper 1999; Di Chiro 1996; Cronon 1995; Fine 1997; Greider and Garkovich 1994; Hannigan 1995). People think about the environment differently based on their structural location, their position in relation to the

dominant institutions, hierarchies and social norms of their times, places, and communities. In today's complex, diverse societies, people may also share a time and place, but be members of communities that see the world in vastly different ways; physical communities may contain many different "thought-communities", groups of people whose common social location expose them to common sets of cultural knowledge.

Preppers represent a thought-community, who perceive and respond to risk in patterned ways. Their cultural worldviews and agendas inform the risks that catch their attention, and the risks that they write-off as overblown, or unlikely. Cultural concepts that make sense to them shape the way they organize information, respond to circumstances, and plan for future. Cerulo (2006) links thought-communities to the concept of habitus, a shared set of dispositions, ideas, beliefs, values, and practices that shape the way individuals move through social life. "Different social sectors render different cultural knowledge, thus producing different habitus in the minds of a sector's members. Considered this way, one might say that in acquiring a habitus, individuals come to join "thought communities"; they enter spaces of shared meaning, spheres of interpersonal understanding that are tied to their social locations" (10).

The way people make sense of risk is not objective but informed by a specialized view of the world. For preppers, it is a view of the world from within the belly of the beast of modernity. From this vantage point—one of relative comfort, but high costs—an earthquake is rarely just an earthquake, and in the scenarios that they mull over, the shit hitting the fan refers to more than a single, contained catastrophe. The trigger event is merely the first of the shits to hit the fan, causing a disruption in access to the taken-for-

granted services noted above that then generates a cascading series of crises which quickly overwhelm the capacity of an already over-taxed system of need-meeting institutions. As access to goods and services evaporate due to an initial disruption, preppers anticipate that major social disaster will follow, as people panic, and turn to struggle, conflict and violence in an attempt to stay alive. The SHTF can easily turn from a minor disaster to a major one, or TEOTWAWKI, the end of the world as we know it (discussed in the introduction). Being prepared—by storing food, water, emergency supplies, fuel, guns, and ammunition, and knowing how to use them, is an antidote to the violent scenarios that preppers imagine will unfold when this happens.

Despite the prevalence of environmental themes in his story, Benjamin did not explicitly mention any environmental concerns during a conversation that lasted more than two hours. Towards the end, I asked him if he was concerned about the state of the environment. He responded outright that he “didn’t care about the environment”. He then however went on to recite a litany of environmental problems and the ways in which he was prepared to respond to the consequences of them, including climate change, increasing frequency and severity of storms, drought, oil spills, ocean acidification, radioactivity from Fukushima, mercury in fish, arsenic in chicken, general toxicity of food, and the potential for a near future ice age. This did not sound like someone who “didn’t care” about the state of the environment or was unaware of its importance to his own quality of life. I pressed him on this in the following exchange:

Allison: I mean, it sounds like you have done a fair amount of research about the conditions of the environment. Why would you do that if you don’t care?

Benjamin: [Long pause] [sighs] I do care, but up to a point. It's just too hard. To care anymore. 'Cause I know that there's no point in fixing this. The only way to fix this is exactly what's happening.

In short, he reported, "I think that we're too late".

Too late for what? Too late to prevent disaster, crisis, and a system out of the reach of middle-class citizens to effect, even as they are positioned in a state of entrenched dependence. Convinced that the system is too far gone to change, preppers set their sights on a seemingly more realistic goal: survive the impending collapse. Doing so means untangling themselves from their state of dependence with as much of their sense of self, dignity, and cultural values intact as possible. By being prepared, preppers challenge their sense of being dependent on others. Prepping inverts the current situation of dependence and puts the prepper in the potential position of being the rescuer, a much more active position.

Americans generally believe that they alone are responsible for their life accomplishments. The downside to this high sense of self-efficacy is that they tend to blame individuals (themselves included) for their failures to accomplish. Belief that individual outcomes are the result of individual effort is a defining feature of the well-documented quality of American individualism (Bellah et al. 1996; Lareau 2002:7; Tocqueville 2003 [1835/1840]). By minimizing the role that circumstances external to the individual play in defining an individual's life chances, Americans tend to underestimate the effects on social-structural conditions like race, class, gender, sexuality, or nationality on a person's outcomes, as well as downplaying the ways that outcomes are weighed according to cultural systems that influence what people want, how they go about achieving it, and what they consider a successful outcome (Lareau 2002). Yet both social

location—someone’s position in relation to hierarchical systems that unequally distribute status, resources and power—and cultural worldviews—systems of meaning, thought, beliefs and values that inform how people interpret and make sense of the world around them—influence individual outcomes and experiences. Preppers are a product of their societies, and as such, their responses to changing conditions of risk, are informed by both their social locations and their cultural worldviews.

In this dissertation, I consider how culture, material circumstances, and historical-structural contexts cohere to form the cultural logic of prepping, an act that many outside the thought-community deem to be “crazy” or illogical, but that to preppers, is the most logical undertaking in the world. To make sense of this cultural logic, we must enter their social world, where risk is taken seriously, dependence is an unfortunate, but material reality, and the institutions they are set up to depend on can’t be trusted. These are the circumstances that preppers know, and knowledge shapes practice. Preppers know that they are dependent on untrustworthy institutions. And they know that this puts them at risk. They also know that individuals alone are responsible for their life chances, and their outcomes. And they know that the deck is stacked against them. To get out of this mess, they have to take action, to do something, to avoid, at all costs, being a victim, a passive, dependent sitting duck, waiting to be picked off by the bad guys who will inevitably materialize. These sets of cultural knowledge, about risk, dependence, institutions, and individualism, combine to reveal a fairly narrow path: being prepared by preparing for emergencies, and developing a practice outside of the confines of modern life oriented towards self-sufficiency.

## **Who preps?**

My observations of preppers suggest that prepping culture is dominated by whites, heterosexual middle-class American men. During the largest prepper event I attended, an exposition in a large city in Oregon, I estimated that less than 5% of the participants were people of color. I did not observe any people of color presenting talks or taking on a leadership role. Oregon is a particularly white state, with an 85% white population, so this is still lower than the general population. Most of the thought-leaders of the prepping movement are conservative, white men. These are the people who write the books, blogs, and podcasts that are most widely read and cited amongst the community; the ideas they present, and the language they use circulates widely. The confluence between digital and in person communication struck me one day while I was coding an interview. The speaker, Max, was discussing his fear that a disaster would destroy the US electric grid, which would not be easy to repair. “it will be many months, if not many years, before the grid is restored because the components ... are no longer manufactured in the United States. They have to be built to order overseas.” Soon after I switched to coding an unrelated document, which led me to an online video titled “Urban Danger”, urging preppers to leave the city and relocate to rural country. A speaker in the video made the same argument as Max, using almost exactly the same language.

Not all preppers are conservative; about half of the people I interviewed did not identify as politically conservative, at least not explicitly. But the political discourse of conservatism was centered in most prepper spaces. Speakers, club leaders, and those that I interviewed made very clear that conservatism was the default political views assumed to be held by their audience. One of the most popular speakers at the expo I mentioned

made this very clear, when talking about some of the benefits he saw in the collapse of society: “You may not all be conservatives, he qualifies, but “most of us are...we feel like a minority here especially...public schools creating more and more liberals...but the meltdown will allow people to move East where there is a majority of conservatives.”

The qualities I observed about preppers align with the demographics of conservative politics. Most preppers are situated in positions of moderate to high social status and privilege; conservatives are more likely to be white (9 in 10 republicans are white) and the GOP has a notable gender gap in leadership representation, with men over-represented.

When I say that prepping is dominated by conservative white men, I am not only talking about demographics. As important as demographics are the ideals that they put forward, against which all preppers are measured. All of these are associated with gendered and racialized status. The ideal prepper has the following qualities:

He is...(preppers generally adopt a default masculine generic third person)

- Rational; able to plan ahead, assess danger logically, remain calm in an emergency, avoiding excessive emotionality
- Active, rather than passive
- Responsible for a nuclear heteronormative family in both provisioning and protection
- A land-owner, able to procure and protect a fixed property that ensures his continued access to necessary resources (clean, running water, good quality air, and space to grow, process and store food)
- Able-bodied and skilled, capable of performing necessary household/property management labor

All these qualities are placed in opposition with qualities associated with “the unprepared”—a homogenous, undifferentiated group of people that preppers refer to in various, coded ways.

If preppers are rational, the unprepared are hysterical, excessively driven by emotion, especially panic, and prone to reactivity, rather than thoughtfully planned action. If preppers are active, the unprepared are passive, sitting around waiting for the government (or their prepper neighbors) to come rescue them from a disaster. If preppers are responsible for themselves and their families, the unprepared are not, and will pose a danger to those who have prudently saved up supplies. The unprepared represent both the victims, and the threat—having assumed that FEMA or other emergency services will rescue them, they become the threat who will compose the crowds of marauding hordes that pour out of urban areas, creating the social chaos preppers fear, which will turn a physical disaster into a social collapse.

### **Why Study Prepping?**

There’s very little sociological research on preppers. Richard Mitchell studied survivalism, a movement from which today’s prepping builds, although survivalism never entered the , in Oregon in the 1980s and theorized that they adopted survivalism as a creative response to rationalization – modern realignment of civilization towards industrialization, bureaucracy, logical planning, structured management and measured calculation on all fronts. (Weber, Mitchell:6) For the survivalists Mitchell studied, survivalism was a creative practice that served to counter the disenchantment they felt with modern life. Mitchell’s account is interesting, and I found some overlap between the group he studied, and modern prepping, which has been influenced by some of the same

narratives, and even the same people who created and enacted survivalism. But much has also changed, most notably, the growing reach of the internet, and the unprecedented access to cheap, fast communications technologies that link people and communities around the world in new ways. Mitchell offers some insights into why survivalists turned to survivalism, but he does not seem to have been interested in situating survivalism into a broader social context, let alone one related to environmental politics. This is where our studies diverge.

Why do preppers prep? And what can their practices tell us about the emergence of environmental practices suited to a changing environment? What are the implications of wide-spread (and seemingly growing) public interest in prepping for environmental politics? My research shows that in order to understand the development of environmental practices, we must consider the cultural, structural, and emotional contexts of people's everyday lifeworlds. Prepping allows insight into the formation of environmental practices outside of environmentalist discourse, which has its own cultural history, is not universally relatable. Feminist theorists have long argued that groups maintain distinctive sets of social practices that develop out of their common histories in relation to hierarchical structures (Acker 1992a; Collins 1989, 1997, 2009; Hekman 1997; Johnson 2014; Lorde 1987). Contemporary work on cultural cognition (Kahan 2012; Kahan, Wittlin, et al. 2012) confirms what Black Feminist theorists have been saying for decades, if not centuries: what one thinks and what one does are inextricably linked to the matter of belonging to a group (Collins 2009).

By analyzing both the how of prepping—the things preppers actually do, the tasks they prioritize and the habits they try to break—and the why—the stories they tell about

why those actions are necessary and good—we can begin to understand the formation of environmental practices in the context of group based histories embedded in some of the most significant historical structures that inform contemporary American politics. One of sociology’s key contributions is the documentation of structural elements that bind and constrain, but also enable and guide people’s individual actions. Another one of sociology’s key findings is that these structures are human-made, and thus fungible. Structure and agency are reflexive, which is to say that the macro composes the micro which composes the macro (Bourdieu 1977; Sewell 1992). Clearly, environmental sociologists find it significant to try to understand individuals’ attitudes, values, and beliefs about the environment; decades worth of attention has been focused on searching for the emergence of a “new environmental paradigm” (Catton and Dunlap 1978; Dunlap et al. 2000; Dunlap and VanLiere 1978; Hawcroft and Milfont 2010; Saphores, Ogunseitan, and Shapiro 2012). Yet much less has been done to understand the interconnections between these units of culture and the social and historical contexts that produce them. Kari Norgaard’s work illustrates the potential of ethnographic studies to reveal under-theorized dimensions of environmental response and practices (Norgaard 2011) and this study builds on her recognition of the role of emotions in socio-environmental relations.

Norgaard studied Norwegian villagers who knew about, and cared about climate change, but still failed to act to mitigate its generation. Her insights into the construction of socially produced denial show how even well intentioned, environmentally-inclined individuals can work actively to minimize risk, and justify holding to what Allan Johnson calls “paths of least resistance” (Johnson 2014). I take a different approach, by

considering how members of a sub-culture that are not explicitly interested in or concerned about climate change make sense of environmental risk more broadly. Early on in my observations of prepping culture, I noticed that preppers regularly talked about and prepared for what I call “the constituent elements of climate change”, even though they rarely used the language of climate change familiar to scientists, environmentalists and policy specialists. From my cultural perspective, climate change was written all over the act of prepping, even as preppers rarely referred to it, until I asked them about it explicitly. Then, they revealed complex thoughts and feelings about the matter, all of which informed their choice to spend their time, resources, and energy prepping.

Although I ask why preppers prep broadly interested in their own understanding of the culture, I am especially interested in how prepping relates to climate change, an issue that has been particularly polarizing in the United States, leading to a confusing politicized cultural mess that individuals must navigate. Surveys show that most Americans understand that climate change is real and human-caused (Leiserowitz et al. 2016). But we know very little about how people make sense of this in everyday life. Prepping is a case of individuals responding to environmental risk, whether or not they explicitly express concern about it. Prepping is a case that offers an opportunity for in-depth, ethnographic exploration of how people who do not necessarily identify as environmentalists, respond to and deal with environmental risk. These findings then have implications for an environmental politics that accounts for a variety of cultural worldviews embedded in the historical legacies of neoliberal capitalism, colonialism, racialized structures of white supremacy, and heteronormative patriarchy—a legacy environmentalists have long struggled to grapple with (Bacon 2019; Chapin 2004; Di

Chiro 1996; Cronon 1995; Norgaard 2019b; Park and Pellow 2011; Pellow 2016; Plumwood 1993, 2002; Pulido 2015, 1996; Taylor 1997, 2014a).

Environmental discourse is often apocalyptic, focusing on the enormity of environmental problems, without much hope for solution. Although advocacy groups hope that urgent, negative messaging will spur people to action, excessive reliance on fear-inducing bad news can in fact be debilitating, and one-way messaging can be tone-deaf to people's actual feelings and concerns (Brulle 2010; Hulme 2008; Janis and Feshbach 1953). Environmentalist discourse is also generally associated with progressive liberal politics in the United States; recent polling tells us that most Americans identify as conservative or moderate; although liberals are gaining ground, environmentalist discourse might not be accessible to many people based on political identity. But that doesn't mean they are not aware of environmental problems. In this case, Benjamin feels so overwhelmed with the bad news that he has given up on communal, public processes to solve these problems. Prepping is a solution that allows him to actively participate in alleviating his own stress, while reinforcing his gendered sense that he must take care of himself and his family no matter what happens. Prepping reinforces (rather than challenges) his belief in individual responsibility.

Hochschild's classic work on emotion management shows how individuals "work" their emotions to interact with cultural and structural constraints, to reconcile felt states with social expectations (Hochschild 1983, Turner & Stets 2005, Evans and Moore 2015). Hochschild's classic flight attendant subjects were on the job and constrained by economic necessity. However, preppers occupy social positions of moderate privilege that may allow them to change their practices in response to their emotions, rather than

forcing them to modify their emotions. Prepping is a culturally appropriate response to feelings of vulnerability that reinforce feelings of competence and control—central to masculinity, whiteness, and middle-class identities.

Emotions aren't just something to be dealt with or managed but serve as information and impetus for change. Deborah Gould's work on AIDS activists emotional response to institutional neglect shows how emotional states may signal when things are awry and create stress or unease that propels action to alleviate discomfort (Gould 2009:26-27), as Benjamin reports. Her work on emotional habitus shows that emotions, which are mapped onto cultural features as affective symbols, cue embodied emotional responses that can result in changing practices.

Self-sufficiency, individual responsibility, and thus the need to be prepared for all occasions emerge as the culturally logical response to risk that is generated by institutions that preppers distrust, but preppers, who occupy relatively privileged social statuses in intersecting hierarchical systems, also benefit in real ways from the structural status-quo. They carry this privilege into the cultural sphere of prepping, which has many hallmarks of what George Lipsitz calls "the white spatial imaginary", which "idealizes "pure" and homogenous spaces, controlled environments and predictable patterns of design and behavior. It seeks to hide social problems rather than solve them..." (Lipsitz 2007)

Being individually prepared requires resources—despite preppers' insistence that anyone can prepare, the bar for being truly "prepared" is high and costly, and ever shifting. Most preppers are privileged in ways that offer real material benefits—men earn more money than women, whites hold the majority of the nation's wealth, and property owners own land that is considered theirs thanks to the legitimacy of the settler-colonial

state's violent attempted extirpation of Native Americans. While preppers see themselves as independent, autonomous, and individualistic, their commitment to individualism is made possible by the erasure of structural differences that produce disparate life chances for people in varied social locations. Their commitment to individualism is made possible by the prominence of abstract liberalism, a key element to Bonilla-Silva's theory of color-blind racism. Abstract liberalism is a political philosophy that espouses equality for all while producing outcomes that favor white, property-owning, men. Individualism is one of the four key components of abstract liberalism that undergird dominant hierarchies by rendering them invisible.

Preppers are judgmental of "the unprepared", even as they insist that they are not racist, or uncaring. But there is a racial, classed element to the trope of the unprepared. The unprepared are more likely to be those on the margins. We know there are lots of people who are struggling to deal with disasters as they happen, or disasters that have already happened but have a long recovery time. Not because they are irresponsible, but because they are set up structurally to have less to start with. By ignoring structural imbalances that produce unequal opportunities and blaming (and sometimes shaming) the unprepared for their lack of preparedness, preppers invoke the privilege of turning away, focusing their attention not on the problems to be solved, but on the ways to personally weather the storm. In doing so, they reiterate and reinforce their commitment to individualism, self-sufficiency, and a limited sphere of personal responsibility that does not extend outward into the political.

## Overview of Chapters

To understand why preppers prep, and how their cultural practices shift in response to socio-environmental risk, I examine four key aspects of prepping. Following a discussion of methods and data analysis in Chapter II, I share the results of my multi-cited ethnographic study. In Chapter III, I describe the central stories that preppers tell about risk, disaster, and dependence, focused on the belief that disaster is immanent, and nobody is coming to help when it happens. I discuss what I call the double bind between dependence and distrust, considering preppers' "risk position" within "risk society" (Beck 1992) in the context of the material flows of everyday life (Schlosberg 2019; Schlosberg and Coles 2015) of neoliberal capitalism.

In Chapter IV, I apply theories of practice (Bourdieu 1977; Hargreaves 2011; Kasper 2009; Sewell 1992; Shove and Walker 2014) to the questions of why and how preppers reorient away from taken-for-granted, habitual practices by producing micro-changes in their ecological habitus (Ford 2019; Haluza-DeLay and Berezan 2013; Kasper 2009), showing that social location and narrative identity interact with structural and environmental circumstances to produce contextualized practices. I show how preppers make sense of what I call the environmental field by working to transpose their ecological habitus to changing conditions, relying on resources and cultural schema, or capital in the form of privilege vested to people allocated differential amounts of cultural and material resources within hierarchical social structures, including heteronormative patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and settler colonialism. By relying on the discursive trope in which they distinguish themselves from "most people" preppers do cultural work to reveal their grievances with risk society, while salvaging elements of

their ecological habitus that they wish to transpose onto new circumstances of risk awareness. I show how structure, culture, emotions, and material factors cohere to produce sets of environmental practices that make sense within their socio-cultural environmental contexts, even as they defy the predicted environmental behaviors that social scientists hope to predict.

In Chapter V, I argue that ideas about nature and rurality play a central role in prepping, explored through the story of the marauding hordes, a discourse of danger that builds on racialized, colonial hierarchies (even as preppers reject the language of race) and provides a showcase for the moral code of masculine protection (Carlson 2015; Young 2003). This discursive practice builds on *claims to superiority* that bolster an eroding sense of social status and self-worth associated with hegemonic whiteness, masculinity, and American nationalist sentiments, all of which preppers perceive are under attack.

Lastly, in Chapter VI I examine the role of emotions in generating prepping as a practice, and show that even though preppers deny feelings of fear, and make regular claims of rationality, prepping serves as a form of emotional management (Hochschild 1983) that allows them to act upon discomfort and concern about risk without threatening the constituent elements of their sense of narrative identity (Somers 1994). Prepping is identity confirming, allowing preppers to see themselves as the rational, autonomous, self-controlled individuals that intersecting structural systems have vested with value, while distancing themselves from “most people” and institutions who they blame for putting them in danger. Preppers adopt four main emotion management strategies that I document, including denial of fear and emotionality, deflection of attention away from

the centrality of emotions or emotive speech, projection of dangerous or uncomfortable emotions onto others, including individuals and institutions, and lastly, sublimation of difficult emotions, which are channeled into productive, embodied, pleasurable and identify confirming activities. In this way, preppers navigate risk and danger without giving in to fear.

Throughout these chapters, I consider the ways that material environmental practices are shaped by culture, structural location, and emotion. Cultural theory in sociology offers many useful concepts that help to make sense of the cultural strategies that preppers adopt. But many of these tools focus almost exclusively on the realm of the cognitive. This is an important component of any developing cultural practice, and cognitive cultural tools are particularly useful in making sense of the patterned sets of meaning, information, ideologies, and schema that a thought community relies on to develop a shared understanding of the world. What's missing is the impetus to make that meaning, to move against dominant cultural worldviews, to seek out something different. I argue that emotion serves as this missing piece, and that no account of changing cultural practices, or emerging environmental practices can be complete without an understanding of the affective dimensions of social practice. Humans are fundamentally emotional, embodied beings, who rely on their bodies, and their bodily sensations—including the ones that get categorized as emotions—to make sense of information, determine values, desires, risks and dangers, and to align themselves with the ways of knowing and being in the world that feel right. Emotions are central to social life, guiding the often elaborate cultural work people do in order to justify practices or beliefs that don't neatly fit into available cultural logic (see for example Vaisey 2009), thus propelling social change.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **METHODS**

This analysis is based on a multi-sited, extended case ethnographic study, which includes three sources of data: participant observation of events, meetings and classes hosted by preppers based in the Pacific and Inland Northwest from 2014 to 2018; in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 preppers, 1 family member of a prepper, and 2 emergency management professionals; and digital ethnographic observation of prepper web sites including blogs, forums, public email lists, and social media posts. Field work and interview recruitment began in the spring of 2014, and was ongoing, but especially concentrated in two waves, including interviews and participant observation throughout the spring, summer and fall of 2014, in Oregon, and in the spring and summer of 2017 in Oregon and Idaho.

#### **Justification for Selection of Multi-Sited, Extended Case Ethnographic Methods**

The topic of this research study is the relationship between prepping and environmental politics—a relationship that is not derived from the explicitly expressed environmental interest or concern of preppers, but imposed by the researcher with the goal of furthering our collective understanding of the formation of environmental practices, even outside of the current, dominant, professional understanding of what is and is not contained in the category of environment.

Much of the sociological literature on environmental practices extends from survey research on environmental concern, values, attitudes, and knowledge. Survey researchers have been trying to predict the emergence of environmental practices from variables such as environmental concern for decades, under the auspices of analyzing

endorsements to Dunlap and VanLiere's "new ecological paradigm", or persistent commitments to its opposite, the "human exceptionalist paradigm" (Buttel 1987; Dunlap and Liere 1984). As Buttel (1987) points out, these early framings were largely metatheoretical, and did not easily translate into empirical research. Their translation into empiricism has spawned a large, if not somewhat scattered literature of survey research that aims to hone in on the variables that predict adoption of the "new ecological paradigm", a "new world view" that represented to Dunlap and Van Liere "a direct challenge to [the] DSP", the dominant social paradigm of the time (Dunlap and VanLiere 1978). Dunlap and Van Liere base this observation on Pirages and Ehrlich's concept of the DSP, "world view "through which individuals or, collectively, a society interpret the meaning of the external world...[and]...mental image of social reality that guides expectations in a society."" (Pirages and Ehrlich 1974 in Dunlap & Van Liere 1978). As Buttel (1987) points out, less than a decade into environmental sociology's metatheoretical origins, work on NEP had transitioned into "survey research devoted to exploring commitment to the "dominant social paradigm"...and the "new ecological paradigm" among mass publics and segments thereof" (471), work that Buttel categorizes as "normal-science" devoted to "working out... middle-range empirical puzzles" (466). Buttel notes that "environmental sociologists sought nothing less than the reorientation of sociology toward a more holistic perspective that would conceptualize social processes within the context of the biosphere. These lofty intentions, however, have largely failed to come to fruition."

With its individualistic focus, and failure to contextualize variable categories within complex cultural contexts or networks of power (Ford and Norgaard 2020; Kasper

2009; Shove 2010) this line of research has largely failed to produce a coherent, politically useful theory of environmental practices. Although efforts to situate environmental practices in relation to concern (Dunlap and Liere 1984), values (Dietz, Fitzgerald, and Shwom 2005), attitudes (Dunlap et al. 2000), and knowledge (Saphores et al. 2012) have identified some interesting and important patterns in environmental beliefs, attitudes and perceptions, the relationship between these variables and the ultimate adoption of environmental practices remains unproven at best (Blake 1999; Kennedy et al. 2009; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002) and grossly mis-representative of the magnitude of the problem, and the significance of overlooked power dynamics at worst (Ford and Norgaard 2020; Shove 2010). Environmental concern and the emergence of a “new environmental paradigm” have been foundational topics in the sub-discipline of Environmental Sociology (Buttel 1987; Dunlap and Catton 1994; Dunlap and Jones 2002; Dunlap and Liere 1984), and as recently as 2018, environmental concern ranked as the most prevalent topic in a computational text analysis of the discipline’s output between 1990 and 2014 (Bohr and Dunlap 2018). Bohr and Dunlap note that output of literature in this category shows “modest declines” but remains “the most prevalent topic in the corpus” of environmental sociology.

My research questions are related to those posed by Dunlap and Van Liere, and Catton and Dunlap in their early missives on environmental sociology—how do people relate to and make sense of the increasingly hard to ignore rift between the dominant social paradigms of modernity and emerging paradigms that recognize limits, risks, and the costs of those dominant ways of organizing economic, political and social life? We could call these environmental, and indeed I do, although I do not take for granted that

my definition of what is “environmental” is understood or shared by my research subjects, or those outside of my own social network of environmental professionals, political liberals, and others who share a common reference point. Instead, I observe that the development of ideas about what is and isn’t environmental is a cultural process, the development of which is a ripe topic of empirical investigation, instead of a taken-for-granted, researcher driven assumption upon which empirical investigation is built. From this starting point, then, qualitative methods, which are concerned with “the ways that people construct, interpret and give meaning to” experiences (Gerson and Horowitz 2002:200), provide appropriate methodological tools for understanding how people experience, manage, adapt to, or resist changing environmental conditions within the contexts of their everyday lives.

Kari Norgaard’s *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions and Everyday Life* (2011) provides an excellent example of how qualitative, ethnographic methods can uncover important facets of the way people make sense of environmental conditions that may be unintelligible to survey research. On paper, she observes, Norwegians are consummate environmentalists, who report high levels of public awareness about climate change, belief in its human causes, and support for environmental movements (xvi). In practice though, Norwegians carried on with everyday life “as though...[global warming] did not exist” (xvi). Norgaard interrogates the researcher driven assumption that if people only knew more about global warming, they would react in more precautionary modes. This is known as the “knowledge-deficit model”, which situates knowledge as the variable that motivates behavioral change, and assumes that once people have more information, or “better mental models” that they will act in a researcher predicted manner

(Halford and Sheehan 1991:606 quoted in Norgaard 2011:2). Clearly this model did not hold. Norgaard's ethnographic research asks how Norwegians could both know and not act upon the knowledge of climate change, something they themselves were not explicitly aware of, and therefore could not have elucidated in surveys. Norgaard observed that Norwegians participated in a process of "socially organized denial" (Zerubavel 2006) to avoid the emotionally painful knowledge of climate change that illuminated inequality and injustices woven throughout everyday Norwegian life. By both interviewing and observing Norwegian villagers over the course of the year, Norgaard located their response to climate change in both cultural-emotional and political-economic contexts in an analysis that shifted the conversation about why people failed to act on knowledge of, and concern about climate change.

As Norgaard's example shows, ethnographic research offers an important, and under-utilized tool for answering pressing environmental sociological questions about how people make sense of their relationship. Norgaard focused on a case in which most people explicitly recognized their relationship to the environment, but this need not be the case. While researchers (as well as other environmental activists and professionals) have generally conceptualized the environment in relatively narrow terms (Di Chiro 1996; Cole and Foster 2001), limiting the idea of environmental subjectivity to individuals who hold environmentalist beliefs (Agrawal 2005), in fact every person has a relationship to the environment, whether they recognize it or not. If they do not recognize it in environmentalists terms, then they must conceptualize of it in different terms—and it is the task of the ethnographer to make sense, describe, and interpret those terms (Geertz 1973). Sociological uses of ethnography go beyond description, to make generalizable

claims that situate local understandings and practices in the context of the macro-social world and its organizing structures (Porter 2002).

The extended case method “extends out” from the field (Burawoy 1998) in order to situate the particulars of a group’s collective practices in reference to their historical, material, and structural contexts. “The extended case method applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the “micro” to the “macro,” and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory” (ibid 5). This model of ethnography moves beyond documenting the site specific cultural understandings of a neatly bounded community, focusing instead on “empirically following the thread of cultural processes” (Marcus 1998:247) with the intention of “the uncovering of structural relations”, which Porter (2002) calls the “initial purpose of social science” (62). This is to say, that upon entering the field, I was guided by theory driven research questions pertaining not just to the ways preppers experience their own social world, but also pertaining to the interrelations that structure their adoption of prepping as a practice. My approach to ethnography resembles what Sam Porter calls “critical-realist ethnography”, which emerges in response to challenges posed to both positivist/functionalist models of traditional ethnography, in which ethnographers made often grandiose claims from a presumed position of objective social scientific authority; and counter-movements such as phenomenological and post-modern corrections. Central to these methodological debates is the question of how to define the relationship between subjective experience and agency, and structure. Applying this question to the environmental field by seeking to understand how preppers experience, make sense of, and respond to the environmental, historical, and socio-

economic-political circumstances of their time is a central motif in this dissertation. Ethnography as a method is especially well suited to this topic because it allows for qualitative testing of subject matter that is fundamentally conceptual—how people subjectively experience structure informs how they reiterate, reproduce, resist, or create subsequent structures.

Ethnography is particularly good for exhaustive, in depth examination of events, cases, or cultural phenomena for several reason. Ethnography:

- Is limited in scope
- Involves extensive observation of a case
- Allows for more thorough explanation than research that attends to more cases (like surveys)
- Focuses on narrative, justification, themes, and explanation
- Requires the researcher to enter the social world of the research subject, revealing sources and types of data that fall outside of pre-existing researcher-anticipated categories, which might not know to look for otherwise.

Traditionally, ethnography took place in a single site that was relatively clearly bounded by place and social convention. In a globalized capitalist world system, single-site ethnography no longer easily maps onto the connected, networked lifeworld of the modern individual or group. Multi-sited ethnography is a methodological shift that has emerged as an adaptation to these circumstances. As George Marcus observes:

Ethnography moves from its conventional single-site location, contextualized by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the “local” and the “global,” the “lifeworld” and the “system. Resulting ethnographies are therefore both in and out of the world system. (Marcus 1995).

This model suits sociological ethnography, which tends to approach theoretically defined fields, rather than single, clearly bounded social sites (Nadai and Maeder 2005), and is

also especially well-suited for the study of a self-defined collectivity with porous boundaries, such as prepping. Prepping, which is in part defined by its individualist ethos, is hard to delineate as a “community”, although, as I shall document, I saw various examples of community interaction emerge. Preppers form a “thought community” (Cerulo 2006), and, as I shall argue, share a habitus, a concept that situates them within a shared field (Bourdieu 1980). But their community is in many ways defined by their rejection of community, which poses challenges that push the boundaries of traditional ethnographic methods.

For example, participant observation depends on actions that can be participated in and observed. I certainly found plenty of these, but they struck me as not terribly representative of a collective practice located primarily in private, individual households. Participant observation of public events, gatherings, and permanent sites open to the public (such as small businesses that serve preppers) were fruitful sites to observe, but they always felt somewhat removed from the heart of the practice I was seeking, given prepping’s focus on the private realm. These sites proved useful for identifying key actors, interviewees, and informants, who sometimes let me into the private spheres of their social worlds, and sometimes didn’t. Taken alone, participant observation of these sites, and even the interviews that they sometimes generated, would have provided an incomplete picture of the sub-culture of prepping.

To solve this problem, I turn to the online world of prepping, engaging in what Androutosopoulos (2008) calls “blended ethnography”, which considers that in contemporary, electronically networked cultures, people’s lives take place both on and

offline. The emergent field of digital ethnography<sup>6</sup> accounts for the fact that people's everyday lives increasingly include the social space of the internet, and draws from an understanding of the internet not just as an artefact of culture, but as a site of cultural happenings (ibid, see also Hine 2000). As I shall explore in subsequent chapters, my research suggest that preppers, despite their ambivalence about many features of modern life, rely heavily on the internet for information, knowledge and skill development, and community. The internet serves as a discursive space, where the thought-community's cultural narratives, concerns, beliefs, and feeling rules emerge, are performed, negotiated, and delimited by members. The discursive space of prepping includes both online and offline sites, and any participant observation that neglected one or the other would provide only partial insights to this social world. Although I distinguish between the digital and the offline forms of participant observation I conducted, I consider my use of online "log data" (logs of forums, website content, blogs, social media engagement, and emails) to be ethnographic, rather than oriented towards content analysis, which requires a different data collection and methodological approach, and which produces a different set of insights.

### **The Field**

My primary field sites included mid-size urban areas and their outskirts in Oregon and Idaho, but I quickly expanded my research beyond these sites into the digital realm when it became apparent from my field work how central the internet is in producing the social world of prepping. Preppers I spoke with consistently referenced common online

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<sup>6</sup> Also variously called "virtual ethnography", "network ethnography", "cyber ethnography" and "webnography" (Androutsopoulos 2008:1)

sites including blogs, message boards, podcasts and internet radio shows. These sites were not limited to the Northwest, but nationwide, and as I got drawn into them, I began to recognize the physical and the digital as continuous elements of a single social world. When preppers I had interviewed in the Pacific and Inland Northwest suggested contacts for preppers who would be willing to talk with me, I followed the lead, even if these preppers lived outside of my immediate study site. I believe that the frequency with which this occurred is an indication of the centrality of internet communications within prepping culture, and the national spread of prepping that certainly varies in practice by region (given the different types of disasters and local conditions that must be accounted for) but which largely shares a common, national, and occasionally international prepping discourse. While the people I interviewed resided mostly in the Pacific Northwest, they pulled broadly from cultural sources that originated outside of the region, including internet sources and mainstream media, and so I include these, as well as several interviews with people outside the Northwest, in my data.

In addition to spending time with preppers who are prepping individually at the household level, I also conducted participant observation of a Community Emergency Management Training (CERT) in a mid-size city in Oregon and interviewed 2 emergency management professionals associated with municipal emergency planning outreach. I did this after learning from a variety of preppers that individual preppers often participated in these trainings, and after observing a strong presence of official emergency management response agencies (both public and private) at a series of emergency preparedness expositions and fairs. Although I largely focus on prepping as an individual act in this analysis, I occasionally include data collected from my observations of CERT as an

indication of the complex relationship between preppers and the state. This is a rich set of data though, and I do not do it justice in this analysis; the intersection between individual emergency preparedness and official emergency preparedness is a topic worth following up on in full.

## **Interviews**

Early on in the several months I spent in Idaho, I called a real estate agent in a nearby town, who marketed his business to preppers, those looking for off-the-grid locations, and people moving to the region that had been dubbed the “Great American Redoubt” by prepping blogger and thought-leader James Wesley Rawles. I got several rings to the tone of Yankee Doodle Dandy before the realtor picked up. I introduced myself as a student doing research on prepping, and hoping to learn more about the Redoubt, and asked if he’d be willing to be interviewed. He asked me what school I was from, and I responded that I was coming from the University of Oregon but was spending the summer in Idaho. He responded curtly, “that’s great. But the University of Oregon is too liberal for me. I’m gonna have to pass.” I thanked him anyways, and he hung up. The conversation couldn’t have lasted more than a minute. I share this vignette to illustrate the difficulty of gaining access to a population for whom privacy and secrecy is paramount, and who are largely distrustful of institutions, and their affiliates (such as university affiliated researchers such as myself).

Preppers highly value privacy, and, after a wave of media attention, primarily in the form of the National Geographic reality TV show *Doomsday Preppers*, are somewhat wary of outsiders. As I discuss in Chapter 3, many preppers felt that the media typically portrayed them as crazy and irrational, leaving them feeling stigmatized and defensive.

Preppers also worried about other forms of scrutiny and surveillance, such as government observation, and wondered if I really was who I said I was. When I asked to interview Bailey, after spending time with him at a self-sufficiency fair attended by the prepper club we both participated in, he responded with suspicion that I suspect was only partially in jest. My field notes of the interaction read,

I see Bailey; we chat again. This time I ask him if I could interview him for my project. So you're the mole, he says, with a straight face. I joke back that the NSA would be more discrete than I am, I'm just a student. He asks what the project is for and I say my Master's paper. He says he would be willing to talk to me, that he's not as paranoid as some in the group, and I promise to follow up next time I come to town.

Bailey did agree to be interviewed, but as he noted, "paranoia" or generalized suspicion of others was common within prepping culture, and it proved a significant barrier to accessing willing interviewees.

Despite barriers to access, I found interviews to be an important source of data that helped contextualize and triangulate both my observations in person, and my observations of online interactions and discourse. Recruitment involved a multi-tiered strategy that started out targeted, and eventually devolved into interviewing any preppers who would talk to me. Given my discoveries about the blended online/offline nature of the prepping field, and the difficulty in gaining access to the private spaces of a very private sub-culture, this relatively untargeted strategy proved the most appropriate given the circumstances. In addition to the relative reticence of preppers, who I consider a somewhat "hidden population" (Watters and Biernacki 1989), there were barriers to access that came from limited time and resources for travel to and from sites that were often rural and remote, given prepper preferences for off the beaten path, well-hidden

locations. I did travel frequently to different parts of Oregon, and ultimately Idaho, but also had to pass opportunities to do so up when they conflicted with my other obligations as a student, and employee.

Despite these limitations, I rely heavily on my interview data in this dissertation because interviews allow the researcher to directly interrogate subjects about the topic of study with targeted questions that apply to the research question at hand. I conducted interviews with 20 individuals. Seventeen of these were with self-identified preppers. One interview was with someone who I thought was a prepper initially, but who then clarified that he did not identify as a prepper, but that he had grown up with a prepper father. I continued the interview, which offered a unique perspective, but do not draw from it in this analysis. I also conducted two interviews with emergency management professionals who trained and otherwise interacted with preppers in their professional lives, and who carried out prepper practices, even as they did not take on the label of preppers themselves.

Almost all of interviews were conducted as one-on-one conversations, with the exception of one, where I interviewed a couple together. Most interviews took place in person, but four were conducted over the phone due to geographic constraints. For the in-person interviews, interviewees were given a paper copy of an informed consent form, asked to read it, and offered the opportunity to ask any clarifying questions and receive a copy of the signed document. For phone interviews, I either emailed a copy of the consent form, read it to interviewees over the phone, or both, and also offered to send a signed copy via email or physical mail. Verbal and/or email consent was adopted for phone interviews.

## **Recruitment**

Interviews resulted from convenience and snowball sampling; sample size is low due to recruitment challenges. Preppers are in many respects a “hidden population” (Watters and Biernacki 1989); many conceal their practices, or avoid public identification as preppers, they are concerned with surveillance, and many have intentionally chosen to live off-the-grid lifestyles in order to avoid unwanted attention. Still, other preppers were visible, public, and open for business. Indeed, prepping provides much opportunity for business, as preppers trade in equipment, skills, and sources of knowledge that are not readily available in mainstream markets (although big box stores like Costco and Walmart do sell pre-packaged emergency kits and bug out bags), and preppers looking to do business by necessity had a public presence, and were often willing to talk with me.

Participant observation served as a primary recruitment opportunity, in addition to a data collection source in its own right. I joined several online prepper clubs on a website that hosts various online clubs that encourage people in a shared location to meet up “in real life”, thus bridging the online and offline worlds. I participated in as many club events and meetings as I could across several cities in Oregon, given the challenge of traveling back and forth, and managing other time commitments. Some clubs were more active than others. I refrain from offering specific details about the website I used and the specific cities where I participated in an effort to protect the identities and privacy of preppers who I interviewed and observed. After a first wave of participant observation and interviews which took place in 2014, I decided to expand my study outside of Oregon, to spend time in Idaho, which I learned was considered a sort of prepper “hot spot”.

## **The Advantages and Disadvantages of Interviewing as a Method**

Despite my difficulties finding interview participants in Idaho, in this analysis I do rely heavily on the interview data I was able to collect, given that a handful of interviewees proved especially loquacious and articulate about their prepping practice. They served as “key informants”, “knowledgeable insider[s] willing to serve as informant[s] on informants” (Weiss 1994:20). These include Benjamin (Oregon), Samuel (Oregon), Hank (Idaho), John (Idaho) and Max (North Carolina) (more on them to come). Although interview recruitment poses challenges, no other technique allows for quite such a targeted approach, and for this reason, interviews were a prime site of data collection that feature prominently in this write up. That said, there are limitations to interviews, and I encountered many of them.

- Difficulty with recruitment
- The social context of the interview itself may distort findings by inciting unusual levels of self-reflection
- Interviews may encourage deliberative thinking, while automatic processes reign supreme in the adoption of practices
- Interviews are costly, time consuming, and only give insight into discourse, with limited verifiability for practice
- Interviews rely on self-reports of practices, and interviewees may exaggerate, underestimate, or overlook important facets of practice in their self-reports

Despite these challenges, interviews offer an unparalleled insight into the logic of prepping, and the opportunity to observe preppers deliberate and describe their practices self-reflexively. Some cognitive cultural scholars have worried that interview data may disproportionately provide insight into deliberative cognitive processes (as opposed to automatic, more emotional responses, something of great interest to this study) (Vaisey 2009, 2014), while others refute this claim (Lamont and Swidler 2014; Pugh 2013).

Lamont and Swidler (2014) advise against allowing methodological practices to be pitted against each other, and suggest a reframing of the question of “whether attitudes correspond to behavior”, which they believe “is an overly narrow and misguided question” prone to “sectarian methodological fights” (153). They focus instead on what interviewing (and other methods) are best suited for, and laud the growth of mixed methods research, and what they call “methodological pluralism” (ibid). In the service of cultural sociology, they observe that mixed methods allow scholars to “[pursue] interpretation and explanation with whatever type of data was deemed useful” (ibid). In response to symbolic interactionist critiques, which tend to characterize interviews as static, overly deliberative and reflexive, and therefore inauthentic (Jerolmack and Khan 2014; Levi Martin 2010; Vaisey 2009), I work to triangulate what interviewees told me with other data sources including in person observations and web log data (Androutsopoulos 2008). But I also agree with Lamont and Swidler that in addition to potentially offering insight into behavior, interviews are good for a range of other types of observation, such as “representations, classification systems, boundary work, identity, imagined realities and cultural ideals, as well as emotional states” (157), all of which offer rich contextual clues as to the motivation and logic of practice.

### **Site Selection**

Three interviews took place in Idaho, four were with individuals located in southern states, including Texas, Arkansas and North Carolina, and the rest took place in Oregon.

I selected the Pacific Northwest in part out of convenience, and in part due to the early observation that there was a strong culture of self-sufficiency in the region (see

Ford, 2014, 2019 for write ups of my early work comparing prepping and homesteading practices in Oregon). Oregon has a long history of self-sufficient communities and individual attempts to live outside the confines of the state (see for example Sandilands, 2002).

After my first round of data-collection, I realized that I could not fully understand prepping culture in Oregon without situating it in a national prepping culture that was connected by the prevalence of online communications within prepping cultures. For a people concerned that technology was likely to fail them in the near future, preppers are a tech savvy and prolific folk. In interviews and observations, I traced the material practices, habits, and skills that preppers embodied to digital sources of ideas, trainings, and educational documents. Preppers were ambivalent about prepping's relationship to survivalism, which I portray as an antecedent to prepping, but one that never gained the level of mainstream popularity that prepping has achieved. The difference I believe lies in this generation's ability to gather online, share material and ideas, and to communicate to a broader audience via their digital visibility.

It's not an understatement to say that the communication technology of the internet has dramatically changed the fabric of daily life for those who have access to it, which is an increasingly large percentage of the United States, although there does remain a significant "digital divide" (define and cite). It is likely that my study over-represents preppers who remain wired, and who have access to the internet, even if they anticipate this connection failing in the foreseeable future. There may be preppers who live completely off the grid who I was not able to find—but I think that my observation that the popularity of prepping is fundamentally connected to the quick, cheap and easy

spread of information that the internet makes possible is sound, and that the number of preppers who live completely off the grid in the present is rather small. Self-sufficiency as a value and ideal is central to prepping, but not limited to preppers; indeed it is an ideal that various sub-cultures of Americans have turned to again and again throughout American history (Brown 2011), and preppers version of self-sufficiency is future oriented. As I shall discuss in greater detail in Chapter 1, preppers are ambivalent about modernity and its technological comforts, but many are quite attached to their modern comforts, and although they are preparing to live without a great many of them, including the internet, so long as these amenities are available, they happily make use of them, even as they predict their immanent collapse.

Prepper blogs, forums, and email lists led me to believe that Idaho was another prime site from which to study prepper culture. Several prominent prepper authorities call Idaho or its environs home, and regularly advise preppers to move to the Inland Northwest. One speaker that I listened to at the Sustainable Preparedness Expo advised Oregonians to move east if they could, whereas blogger James Wesley Rawles urged his east coast readers to “go west”, harkening back to the frontier adage, “Go West, young man”. Rawles has declared the Inland Northwest, including eastern Oregon and Washington, Northern Idaho, Montana and even parts of Northern Utah as “The Great American Redoubt”, urging preppers to move to these regions not just to prepare themselves for the disasters likely to befall the urban coastal regions, but, in a rare instance of calling for political collective action, to take over the local political systems in these areas, thus “taking back” the land for the self-rule and sovereignty of political conservatives. Idaho was also the site of a particularly notorious community committed

to self-sufficiency, the Aryan Nation's white supremacist compound in Hayden Idaho, shuttered in 2001. I was curious about the relationship between this history, and the contemporary prepper call to "take over" the region. The preppers I spoke with in Idaho were quick to dispel any connection between the two, but the legacy of what various groups do with self-sufficiency discourse and practice remains a point of interest.

Unlike Oregon, where preppers got together for club meetings to berry pick, can, and discuss the finer point of HAMM radio communications, preppers in Idaho kept to themselves. I struggled to find preppers willing to talk with me; the few who would already had some sort of a public presence, and although they agreed to ask other preppers if they would be willing to talk with me, this effort at snow-ball sampling did not pan out. The exception was a prepper who hosted a podcast (no longer active) who offered to put out a call for participants on his radio show; I gratefully accepted, and that is how I ended up with several phone interviews with preppers in Arkansas, Texas and North Carolina. This experience reinforced several points observations that I had made thus far:

- In a sub-culture that relies greatly on internet communications tools, physical space is not a good indicator of the bounds of community
- The digital and the "real world" are not separate social spaces, but continuations of each other
- Although some preppers are relatively visible, most prefer to remain unseen, making preppers a "hidden population".
- The absence of prepper visibility is not an indication of the absence of preppers, but evidence of the importance of privacy and secrecy for preppers, and their general distrust of outsiders.

## **The Online Field**

To counter some of the difficulties of interacting with preppers in person, I turned to the Internet. In the past several decades, the internet has radically transformed communication possibilities around the world. Data suggest that over 4.5 billion people were using the internet worldwide by beginning of 2020 (Kemp 2019; Miniwatts Marketing Group 2020). The United States has almost 95% penetration rate, which refers to the percentage of the population that uses the internet (Miniwatts Marketing Group 2020), suggesting the extents to which internet usage has become a common feature of daily life around the world and in the US. Although there remains what is popularly referred to as a “digital divide” (van Dijk 2006), home and mobile internet use have become a common feature of American life.

The issue of security of online communications is a contentious and shifting terrain, but despite general concerns with safety, preppers have made good use of a wide range of internet resources. As Lauren Stewart writes, “the anonymous possibilities of the Internet may provide a space for people to have candid conversations with each other about sensitive topics”, providing “unique opportunities for the researcher to study social interaction” (Stewart 2018:25 see also Adler and Adler 2008; Bell 2007; Boero and Pascoe 2012; Hsiung 2000). While the internet offers the opportunity for all sorts of novel community formations, it perhaps has especial salience for people who are labeled or identify as “deviants” or people who’s beliefs or self-image ride upon a perception of self as “loners” (Adler and Adler 2008). The varied sites of community that the Internet provides might allow people to maintain their sense of self as deviant, stigmatized, solitary or independent, while also providing a forum for interaction that can be engaged

in passively as well as actively. The preppers I spoke with in person all acknowledged a sense of stigma attached to prepping with a sense of willful defiance. Many seemed annoyed at the general public perception that preppers were “crazy” (the most commonly used word to describe stigma) or extreme in their beliefs or practices.<sup>7</sup> They frequently did boundary work to differentiate themselves from those who they perceived to be “the extreme” preppers, whose practices did not, in actuality, differ all that much from many of their own.

Even as they contested the narrative that preppers as a whole were “crazy” they simultaneously embraced the idea that preppers were somehow different then and set apart from community at large; flipping the script to accentuate the ways in which prepping rendered them superior to the unwittingly unprepared.<sup>8</sup> This played out in online as well as offline spaces, where preppers both sought “like minded people” to form virtual communities with, but, once in those communities, frequently enacted what I call moral claims of superiority to differentiate themselves from others and bolster their sense of themselves as an individual unit, rather than a member of a group. Mostly, claims of superiority were made at the expense of non-preppers, a homogenous, undifferentiated outgroup that consisted of everyone who was not a prepper. But, as I shall argue in Chapter 2, the interactional dynamics built on an us vs. them mentality was deeply patterned, and shaped interactional dynamics amongst preppers as well, and structuring their online interactions. The online field of prepping was then marked by a tension between the recognition of the value of togetherness and the deep belief in the

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<sup>7</sup> I discuss this defining narrative and its significance in detail in Chapter 3

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 2 for a thorough discussion of this discourse of moral superiority

primacy of the individual. Togetherness garnered resources such as the opportunity to swap tips, share skills, and informational resources, as well as the possibility of in-depth conversations about disaster scenarios and potential responses to them that were probably far beyond what preppers' non-prepper friends and family would be willing to engage in. On the other hand, online community presented another potential opportunity for dependence, interrelatedness, and social solidarity—qualities that preppers were suspicious of to begin with. The result was an online field that reproduced some of the patterns I observed offline, and at times revealed concentrated versions of the subculture's discourse and interactive patterns.

The online field of prepping sub-culture is largely composed of blogs, message boards, news conglomerating websites, social media feeds, and marketing emails that are written by prominent prepper thought-leaders and small business owners to their public lists. These various sites produce what digital ethnographers refer to as “log data”, logs of conversations, essays, news items, and other communicative artefacts that make up the discursive space of an online field. Each website, email list, blog, or message board is a unit within this field, with a “field of computer mediated discourse...being composed of interconnected websites that represent a lifestyle or a social scene on the web”(Androutsopoulos 2008:5). Note that this concept of the online field draws from Bourdieusian field theory, of the social organization of symbolic capital, which I will draw from further in my analysis. In offline ethnography, the field represents the ethnographer's sense of place. In online ethnography, we need not forget the material nature of the social field to extend it into the conceptual space that embodied social actors create as a matter of social practice. What happens on the internet is no less “real” or

more disembodied than any other social action (Hine 2000; Stewart 2018), although the internet is unique as a “social space” that may allow for alternative or experimental forms of social presentation (Stewart 2018; Waskul 2003). Presentation of self is always multifaceted though (Goffman 1959) and there is no reason to think that facets of this presentation that take place online are less “authentic” than those which take place offline.

### **Preppers on the Web**

The Internet was an important tool that allowed me to locate preppers via a social media website geared towards moving online interactions offline.<sup>9</sup> The website is organized by location and topic, so that people may join clubs made up of people with similar interests who live in the same geographical region. Once I found preppers to observe through this portal, the website itself continued to serve as a useful source of information about prepping. In addition to information about the kinds of events preppers found useful, members would sometimes post weblinks, or advise each other on other sources of media they found useful, such as podcasts or books. I often followed these tracks, moving from the offline to the online social space of prepping, to observe how the activities we participated in were informed by a broad, widely dispersed thought-community of mostly Americans thinking about, and creating the sub-culture of prepping.

In addition to following the online tracks of preppers in the online clubs, I also explored the prepper-web more broadly. I often started with basic Google searches, with

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<sup>9</sup> I describe this website in generic terms and avoid naming it as a way of protecting the identities of my research subjects.

the logic that the most popular sites would be most highly ranked in the search engine's algorithm, and that a lay person seeking an inroad to prepping would likely start with the first few pages of a popular search engine's results. I considered various forms of popularity ranking, such as Google ranking, a page's own self-reported statistics (i.e. number of hits daily or annually, size of a list), and I installed several web browser add-ons that claim to report a website's traffic, in order to roughly assess the popularity of various prepper websites, including Alexa Traffic Rank and Similar Web. These tools provided some numerical context for various pages, but ultimately, I relied most heavily on a networked approach that involved identifying "key nodes" in a network, then moving to more "peripheral nodes" (Androutsopoulos 2008:6). This resembles Androutsopoulos's "practice-derived guidelines for systematic online observation", which include:

- Examining relationships and processes rather than isolated artefacts
- Moving from the core to the periphery of the online space
- Repeating observation of the same sites
- Maintaining openness
- Using all available technology (such as a site's own popularity statistics, search functions, post history, etc.)
- Using observational insights as a guide for further sampling

Based on these guidelines, I selected a handful of sites that covered a range of units, including individual blogs, edited blogs, online magazines, discussion boards, and email lists associated with a business or key figure. For each of these, I selected a purposive sample of dates that covered the history of the site and gathered all available logs from that time period. For example, I include data from SurvivalBlog.com, written by James Wesley Rawles, a thought-leader of the prepper community who has inspired a

number of prepper practices and phrases, including the notion of the “Great American Redoubt”. His blog was founded in 2005, and I collected data for the months of August 2005, December 2010, June 2012, April 2015, and October 2017. In addition to purpose sampling that covered a range of dates, I also used observational insights and key words in the site’s search engine in order follow up on topics and threads that moved beyond these initial logs, or to seek answers that arose in the course of coding. For example, I did a search for “climate change” and analyzed logs of all posts that pertained to this topic of interest to my research question.

Message boards proved more difficult to navigate via units of time because of their multidimensional structure. At any given time, hundreds of conversations may be taking place with relatively quick response, or over a series of days, weeks, or even months or years. Conversations are often “threaded” with respondents replying to the original poster (OP), as well as to other respondents, which creates threads within threads (Stewart 2018). I made an effort to sample log data from various time periods, but also followed a topical purposive sampling strategy that made use of observational insight to focus on key players—regular members who participated frequently, and had high rankings and authority (made visible by user statistic shared next to user names), and topics central to my area of interest, such as threads titled things like “What do you think of the American Redoubt?”, a forum topic in which preppers discussed Rawles’ proposition that conservative preppers with similar beliefs move to Eastern Oregon, Eastern Washington, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

I also include in my analysis the official positions of edited sites, such as the American Preppers Network, which have commercial sponsors, and a more polished

presentation than personal blogs and forums. These sites serve as key nodes that present a quasi-official version of prepping, and often put forward ideas and concepts that get picked up and discussed by individuals participating in their forums, and throughout the web.

I was reminded of the significance of semi-professional web content produced by prepper thought-leaders one day while coding an interview with Max. I read through a part of our conversation in which he expressed concern over the inability of the US to respond to an EMP—an electromagnetic pulse generated by a solar storm, due to technological outsourcing. He explains:

If we had say, a solar around the Carrington event-- you've probably heard that by now-- which does severe damage to the North American grid. By all accounts it will be many months, if not many years, before the grid is restored because the components that ...severely damaged are enormous. Transformers high-voltage, long distance transcontinental type transformers to keep the voltage at very high to get a long transmission runs. Those things are no longer manufactured in the United States. They have to be built to order overseas.

Shortly after coding this interview, I took a break from interviews and reviewed some web documents. I was looking for data on urban danger, a central focus of Chapter 2, and I had just found a video trailer for a DVD titled Urban Danger, produced by Craig Meissner, who ran the Sustainable Preparedness Expo, and who writes a blog, generates mass emails, and hosts trainings on homesteading style prepping skills. Meissner's website describes the film:

Danger is stalking the city.

Like it or not, its [sic] a fact... life in urban areas is about to radically change due to developments most people are not aware of. Find out what the issues are and what YOU can do to not only survive but also thrive. (Anon n.d.)

The trailer opens to now former Maryland Republican Congressman Roscoe Bartlett warning,

If when the power grid went down, some of our large transformers were destroyed, damaged beyond use...we don't make any of those in this country. They're made overseas, and you order one, and 18 months or 2 years later, they will deliver it. Our power grid is very vulnerable.

It was the exact argument that I had just read Max make, from an interview several months before. Although one of these examples came from an offline conversation, the idea, almost verbatim, was clearly circulating through the prepper web, where Max found it, thought it made sense, and wove it into his personal account of prepping as a logical response to risk.

### **Participant Observation**

The first wave of this research took place as part of a comparative study on homesteaders and preppers (Ford 2014, 2019). Initially, I found it much easier to find and interview homesteaders, a sub-culture oriented towards self-sufficiency that frequently overlaps with, but differs in some important ways, from prepping. However, I joined several prepper clubs, some of which were not currently hosting meetings, and attended events wherever I could. My rationale for participating in clubs as a participant observer is that it exposed me to a wide range of people who participate in prepping for various reasons, allowed me meet subjects to observe them engaging in the activities that were of interest to my study, being done willingly in public. It also allowed me to observe how preppers interacted with others with whom they relate to via a common interest. The prepper club I initially spent the most time in was based in a city several hours away from where I lived, so I would often attend several events over a weekend to try to maximize

resources. This was beneficial for the development of relationships with members of the group, but was also incredibly taxing, as I worked to take consistent fieldnotes for hours at a time, over several days.

Because online clubs are by nature informal groups open to the public, I participated in group activities as a passive participant observer with the intention of understanding the scope of activities participants engaged in and how they framed their participation in these activities. Each group is “hosted” by a member who may serve as a leader, or who might just take the most responsibility for organizing events. During my first event, I introduced myself to Samuel, the leader of the club, who had organized the event, and let him know that I was a student researcher studying prepping. He did not seem particularly concerned about my use of the group for research purposes; he told me that because the clubs were organized online with the intention of being open to any member of the public with an internet connection, he was accustomed to people coming to the meetings and events for all sorts of reasons. By way of example, he pointed out that even though the online clubs were not explicitly organized for dating, many people used them in order to meet potential romantic partners. He had no problem with this, and he did not mind if I continued to attend prepper events organized through the club. He also agreed to be interviewed, and proved to be a “key informant” whose insights about prepping were invaluable, even though, as I later note, he himself proved a bit of an outlier as far as his beliefs and reflections about prepping.

I did not regularly disclose my status as a researcher to other group members, although I did not try to hide it. Indeed, it was frequently revealed during polite, introductory small talk, as people would ask me what I did for work. I would tell them

that I was a graduate student studying sociology, and that in fact my area of interest was self-sufficiency and prepping, and that I was participating in the club as part of my research. Like Samuel, most participants didn't seem to think this was anything out of the ordinary, and some consented to be interviewed for my project. Occasionally people would learn that I was a researcher, and I would notice them making a concerted effort to avoid me or minimize interaction. I did my best to respect their privacy. Several club members seemed to have mixed feelings about my role as a researcher, and they oscillated between distancing themselves from me, and engaging with me. I tried to take my lead from them and respect their comfort levels with my presence. One prepper who seemed both interested in and wary of my interest in prepping seemed to enjoy spending time in my company, but initially refused to be interviewed. He did, however, invite me to carpool to an event we were both attending, and during the car ride agreed to be interviewed on the spot. Unfortunately, the recording I made during the ride was quite fuzzy, and I was unable to capture the transcript, although I did my best to make up for it in my field notes.

The activities I participated in with preppers were varied, and most were quite a bit of fun. We gathered at a local farm to pick berries (blueberries and raspberries) and then decided to buy some additional fruits and vegetables together for an impromptu session of canning, which I had agreed to teach them how to do. I had not brought my equipment, but another member had some available, so we extended the morning outing into the afternoon, and spent a pleasant day making blueberry and raspberry jam. We canned the bulk of it, and turned the rest into a crisp, which we divvied up to take home

at the end. The next weekend I returned with my pressure canner, and we canned apricots in brandy and green bean pickles.

Other activities I participated in included:

- A pistol-shooting class, where I learned how to shoot a gun, and won a case of bullets in a raffle,
- A field weekend on a club member's private land, where we tested out our bug-out-bags (ready packed emergency kits that preppers keep in case they have to grab it on the go), learned how to build emergency shelters, make strategic home defense plans, and took workshops on mushroom foraging and emergency communications such as HAMM radio
- A homesteading fair, which included booths about gardening, canning, and storing food, solar panels, composting, making and selling soap, a blacksmithing demonstration, and classes on butchering a chicken, stocking a pantry, and making homemade dairy food like butter, yogurt, milk and ice cream
- A sustainable preparedness expo, featuring products like solar panels, water storage facilities, essential oils, gold as currency, etc. as well as workshops on strategic relocation, heating with a woodstove, healing with plants and essential oils, and more
- Club meetings with various activities, such as lectures on HAMM radio, or activities such as one where we all brought something from our pantry to share, taste and swap

During these activities, many of which were quite hands on, I did my best to jot down notes when I could, without drawing too much attention to myself, but for most, I observed as best I could, and then took notes either by hand, or by voice recorder as soon as I was away from the group. This often involved pulling over on the side of the road to scribble notes, although I sometimes made it to a coffee shop, if I was lucky. The field weekend, which began Friday night and ended on Sunday proved particularly challenging, in part because it was so rich with data, and in part because I grew exhausted at balancing keeping up with all the things I was learning, participating with the group,

and sneaking off occasionally to take notes. Although it was a challenge to translate observations into words during embodied activities, I also found that the fact of embodied activity produced a different sort of data about the significance of a practice oriented around “doing something” rather than letting things be done to you.

### **Privacy and Safety**

Privacy is an important concern for preppers, and it is for researchers too. All the preppers I talk about here have been given a pseudonym, a false name to conceal their actual identity, and I am intentionally vague about some of the locational details, since some of the preppers I talk to might be easily found online if I were more specific. I also avoid naming preppers I observed during participant observation by name and I remain vague about the locational details of the sites I observed as much as possible, while working to retain important, sociologically relevant information about social space (i.e. size of cities or rural areas, geographical regions, etc.). Preppers who have a public online presence in the form of a website, public email list<sup>10</sup> or blog, or who use their name openly in media, or published material I cite by name. I do this to give attribution of ideas and information to the due sources, and to avoid plagiarizing. Because these are public figures who are easily identifiable, I do not obscure their identities.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis was conducted in an iterative process, beginning early in the data collection process, and extending outward. I used Atlas.ti, a qualitative data coding software to organize data and to identify themes that shaped the analysis. I used a variety

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<sup>10</sup> I consider an email list public if readers of a website are asked and encouraged to sign up for email updates from the author

of coding styles, including grounded coding, simultaneous coding, and occasionally InVivo coding to capture particularly salient or important subject-generated language. Language-focused coding gave way to thematic coding, which shaped concurrent data collection.

Although I occasionally used some of Atlas.ti's search and organizational tools, for the most part my coding process was quite straightforward; I grouped quotations with common themes together in order to put them into conversation with each other, identify contradictions, tensions, or outliers, and commonalities. Word clouds, code networks and the many tools that Atlas.ti provides were interesting to explore, but ultimately, my coding was organized around the emergence of a coherent narrative, and its occasional contradictions.

### **Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research**

I learned a great deal from my time observing and interviewing preppers, and spending time in their online and offline worlds. But this community is large, and I only made my way into a small pocket of it. If preppers are right in their belief that interest is growing in their community, and I believe they are, then this sub-culture warrants much more study, with a variety of different focal points, to elucidate its appeal, its political effects, and its range of influence.

I am regularly asked to quantify how many people prep, what kinds of people prep, according to all sorts of interesting categories, and given that qualitative methods are not really made for counting people, I have had to come up with all sorts of creative answers. I discuss at great length my impressions of who preps, and why prepping seems to be more appealing to some types of people (men, whites, middle-class people) than

others, while I do not do justice to other important facets of prepping (such as its regional spread and demographics). If someone wanted to count preppers, I would be curious to see how their findings matched up against my analysis, and very happy to cite their work. That said, I personally do not think the number of preppers is the most interesting thing about them, and so I chose not to prioritize it.

Another limitation of this study is my limited focus on religion. There is some interesting overlap between increasingly mainstream prepping, and related practices carried out by religious groups, such as the Latter Day Saints, known more commonly as Mormons. The Mormon church advises its members to keep on-hand one year's worth of food, and as such, has many useful resources and tips available for both church members and members of the public on matters of food preservation and storage. Up until relatively recently, the church would make its commercial canning facilities available to the public, although some preppers reported to me that this was no longer the case, and they alluded that this was because of health and safety laws and the potential for litigation if something went wrong. I did not follow up, so I cannot confirm the validity of this rumor. What I wish to point out is that preppers are aware of the Mormon church, and it seems like the Mormon church is at least peripherally aware of preppers. I regularly saw local church wards participate in, and occasionally sponsor emergency preparedness fairs in communities, encouraging citizens to plan for emergencies, and giving out useful advice on how to do so.

Despite this, I did not focus much on the Mormon church's role in the prepping sub-cultures I studied, to the regular consternation of audience members at talks I gave, who almost always asked me some variation of, "what about the Mormons?" (I also got

this question from an old friend of mine, who is Mormon). My reason for this is not that the role of the Mormon church in prepping is not relevant or interesting; I'm sure that it is. But my interest in prepping has always been in reference to environmental politics. Having identified prepping as an environmental practice early on in my research, I was curious as to why people who seemingly did not care much about the environment would go to great lengths to change their relationship to it. In the case of Mormons who practice a version of prepping, their pathway to emergency preparedness was more directly mediated by a trusted institution: the church. The Mormons that I encountered in my studies tended towards emergency preparedness style prepping (see Chapter III for a discussion of the different types I encountered). They store extra food for emergencies, and may make other preparations for short-term disaster, but I saw no evidence that they are otherwise seeking to minimize their reliance on institutions, a main theme amongst preppers more broadly. While I have no doubt that there are Mormon preppers of all types, this particular avenue did not seem relevant to the research questions I posed, and so I leave it for someone else to explore.

Otherwise, this study suffered the same limitations as any other dissertation length study—limits on money and time. No doubt additional time, additional sites and sources would reveal important layers of this fascinating practice and sub-culture that I was unable to attend to, and I hope other scholars will continue the work where I left off. I would love to learn more about preppers in different regions of the United States, and how they relate to the prepper discourse I have identified, as well as preppers abroad. Future research might also consider how prepping relates to other sub-cultures or social movements on both the left and the right (for some early work on this, see (Ford 2014,

2019, n.d.).

## CHAPTER III

### THE DOUBLE BIND BETWEEN DEPENDENCE AND DISTRUST

This chapter examines preppers concerns about risk by applying Ulrich Beck's idea of "risk society" to situate prepping as a practice within the context of preppers' social-environmental locations within an environmental field. Beck observes that society has entered a late phase of global industrial capitalism he names "risk society" in which the industrial production of risk is universalized and must be managed across all sectors of society. Bourdieu's theory of practice, which seeks to integrate agentic practices into an understanding of a structured society, provides theoretical tools for examining the interconnections between agency and structure. By applying these theories to prepping, I offer empirical evidence of risk society, and demonstrate the utility of theories of practice for understanding the emergence of novel responses to global environmental, economic, political, and social risk.

#### **Nobody's Coming to Help**

Early on a lovely spring morning, I filed into a generic looking classroom with about 40-50 residents of a mid-size city in Oregon. We were there to participate in the first of a two-day Community Emergency Response Team training. I had learned about the trainings from several preppers I had interviewed in the first wave of my data collection; they had told me that many preppers participated in these trainings. I was both interested in identifying preppers who I could recruit for interviews, and curious about how local municipalities' emergency preparedness efforts related to individual

preparedness. The mood of the room was nervous excitement, as people milled about, greeting neighbors, and introducing themselves, signing in, and writing out nametags. The room was made up of an equal mix of men and women, almost all of whom I read as white.

The training was taught by a rotating group of city officials and volunteers. Over the course of the first hour, they introduced themselves, and gave a brief overview of what we would be learning for the next two days. Pamela, the manager of the program is a congenial middle-aged woman who maintains an affect of unflappable calm. She informs us that although the program we are participating in used to be funded by Homeland Security, it is now funded by the local municipality. The goal of the program is to train volunteers with basic emergency response skills because in the event of an emergency, we are likely to be the first responders. After telling us that “what we are doing is important”, she adds as an aside,

“I said this the other day, and caught the ear of the state, and I will probably get in trouble” for saying that “you are the first responders” She goes on to explain that official first responders—trained professional firefighters, police officers, and emergency medical technicians (EMTs)— will be limited in a major emergency. In short, nobody’s coming to help.

This is the defining message that we are given by CERT trainers, and it is a main feature of prepper discourse. After giving us this bleak overview, Pamela passes the mic to an older man who she introduces as Dr. Evans, a retired doctor who has been working with CERT since its founding. After giving a brief overview of the program’s history, he

informs us bluntly that “you guys may be the only people to respond” to a major disaster. And a major disaster, he adds, is immanent.

The training is focused largely on the likelihood of a major earthquake striking Oregon, which had received widespread public attention in the wake of a New Yorker on scientists’ prediction of the Cascadia Earthquake came out in July of 2015, titled ominously, “The Earthquake That Will Devastate the Pacific Northwest” (Schulz 2015). Dr. Evans is so worried about a major disaster striking that he tells us “I don’t go to the coast anymore” because he fears a tsunami. “I used to love to go to the coast,” he says. Now, when it’s absolutely necessary for him to be near the coast, he tells us “I keep to high ground”.

As far as Dr. Evans is concerned, risk is ever-present. Even if the earthquake doesn’t get us, something else will. He lists several scenarios, including a break in the fuel supply during an earthquake, terrorist attacks, and collapsing cell phone towers, concluding,

This will be right out of the horror movies. People will be hungry, thirsty, there will be marauders.

I look around the classroom. The audience is rapt. They hang off his words, and when he interrogates them (“how many of you keep a flashlight next to the bed?”) they eagerly jump in to display their emergency preparedness savvy. He asks who carries flares in their car. Most of us raise our hands. He then asks, “have you checked the [expiration] date?” Some hands drop. Three people at the table in front keep their hands raised, a man who has previously identified himself as a retired police officer, a man in a camouflage hat with an American flat patch sewn on who has also identified himself as a

previous first responder, and a woman. Dr. Evans points to the men, and said, “well, you guys know”.

He points at the woman; “do you check the dates?” She says yes and tells us that she is a retired taxi driver. She begins to share information about where she stores her flares, but Dr. Evans cuts her off. He repeats his point that we should all check the date on our flares and takes several more comments, glancing at the clock as people talk. After the comments, he mentions a few more things we should or shouldn't do: do keep a flashlight, shoes, globes and our soon-to-be-issued CERT helmet next to the bed at all times. Don't hang a mirror over the bed. Do have a plan to shelter-in-place. Do be prepared to dig a hole for a toilet. Do be aware that schools are supposed to have disaster plans. He says this last one as if he doubts they really do. The underlying message is clear: nobody is coming to help us, institutional plans cannot be trusted, it's our personal responsibility to be prepared, and some of us are already more equipped than others to be fully prepared.

### **Don't Be The Victim**

Confident that disaster is imminent, above all else, preppers are preparing to survive. Kai (Oregon), a prepper who runs a small business selling prepper products and training experiences, tells me,

Basically, store food, store water, understand your five basic needs, food, shelter, water, energy and security. Have redundant systems in place for all those things and you'll actually then be able to render aid to other people and not just be a helpless victim. You can be a resource.

Survival, organized around these basic needs, is a central theme for preppers. Kai's summary is echoed throughout the prepper blogosphere. There are five things you need to survive "any scenario". A blogger who goes by Just In Case Jack writes:

If we strip away all the BS...what does a human being really need to survive?

- Not taking into account what makes us comfortable
- Not discussing how to avoid injury or disease
- Not figuring out what it takes to thrive

At the end of the day, what are the basic human needs for survival to avoid a premature death?

Oxygen, water, food, shelter (warmth) plus self-defense...that's it.

If you plan for and meet these 5 survival needs, you have a reasonable chance of surviving any scenario. (Jack n.d.)

The intent to survive just about anything drives preppers to two main practices: emergency preparedness, and self-sufficiency. Emergency preparedness is focused on the immediate aftermath of a disaster, whereas self-sufficiency is oriented towards longer-term survival. CERT focuses exclusively on training people for emergency preparedness and has a more collective focus than most individuals. But CERT trainers also encouraged individuals to set up their personal emergency plans first, so that they could ensure that they would be in a position to offer help to others, not end up being the ones who need help. It is clear that needing to rely on others for help is a worst-case scenario.

Some individual preppers plan for the aftermath of a short-term emergency and stop there. Roberta is one such prepper:

Roberta: I've looked at like the home gardening stuff and I've looked at the make your own backyard homestead kind of stuff with chickens and things. I realistically look at that and my time and my available finances and say, this is one step too far

for me. I'd like to be able to have my own eggs in the backyard, realistically that is not going to happen. So it's great that some people can do it, it's not where I'm going.

With two young children and a full-time professional job, Roberta doesn't have the time to focus on self-sufficiency, even if it interests her. Instead she prioritizes emergency preparedness, which entails storing water, food, and being prepared to use alternative sources of fuel for cooking and heat. In her impressive list of preps, Roberta covers the basics listed by Kai and Just in Case Jack: food, shelter, water, energy and security.

Allison: How long do you think you have supplies to be comfortable in an emergency?

Roberta: We have enough water for four people for two weeks with a 55-gallon drum plus we have a bunch of little packets of water... And then we have the water filter and we have various bottles of water and we have canned foods that have liquid in them so we're good for water for at least two weeks, if not more depending on the season of the year. We've got iodine tablets and all that kind of stuff. We have lots of chopped wood and wood planks because one of my hobbies is woodworking so we've got branches of a tree, they're probably about that big and that long, and about three inches big and about a foot long, that are piled behind our garage from a tree that came down a few years back. We could use that as fuel in a fire pit if we needed to. I also have three small Coleman propane things and then we've got a backyard barbecue which has propane tanks that we've just refilled once, so we've got a number of sources of cooking energy. I also have rough ideas on how to build a solar oven if I needed to. My coworker has actually built a solar oven and tested it this weekend. It got up to 250 degrees. He said it's not enough to roast a turkey but it's enough to boil some water.

Allison: That's something.

Roberta: Yeah. We've got fourteen days of freeze-dried foods. That's the bags that you saw. I've got two days' worth here and the rest are in our garage. We've also got one of those buckets you can buy at Walmart like for twenty years' worth good food for family of three or four or something like that. Again, this is stuff that we

wouldn't choose to eat necessarily. A lot of beans, we're not really a bean family, but if you're hungry you're going to eat it. I've got two shelves in the garage which isn't ideal because it gets hot in the summer, but full of jars of peanut butter and canned goods. We try and rotate them out and I have the dates on them. We are pretty good for water, for food, for energy. We've got solar flashlights, we've got some long burn candles, we've got a couple of oil wick type candle things. We have a handful of different radios. I've got little flashlights with radios for both the kids so they'll have fun with it and be less scared, probably will use them as sword fighting or something at some point. We've got, I have to go through and see what we've got, we've got some medicines but not as much as we probably should have. I've got a bucket marked heat and light, so the stuff is in there. We've got a bunch more of the little heat packs like I showed you. We would be doing all right, I think. What we would need to assess is this bad enough that we need to leave? If so, is it bad enough we need to leave now, for safety or a little while later because the kids' school is going to be disruptive. It's going to be a while before everything gets back together. So, we'd have to decide do we stay, do we stay a short time and then go. Do we go now? And that would be based mostly on the kids and the time of year. If it was the dead of winter and there was no sign of any heat coming back any time soon, we'd probably be investigating ways to get out even if it was just one of us with the kids. If it were a more mild time of year, nobody was injured or sick, and it was just a matter of holing up for a little while, we'd see how fast our supplies were going down, we'd see if there was other neighbors nearby who needed help or who could help band together thing. And we'd make a decision based on the scenario. There's so many different scenarios, that it's really hard to say, if this happens, I'd definitely do that. But by collecting supplies and giving ourselves that space, we don't have to make those decisions, do we stay, or do we go on the first day because we're going to run out of water? We can say ok well let's give it a week, see what happens and then while we're doing that kind of prepare for moving out if we have to. Scout out on the bicycles, see if the roads are clear. That kind of stuff. Being a little bit prepared, not going all bonkers in the woods kind of level, but having the basics for a few days gives us the breathing room to make a rational decision of what to do next.

In addition to storing these goods in her home, Roberta carries a bug-out-bag, and has an emergency plan for what to do if disaster hits while she and her husband are at work and their kids at school.

Preppers like Roberta believe that a disaster is immanent, and that official, professionally trained emergency responders may not be available to help her and her family. But they generally believe that the interruptions in services will be temporary, and short-lived. Roberta doesn't think that emergency response services are sufficient to address the major earthquake or natural disaster that she thinks is most likely to occur (although she does mention EMP events and terrorist attacks). It's not that Roberta doesn't trust the official emergency responders at all, it's just that she thinks it's unlikely she will be one of their priorities, as she indicates in the following exchange:

Allison: If something happens, say, an earthquake, or something like the kinds of things that you would be preparing for, a terrorist attack, or an event that enacted your emergency preparedness, do you believe that emergency services or institutions would show up?

Roberta: I think they would show up but I don't think they would necessarily show up where I am.

Allison: Ok

Roberta: They're going to prioritize and I'm not going to be the priority.

Allison: So, you don't think that they have the capacity to meet the whole need.

Roberta: Not all at once, and I used to think well maybe they'd focus on [my workplace] because there's going to be a lot of young adults there. But at one of the Red Cross things I went to they said well, young adults are adults, they're not going to be focusing here and it might be three days before you can see some kind of response. And it might even be two days before [my institution] can get its response up because it has to get all its staff in and all of that. So be prepared.

Allison: Do you think that the Municipal, State and Federal level emergency preparedness functions are adequate?

Roberta: It depends on how big an event there is. If we had something that took out the entire West Coast, that's a lot of people, and that's a lot of mobility and

that's a lot of resources that aren't able to help anybody because they're caught up in the middle of it. If it was something that just covered, I don't know, fifty square miles from here, a fifty-mile radius from here, then maybe Washington and California would be able to help us out. But I won't even know when it happens, how big it is because the very fact it is happening will prevent me from finding out how big it is. So, I don't want to be thinking, oh well, we won't eat today or tomorrow, but you know somebody will come the third day. It would be great if that happens, trust but verify.

Although Roberta avoids directly calling the official, public emergency response apparatus inadequate, she prevaricates when I ask a direct question, telling me “it depends”. The idea that the Cascadia Earthquake will “take out the entire West Coast” has been popularized both by the media (Schulz 2015) and local officials (see above). This logic is often paired with the assumption that individual public response is the only option because it simply isn't possible for officials to respond. This assumption was demonstrated by Pete, a volunteer trainer who led part of the CERT training I attended.

Pete began his training module by telling us that the government has the responsibility to develop, test, and refine emergency plans, and to ensure that emergency responders have the skills and resources they need. He stops there and looks at the audience. “That's you” he tells us. Recall that we are a group of volunteers, with no required training, or experience. It is interesting to note that we have already been elevated into the group of first responders, a category that typically refers to professionally trained fire fighters, emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and police officers. Pamela informs us that an effort to fund an early warning earthquake detection system in Oregon. Pete responds by saying that it's interesting that we have the technology, but that “it's fairly expensive”. We are shown video footage of the 2011 tsunami that struck Sendai Japan after a magnitude 9 earthquake, comparable to the one

scientists predict in the Northwest.<sup>11</sup> After the video, Pete notes that Japan has significantly improved its earthquake response capacity, noting that:

Japan prepares really well for this type of thing; they lost a lot less people than they would have 10 years ago; the airport at Sendai was open the next day and being used to bring in supplies and aid.

A woman raised her hand, and when called upon, asked, why can't we do what Japan is doing? Why are we not reinforcing and retrofitting buildings to make them earthquake sound?

Pete's response is,

How much does it cost? Are we going to make people spend tons of money? We'd be "tramping down on people's ability to have small businesses, Mom and Pop can't afford to open a business because of the regulations. We could go as far as Tokyo, we have the technology to allow buildings to be almost earthquake proof, but it's expensive.<sup>12</sup>

Nobody argues, and Pete moves on to talk about the quality of soil in Oregon. The moment of acknowledging the tension between emphasis on individual preparedness and collective, public response has passed, and goes uncommented upon by the training's participants.

The idea that "nobody's coming" and that the aftermath of a disastrous event will be "out of a horror movie" is presented as neutrally factual by a team of public representatives, and accepted without argument by a roomful of community members, and many of the individual preppers I spoke with, like Roberta. But as disaster specialist

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<sup>11</sup> The same type of fault line, a subduction fault, runs along the coast of Oregon and Japan. Subduction faults produce qualitatively different earthquakes from strike-slip faults, which are more common in California.

<sup>12</sup> Direct quote is taken from field notes

and seismologist Lucy Jones points out, focusing on personal preparedness and emergency response that predicts disastrous results from inevitable events (like earthquakes) is based on broad public acceptance that “damage is inevitable”. In an interview with the Seattle Times, she observes,

When people ask me about earthquake prediction, I say: Do you want two hours to get out of a building, or do you want a building that doesn't fall down in the first place?

Why figure out how to survive not having water instead of fixing your water pipes so they don't break? (Doughton 2018)

She points to work she has done in Los Angeles to encourage and support local government to come up with a priority list for addressing earthquake preparedness collectively, resulting in retrofitted buildings, an improved water system, and the ripple effect of the development of a supply-chain of earthquake resilient pipes manufactured in the US. Ultimately, the ways public entities like cities and states engage in preparedness effects the entire community, whereas individual preparedness is built on the assumption that there is no other choice.

The current building code is a life-safety code. The goal is to not kill people. If you chose to have a building that's a total financial loss after the earthquake, that's your choice to make.

I have a problem with that. The reality of an earthquake is that the failure of a building impacts the whole community. (Doughton 2018)

Jones points to the important, but often overlooked role of government policy at various levels in emergency preparedness. The assumption that nobody is coming to help is built upon distrust of, and discouragement towards collective, public, political processes. Preppers build on this assumption to construct future scenarios that feature the

horror movie landscape of marauding hordes, that Dr. Evans references. Having been told for years, if not decades, that government is incapacitated, it is understandable that citizens hesitate to rely on government services that have been chronically underfunded, and struggle to function with routine services and tasks, let alone orchestrate a complicated disaster response. However, the paucity of state capacity for emergency response is not a factual inevitability or a political impossibility, as Pete's contradictory observation that Japan has succeeded in earthquake harm reduction shows. To Pete, and other Americans who live in a political culture shaped by decades of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism refers simultaneously to a political philosophy, and the policies and practices that derive from it. Neoliberalism developed in post-World War II in response to a phase of what David Harvey calls "embedded liberalism", in which the role of the state was focused on enhancing the welfare of citizens through full employment and economic growth. To that end, it was considered acceptable and indeed vital for the state to intervene in markets as much as necessary to protect individual liberty, producing a historic wave of class compromise between labor and capital in response to emergent labor movements in the early 20th century. While neoliberalism also builds upon the valuation of individual liberty, neoliberal political philosophy posits that human well-being is best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within the institutional framework of the market. Within this framework, the role of the state is reduced to creating and maintaining private property rights, free markets and free trade (Harvey 2005). We see an echo of this political-cultural logic in Pete's recourse to the right of small-businesses to avoid "unnecessary" regulations, even ones that would ensure

their safety, as well as the safety of their community, as well as his focus not on the efficacy of disaster warning systems to save human life, but on their cost.

As Harvey shows, American goals and societal values have been shaped by the political-cultural logic of neoliberalism since its political inception by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. The idea that “nobody’s coming” is not inevitable, but a belief shaped by the political-cultural logic of neoliberalism. Nearly half a century from its introduction into American politics, neoliberalism has become the dominant economic and cultural schema guiding American political process and thought. Its narratives have been accepted as natural and obvious by people like Pete, and, as we shall see, it is the dominant discursive construction that preppers rely on to make sense of risk.

### **Emergency Preparedness**

Some preppers begin and end their preparations with emergency preparedness. These preppers are mostly preparing for smaller-scale “Shit Hits The Fan” (SHTF) scenarios, such as an earthquake or storm that cuts off major roads, blocking the delivery of food for several weeks, or the loss of power due to weather, or minor social collapse. Those who focus exclusively on emergency preparedness generally expect society to recover and go on as usual, after the SHTF event. Emergency preparedness practices that preppers adopt include making sure that they can meet the five basic needs that Kai outlines above, for a brief time (generally between 3 days and 3 week) while they wait for infrastructure to be repaired, and services resumed. Emergency preparedness practices include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Storing emergency food, including canned goods, dry goods, MREs (“Meal, Ready to Eat”, a military-grade meal kit that provides minimum daily caloric needs), or other dehydrated foods

- Storing emergency water, and water purification supplies; may include large backyard water tanks that hold hundreds of gallons, water barrels, water bottles, and equipment to purify or sanitize water
- Having plans and equipment for alternative sources of heat and energy for cooking and maintaining body temperature; may include keeping wood burning stoves, generators, emergency cookware such as camp stoves or rocket stoves (a small, efficient combustion stove that can burn off of a variety of fuels including leaves, twigs, and pinecones) . May also include storing extra batteries, flashlights, lanterns, candles, matches, etc.
- Having a plan to either “bug in” (stay in place at home) or “bug out” (leave a compromised place to escape to a safe place, usually predetermined), in the event of an emergency. Have a route in mind, the equipment, knowledge and skills necessary to traverse that route in an emergency, and ideally have some basic emergency shelter building skills.
- Having a security plan, guns, ammunition, and the knowledge and skills that will allow for their use.
- Storing emergency medical supplies such as first aid kits, backup life-sustaining medications, extra glasses or other disability aids, and training in emergency first aid skills.
- Storing devices for emergency communications, such as HAM radios, walkie-talkies, and other devices that operate outside of electric grids, phone lines, or internet networks.

Emergency preparedness includes storing goods that will be helpful in an emergency, including the necessities listed above, and acquiring the skills and training necessary to use them. Some emergency supplies are self-evident in their use, even if they are not used regularly in daily life (i.e. flashlights and pre-set emergency radios). Others, such as guns, HAM radios, specialized emergency medical supplies, or rocket stoves require knowledge and skills that fall outside of those generally used by preppers in daily life.

### **Moving from Emergency Preparedness to Self-Sufficiency**

Emergency preparedness is the first act of prepping for many. Most preppers, however, do not stop with emergency preparedness, but go on to the second major

component of prepping, seeking self-sufficiency. Preppers combine emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency practices to various degrees depending on the types of scenarios they feel are most likely. Most preppers don't believe either practice is complete without the other though. For example, preppers tend to think that a self-sufficiency practice that doesn't involve emergency planning or a self-defense strategy is naïve, because having sustainable long-term resources potentially exposes a household to extra risk when the Shit Hits the Fan (SHTF), and people who have not prepared panic, and turn to theft and violence, looting goods from those who built them up. This observation is derived from my early research comparing prepping to other self-sufficiency sub-cultures, namely homesteading. I observed, while looking for preppers to interview, that there was considerable overlap between membership in prepper clubs, homesteading clubs, and related clubs for topics like permaculture. Homesteaders were generally quick to differentiate themselves from preppers to avoid a common stigma that preppers are "crazy" or extreme<sup>13</sup>, but preppers did not seem to mind associating with homesteaders. Indeed, one leader of a homesteading club, who was a woman, told me that she had decided to make many of the events she hosted "women only" in part because she didn't want preppers, who, in her observation, were mostly men, to take over the club.<sup>14</sup>

Preppers didn't mind associating with homesteaders; in fact, given their interest in self-sufficiency, they often sought them out. I attended a homesteading fair with one of the prepper clubs I participated in, and none of them seemed concerned about being

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 3 for analysis of this narrative

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the gendered dynamics of homesteading and prepping see (Ford 2019)

mistaken for a homesteader—indeed, some of them gladly adopted both labels, or even preferred to be identified as a homesteader, rather than a prepper. But preppers also tended to think that homesteaders who were seeking to attain self-sufficiency without also preparing for disaster were naïve. Benjamin, who identifies as a prepper, but was also a member of the local homesteading club, explained the relationship to me during an interview:

Benjamin: I'm interested in prepping but I can see that prepping is to me is an area that you have to cover in order to survive disaster but eventually you have to survive long-term.<sup>15</sup> Unless you learn all of the skills that you need for homesteading, you're not going to survive.

On the same boat, which is what I was telling another person, you can know everything about homesteading but if you don't know the skills of prepping, you might find yourself all set up...and being attacked by people who are going to take your food. So, you have to learn the skills of prepping but also you have to learn the rest of the stuff, you have to be balanced.

In my case, I know a lot about prepping but also I have learned many skills of homesteading, not all of them, because I've realized that I was running out of time, so I've decided to learn what I could and the rest, I collect the books and I have, uh, I have an iPad—I have actually two iPad—I have tons of books on the iPad, but I am not relying on that completely because that's technology that could die in a disaster, but I have books and I have printouts.

Allison: What do you see as the differences between the skills that homesteaders do and try to acquire and the things that preppers do?

Benjamin: I feel the homesteader is long term. It's a long-term situation in that it is what you eventually are going to need to survive forever. And ever and ever! The other part is temporary.

Also, he added, a major distinction was preppers' interest in guns:

I don't know if I mentioned guns. Preppers go crazy for guns.

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<sup>15</sup> Emphasis mine

Engaging in social boundary work (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002), Benjamin considered short vs. long-term planning, and what he referred to as an obsession with guns as a major distinction between homesteaders and preppers.

Allison: Do you think there's overlap between preppers and homesteaders?

Benjamin: Um, not really.

Allison: No?

Benjamin: I personally think the homesteaders need the preppers. And the preppers need the homesteaders. Because you can know all of the skills of homesteading and you think you're gonna survive, and at the end of the story you're gonna survive, long term, forever. But if you are not able to deal with marauders and panicking people are gonna come looking for food and people are gonna be robbing you every single night, and you are not gonna get to the point that you gonna be a homesteader because you're not gonna have a farm, you're not gonna have anything. They're gonna kill you. And that's the problem that I worry about.

Homesteaders? I worry about them. I know I can survive long term. I could survive long term because I'm very careful about what I do and I'm prepared for all sorts of things, and I got plans, and I'm smart. But, and I tell you, I can survive pretty much anything. But long-term? Yeah, I could maybe figure it out 'cause I have the books, but homesteaders in general, I feel that they're gonna eat them alive.

Allison: Do you think preppers are starting to adopt more homesteading skills?

Benjamin: I hope so. But no. I see them talking about, you know, canning and all sorts of things like that, but always with the guns!

Allison: Ok. The guns are the first for preppers.

Benjamin: I don't know what's with this obsession with guns...I see the point of hunting if you need to hunt, but...obsession with the guns, against the government, that's how they get in trouble. [chuckles]. Clearly. What the hell am I going to do against people that have helicopters and tanks? So why am I going to prepare against the government? The government is supposed to be helping me.

Allison: Do you think it is? Or will?

Benjamin: No.

Benjamin is a Latinx immigrant, who identifies as a Democrat. He is less wary of the government than many preppers, who tend to skew conservative (I will address this aspect of prepping more thoroughly further on), as he himself tells me. As a Democrat with moderately liberal views, Benjamin believes the government should be involved in helping the populace, but, like Roberta and the concerned citizens of CERT, he is fairly certain that government efforts will fail.

Although Benjamin believes that preppers are overly focused on the short-term disasters, which they refer to as the Shit Hitting the Fan (SHTF), I observed significant interest in homesteading type activities, which I refer to more broadly as self-sufficiency. Like Benjamin, many preppers see emergency preparedness alone, without attention to self-sufficiency, as insufficient. At a prepper exposition I attended in Oregon, the exposition organizer explained this in a talk presented to an audience of preppers:

The speaker points out that the average food has to travel X number of miles to get to us. He gives an example of people who become aware of the problem and start learning how to garden, but points out that it becomes dangerous when food runs out because people will see that they [the gardeners] have fresh food and all the people with hungry children will loot the gardens. This is the second time I've heard this argument today.

Next he talks about a storm. This case has to do with how people in a city might prepare, because they have good jobs they don't want to leave. They will buy dehydrated food and stock up on some extra emergency water, but that this is as effective as facing a tornado with an umbrella (he has a visual for this with a man in a suit and top hat holding a red umbrella facing a tornado). What will happen if the emergency we face is a lot longer than the supplies that you have?

He tells us, “God has a plan. That’s why it’s all about sustainable preparedness. That’s why we’re putting these expos on all across the nation, friends. It’s most important to become a sustainable preparer, a producer. So you’re not only in a position where you can help your family, but you can help your friends. I’m not talking about being able to help the whole city of Portland, but your friends.”

In this example, emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency practices are both represented as necessary but not sufficient. In the first case, the family that invests all their resources into self-sufficiency is not adequately prepared to deal with the immediate aftermath of an emergency, which, in prepper scenarios, almost always involves defending oneself against looting hordes of people who have failed to adequately prepare, and therefore cannot feed their hungry children. However, emergency preparedness on its own, represented here by city-dwellers who focus all their efforts on stockpiling extra food and water, find themselves with dwindling, non-renewable supplies in a long-term emergency. The solution the speaker offers is sustainable preparedness—an emergency preparedness plan built around long-term self-sufficiency that can be defended.

### **Self-sufficiency**

Self-sufficiency in this context refers to a state of independence from institutions external to the household; for preppers, it means being able to survive and live well without depending on institutions like supermarkets and agro-industrial food production, municipal water systems, electric grids and national fuel systems, in the event of a major disaster, or The End of the World as We Know It (TEOTWAWKI). In anticipation that governments, economies, or other major industries like the agricultural industry could collapse or fail, preppers turn their attention towards surviving outside of modern, industrial society. They attend to the same basic needs that structure emergency preparedness, but with a longer-term focus. To ensure that one’s household has enough to

eat and drink in the long-run requires different practices than planning for a 3-week delay in acquiring modern goods and services. Self-sufficiency requires access to land, water, and functioning ecosystems. Self-sufficiency oriented prepping practices that I observed, or was told about by preppers include (but are not limited to):

- Planning for or developing a food production system such as gardening or farming, seed preservation, animal husbandry for meat, dairy and eggs (chickens, rabbits and goats are all popular options), raising insects for food, or aquaponics; foraging for wild food, fishing, or hunting; food processing, such as butchering, baking, cooking, grinding grains, fermentation; and food storage, such as canning, dehydrating, or freezing food, keeping a stocked and rotated pantry, and storing mass amounts of purchased dry goods with long shelf-life
- Finding and living by (often relocating to) a water source, such as a river, creek or stream, or property with a well, use of water purification if needed
- Installing small-scale renewable energy devices such as solar panels, wind turbines, wood burning stoves, small hydroelectric generators, geothermal, etc.
- Setting up a property for defense, including storage of guns and ammunition, defensive design such as fencing, surveillance, the designation of a safe room, bunkers, etc. Maintaining and reusing materials, such as casting one's own bullets; participating in emergency drills
- Alternative medical practices such as relying on herbs, plants and essential oils for medicinal purposes, developing medical skills and knowledge such as emergency wound care
- Communication strategies, including HAM radio
- Money and bartering goods, storing gold and silver, storing goods for barter such as alcohol

### **Prepper Typology**

You can be a prepper and be self-sufficient, but you can also be self-sufficient, and not, as we talked [about] early on, be a prepper. (Hank)

Both emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency are integral to prepping, although they are not the exclusive domain of preppers; a number of other thought communities focus on self-sufficiency outside of the framework of emergency or disaster

*Table 1: Preppers organize their practice around the body's survival needs*

Necessity	Practices
Food	Procuring food: gardening, foraging, fishing, hunting, raising animals for eggs, dairy or meat; processing and storing food by dehydration, canning, or freezing
Water	Using well water, water storage, water purification, water distillation, rainwater catchment, relocating to be near a stream or source of freshwater
Energy	Relying on wood stoves for heat and cooking, solar panels, small-scale hydro-electric, keeping generators, storing fuel,
Security	Keeping guns and ammunition, target practice, strategic defense planning, building a “safe room” in a house, having emergency escape routes planned
Sanitation	Storing waste buckets, compost toilets
Health/medicine	Storing medical supplies, stockpiling medication, using essential oils or herbs for medicinal purposes
Money	Keeping cash on hand, buying gold or silver, stockpiling goods for barter

preparedness (see Ford 2019 for a comparison of preppers and homesteaders, one such group), and others may attend to emergency preparedness without adopting a prepper mindset that makes constant awareness of risk an integral part of everyday life. Some preppers do stop at emergency preparedness, without as much attention to self-sufficiency. Others aspire to self-sufficiency but come to realize how difficult it is to attain. Most preppers work to achieve some balance of emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency. To distinguish amongst various balances that preppers strike amongst these practices, I offer three main types of prepping that I observed over the course of my field

work. There is considerable overlap amongst them, but in general most preppers orient their practices around one of the following:

- Survivalist prepping, or Doomsday prepping – these preppers are most closely related to survivalists, an earlier survival-oriented movement out of which prepping as a contemporary practice originated. Survivalist preppers either formerly or still do identify as survivalists and tend to focus their prepping on the widest range of disaster scenarios. As the moniker Doomsday prepper implies, they consider doomsday likely, and even highly probably in their lifetime, and are preparing for total societal collapse. These are the preppers who spend the most time thinking about TEOWAWKI, and the combination of emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency skills that surviving such an event would entail. These preppers may or may not yet live off the grid and rely on self-sufficient living skills in the present. They consider self-sufficiency an important aspect of prepping and may be preparing to live self-sufficiently should the need arise, but continue to rely mostly on consumer goods, and live on-the-grid in the present. Some have made the transition to self-sufficiency-oriented households but continue to enjoy modern amenities and consumer goods while they are available, even as they prepare to lose access.
- Homestead prepping – these preppers are mostly focused on self-sufficiency, living off-grid, and establishing a self-sufficient, small-scale sustainable household in the present. Although their practice is oriented towards self-sufficiency, they still identify as preppers, and do spend some time and resources planning for emergencies, but they put most of their efforts towards homesteading, which includes gardening or food production of some sort, a self-sustaining water supply, off-grid energy strategies, and other practices that orient them towards what one thought leader calls sustainable preparedness. These preppers believe that by practicing self-sufficiency in the present, they will be better prepared to survive the inevitable disruption in supplies and services when the SHTF.
- Emergency preparedness prepping – these preppers focus almost exclusively on emergency preparedness. They may show some interest or concern for self-sufficiency but direct their efforts towards stockpiling necessities and making bug-out or bug-in plans for when the SHTF. They tend to anticipate short term disruptions in services and the flow of consumer goods, with relatively quick resolution of the disaster (less than 6 months). Some preppers believe in the likelihood of a longer-term TEOTWAWKI event, but still focus their efforts on emergency preparedness, with much more significant investment in stockpiled goods.

I offer these typologies to acknowledge the range of practices that are included under the umbrella practice of prepping. As we see in the quotes from Benjamin and Hank, not all preppers agree on what practices are essential for prepping, and throughout my time with preppers, I observed many versions of these boundary-making conversations. These “ideal-types” serve only to differentiate between different styles of prepping, to accurately represent the multitude of practices that preppers adopt. All preppers prepare for disasters—this is the defining practice that prepping (as it is named) is built upon. But they do so in many ways, and for different reasons. One useful way of thinking about the relationship between emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency which I observed in practice, is temporal, with preppers focusing initially on responding to short-term disasters, before turning to sustaining themselves with practices oriented towards self-sufficiency.

An anonymous prepper, writing for the blog *The Organic Prepper*, organized the practices associated with prepping as temporal phases, involving four distinct time periods that require different skills. The first two phases include “surviving the disaster event itself” and “moving to a place of relative safety” apply to any disaster, regardless of scale. The second two phases, “making it through the first year” and “longterm [sic] survival and rebuilding some semblance of civilization” only apply to a TEOTWAWKI event that wipes out an entire society. The author offers the following suggestions for each phase; as you can see, the first two are oriented towards emergency response, whereas the third focuses on self-sufficiency, or living outside of the dominant social institutions that preppers expect to fail:

**Surviving the disaster event itself.** This is partly about buying the right stuff and learning the right skills you will need in a disaster situation, partly about what to

expect and what to do and where to go and how to use the stuff you bought. Covered mostly by the books (especially paper books) and the checklists. You also need to know what the potential Disasters are, be Prepared for them before they happen and be Aware so you are not taken by complete surprise and to know about resources near you.

This first phase aligns with the narrative that “nobody’s coming to help”. Planning for this first phase of disaster requires thinking through multiple scenarios about different disasters striking, and when and where they might strike. As Roberta explains above, her initial disaster response will vary based on whether she is at work, or home, during the day or night, on a weekday, a weekend, during different seasons, etc. This phase alone can involve lengthy planning, especially for preppers who hope to be prepared for “just about anything”. Thinking through potential disasters is a major prepping practice, and the scenarios that preppers focus on are significant in both revealing their taken-for-granted political and cultural assumptions, and for informing their material, environmental practices (discussed in greater detail in Chapter V).

**Moving to a place of relative safety** (hopefully for no more than a few days). This is typically called “bugging out” by preppers. See the article on Maps. The minimum basic tools, supplies and knowledge are typically gathered together ahead of time into a BOB “bug out bag”. If you have to travel on foot or by bicycle you can carry fewer supplies, so pack carefully. There are books with checklists to help you determine what should be in your BOB. Some people will plan to stay home or “bug in”. This allows you to gather more resources, mainly food, water, equipment and books.

Bugging out assumes that the disaster has required travel away from an epicenter, to a safe place, which many preppers pre-identify. Some go so far as to buy land that is far from the urban center (cities are often considered to be hot-spots of danger—see Chapter V), while others map out routes for leaving cities without having to use major highways or roads, which they assume will be jammed with traffic. In the most extreme cases,

preppers move to rural places and work to live off-the-grid, minimizing their present reliance on institutions that they believe will fail in the future. After responding to the initial phases of disaster, preppers turn to self-sufficiency:

**Making it through the first year.** In particular the first winter. In winter, after the first freeze, crops won't grow, unless you can grow them indoors or have a green house. So you must have adequate food supplies stored to feed yourself and your family until you can plant a garden in the spring and begin harvesting food in the summer. You have to assume that the electricity and natural gas will be off so you must be prepared to heat your location by fire. This means a working fireplace that actually burns wood and not gas logs, or a wood stove with an adequate supply of fuel to last you through the winter as delivery of additional fuel will not be available. Coal or oil burning furnace won't do because you will need electricity to run the fan blower and thermostat. You must have adequate winter clothing and lots of blankets. You must be able to defend yourself, your family, your supplies, and your home from those that didn't adequately prepare to survive this period of time.

As we can see here, the turn towards self-sufficiency requires a blend of homesteading skills, sets of skills that allow people to live safely without relying on any modern technology such as electricity, the internet, gas lines, or any fossil fuels like gas. This early stage of self-sufficiency is focused on surviving this transition, and defending against "those that didn't adequately prepare", a group I call "the unprepared", who serve as a constant foil to preppers, who use them to shape their defensive strategies. Self-sufficiency is adopted as a long-term survival strategy that is important not just for individual survival, but for the possibility of renewing what the author of this blog-post calls "some semblance of civilization":

**Long term survival and the rebuilding of some semblance of civilization.**

Given that in any world-wide disaster that causes civilization to collapse 90% of the world's population will quite possibly die. Most of those will be older people, many of whom will have been educated in and have many years of experience in useful subjects such as engineering, medicine, farming, construction, mechanics, oil industry, electrical generation and transmission, manufacturing, truck, rail and

shipping transportation, operating machine tools, etc. With all that knowledge and experience lost it will be impossible to restart civilization where we were before the disaster struck. Most facilities powering life as we know it, such as: factories, oil refineries, electrical power plants, hospitals, etc. may be damaged beyond use or totally destroyed. Hopefully the assemblage of knowledge presented in these articles will help civilization fall only as far as the late 1800's or early 1900's. The alternative is back to the dark ages, if not back to Native American culture prior to the arrival of the Europeans, or even back to the caves. This must not be allowed to happen at all costs! [emphasis theirs].

The focus on long-term survival assumes that modern industrial society has collapsed for good; this is the plot of the second part of the prepper story, that is summarized as The End of the World as We Know It, or TEOTWAWKI. The End of the World as We Know It is expected to destroy all modern technology as well as social organizations built around a complex and specialized division of labor.

It is interesting to note that the author's ideas of "useful subjects" are the basis of the project of modernity that they anticipate collapsing. Their description of what it means to consider rebuilding civilization is built on colonial, racist ideas that values subjects, skill sets and bodies of knowledge associated with (white) European "civilization": "engineering, medicine, farming, construction, mechanics, oil industry, electrical generation and transmission, manufacturing, truck, rail and shipping transportation, operating machine tools, etc.", which they pit against static, undifferentiated assumptions about "Native American culture". Native Americans here serve as a discursive "other" against which white and assimilated Americans frame their claims of exceptionalism and superiority (Go 2005; Said 1978; Young 2000). The anonymous author makes a racist statement about Native Americans that ignores the many innovative and creative cultural, political, social and ecologically sophisticated aspects of Native American cultures; practices that allowed many of them to sustain

North American societies for millennia (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). The author's use of past Native American cultures as a cautionary tale also ignores the presence of contemporary Native American communities, and their contributions to civilization and culture.

The horror embedded in the idea that modern-day preppers—presumed here to be, if not white, then assimilated members of a modern civilization presumably built by whites (coded here as Europeans)—belies the racial hierarchy that underlies assumptions about what is good about civilization. This act of erasure and dismissal reproduces the cultural assumptions of settler-colonialism, which Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck and Angie Morrill define as “a persistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own and do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous peoples that are there.” (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013:12). Access to land and resources is an important theme in the turn to self-sufficiency, further linking this mode of prepping to settler-colonial discourse and practice. Arvin, Tuck and Morrill note that “Within settler colonialism, it is exploitation of land that yields supreme value. In order for settlers to usurp the land and extract its value, Indigenous peoples must be destroyed, removed, and made into ghosts” (ibid).

This assessment of the tasks that survivors will need to attend to reveals what I believe is the question at the heart of prepping: what do we do when modernity fails? Answering this question requires engaging with all the things that modernity does, and the ways in which modern subjects of wealthy, industrialized societies are dependent on impersonal, bureaucratic institutions for their most basic needs. The temporal sequence of prepping presented above reveals a fundamental tension at the heart of prepping: ambivalence about modernity that contains both pride in, and enjoyment of modern

achievements, and the comforts it provides on the one hand, and fear, discouragement, and distress at its inevitable decline on the other.

If emergency preparedness represents the conviction that utter dependence on external institutions for emergency response is unwise, the discourse of self-sufficiency represents a much deeper uncertainty about the viability of modern civilization as we know it. This uncertainty provides the groundwork for giving voice to powerful political feelings, safely projected into an unknown and unknowable future. This future only exists in the scenarios preppers fabricate, but those scenarios have political salience in the present, reflecting beliefs about who and what is worth preserving, saving, and restoring. And like all visions of the future, they are shaped by beliefs about the past. If it has been the technological advancements of modernity that set citizens of wealthy, industrial nations like the United States apart from pre-civilized humans, how might preppers maintain a sense of exceptionalism when modernity collapses?

### **Landscapes of Risk**

Modern material and social networks cut people off from the basic ecological necessities that all human bodies need to survive (Worthy 2008)—an environmental entity I call an ecological life support system. An ecological life support system includes access to land (both cultivated and wild), functioning watersheds, sources of fuel or energy producing systems (for heat and cooking), and raw materials, etc. Social organization has always involved procuring and maintaining access to land and its resources and struggles over who has access to it are the basis of ongoing political processes and structures, including but not limited to capitalism and settler-colonialism. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write, “Land (not money) is actually the basis for U.S.

wealth. If we took away land, there would be little wealth left to redistribute.”(2012:24). Land in the United States and elsewhere have long histories of contested claims to access, rights and ownership, but for many citizens, these histories are obscured by complex supply and distribution chains that render invisible the ties between their daily lives, and their ecological life-support systems. Once people no longer have direct access to life-sustaining environmental resources, they are utterly dependent on institutions.

Preppers prep because they recognize that they are dependent on institutions, people, and the environment. They are very uncomfortable with this relationship. As Kai puts it,

We're in such a precarious state where we're vulnerable to so many different potential political economic ecological factors mainly because we're not taking responsibility for our physical security and our own ecological security.

The cultural threat comes from the recognition that Americans, a people fiercely invested in ideals of independence, are in fact deeply dependent on complex public and private institutions for their survival, undercutting claims to autonomy, self-responsibility, and the possibility of control. One prepper, a community thought leader who also identifies as a homesteader, writes on his blog, "I'm particularly concerned about how utterly dependent almost everyone is on "the system" for their most basic necessities of life-- such as water, heat, and food."

Preppers are very concerned about responsibility. They believe that dependence represents a lapse in their own responsibility, and that of others. This reinforces their tendency to be distrustful, producing what I call a double bind between dependence and distrust. Preppers recognize their dependence, but they distrust both the institutions that produce the conditions of dependence, and the individuals that they see as shirking their

responsibility to be independent, either by acting to produce and encourage conditions of dependence, or by failing to prepare. Because they are complicit in the creation of these conditions, preppers see those who are unprepared not only as irresponsible, but as dangerous. Both institutions and individuals are to blame. Prepping—which preppers see as a form of reclaiming responsibility for oneself—is the solution to dependence and is therefore a sign of responsibility. John, a conservative white prepper who runs a small business in Idaho, tells me,

If you have someone, or something assume all your responsibilities, then you are no longer responsible. What you have in Louisiana with [Hurricane] Katrina, these people there are there solely because the government has assumed all the responsibilities. There are hundreds of thousands of people there who do nothing but breed and get welfare. Because they don't have to be responsible.

The insanity is that the whole area is below sea level. There's no reason for it to be there anyway... When a governing agency, city, county, state or federal assumes your responsibility for your failures, or your unwillingness to participate in life, or your unwillingness to work, and they allow this, you've become a victim. It's automatic. It's right there. It's like, "Okay, you're victim."

What is most significant about John's concern about people ceding responsibility is not just that he dislikes being in a state of dependence himself, but that he considers the contemporary social order of interdependence between institutions and individuals to be morally reprehensible. To rely on an institution—in this case the government—for anything represents an unwillingness to take responsibility for yourself—a judgement he makes, using a dehumanizing stereotype of welfare recipients, without consideration of contextual circumstances.

As sociologist Paul Stock observes, "Hurricane Katrina, as an event and prolonged social and political struggle, demonstrates many fissures in our society today."

(2007: 706). John does not mention anything during our interview to suggest that he has any particular relationship to this place, beyond his perceptions of Hurricane Katrina, which echo media portrayals of the storm's aftermath, which Stock argues relied heavily on a frame of "anarchy" to describe the post-disaster conditions (Stock 2007). Joane Nagel (2016) observes that media representations of violence and anarchy during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina were readily accepted without evidence because they drew upon racial and gendered stereotypes that both reporters and the general public assumed to be true. She writes that,

The initial reports painted a picture of dangerous Black men sniping, looting, and raping. Many observers expressed little sympathy for the presumed victims of this crime wave, Black women, who were depicted as "culprits in their own misfortune" because of their presumed laziness, promiscuity, and irresponsibility, rather than because of low pay, lack of jobs, lack of affordable housing, lack of transportation out of flooded areas, and poor city, state, and federal disaster relief. Few reports focused on the damage done to the resiliency of those whose lives were disrupted by Hurricane Katrina, including the destruction of pre-Katrina support networks and mutual aid systems on which many of New Orleans' most vulnerable residents depended. Little attention was paid to the bravery and generosity of the displaced toward one another. (Nagel 2016:64)

John's ideas about the poor of New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina mirror the presumption of laziness, promiscuity, and irresponsibility that Nagel describes. He attributes the conditions of poor, welfare recipients of New Orleans to bad individual choices and an unwillingness to work. This perception builds on American stereotypes about welfare recipients documented by Joe Feagin in 1972 (Feagin 1972), suggesting the remarkable durability of the political ideology that informs sentiments about responsibility. John takes for granted that welfare and unrestrained sexuality and child-bearing go together, drawing on what Patricia Hill Collins calls a "controlling image", a

racist, sexist ideology that “permeate[s] the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal and inevitable.” (Collins 2009:7). John’s use of the word “breed” introduces concern about sexuality and gender, signifying sexual promiscuity in a way that recalls stereotypes of the black female “welfare queen” (Lubiano 1992; Nadasen 2007).

Although John exhibits disdain for the “victims” of Katrina, and, in his opinion, government overreach, he also draws on an environmental narrative. The basis for his argument that the city shouldn’t even exist is environmental: “the whole area is below sea level”. He makes this argument in passing, on the way to a broader point: the government is responsible for the existence of New Orleans, and New Orleans, with its poor capacity to weather hurricanes and its population of “breeders” and welfare recipients, serves as the example of what is wrong with the world: government assuming responsibility, and individuals letting it happen.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, New Orleans was created not by the United States government (which did not yet exist in 1718, when the city was founded), but by a French corporation, on Chitimacha land, under the direction of Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, not for any strategic geopolitical reason, but because Bienville’s personal financial interests won out over those of French officials, who would have preferred to situate their settlement elsewhere. The context was entirely capitalist and colonial, as is the history of the city’s circumstances, which inform its contemporary environmental and socio-economic conditions. Historian Lawrence M. Powell explains:

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<sup>16</sup> New Orleans here serves as a stand-in for urban decadence, another recurring motif that preppers draw upon, discussed further in Chapter 2. Los Angeles is another favorite example that is frequently held up as a bastion of modern excess.

In truth, the founding of New Orleans had less to do with the imperatives of geography than with the cunning of history. The town was the unintended consequence of the world's first stock market crash, the notorious Mississippi Bubble. But for its bursting, New Orleans might have been built in the shadow of Baton Rouge, at a now largely forgotten bend in the river known as Bayou Manchac. This was where officials in France, whose word was supposed to be final, had wanted to put it. Bienville fought for its present-day location because he had large land concessions there. Geopolitical clairvoyance had little to do with his site selection; self-interest, everything (Powell 2012).

Like the rest of the United States, the city's current circumstances, including a complicated network of material and cultural imbrications, are a result of a colonial history that is overlooked, minimized, or ignored by its modern inhabitants. John's use of New Orleans and its welfare recipients as an emblem of contemporary dependence and the slippery slope from ceding responsibility to victimhood parallels other cultural strategies by which Americans minimize or deny the historical circumstances of colonialism, and the race, gender, and class dynamics that structured them (see for example Bonilla-Silva (2014) on colorblind racism, Joan Acker on the racialized and gendered nature of capitalism (Acker 1992b) and Tuck and Yang (2012) on settler moves to innocence).

### **Depending on “Union Commies” and “Mother Nature”**

John grows visibly, animated with scorn when talking about those who he believes willingly choose victimhood—an unconscionable decision that he does not understand. His concern derives from the recognition that, like it or not, as a citizen of a common society, he is affected by the “choices” others make, which perpetuate the state of dependence that makes up the status quo. This is the double-bind of dependence and distrust. John recognizes his interdependence with others whose choices he believes put

him at risk. He explains his discomfort with the current state of dependence that most people live in, identifying the ripple effects of a Longshoremen's strike in Los Angeles on the access that he has to food and necessary goods in Idaho:

John: You can see this yourself. There are political and governmental problem that occur, like the Long Beach, down in south California. Longshoremen went on strike, just a few years ago. "Who cares? A bunch of union commies down in there, who cares?" Except for one thing, what these guys took care of on all these ships, was to bring in food and stuff that comes up here, in trucks.

All of a sudden Safeway, Fred Meyers, and Super One, their shelves are starting to look bare, because all they have left is Tabasco and Salsa...

The food thing was one thing, and then there was another thing that was simply mother nature. You know the road from Spokane to here. That's our main shipping hub. We had an ice storm. There were six inches of ice in the road. I don't care who or what you are, you ain't getting here. It's just 30 miles that way, and that's it. No snow shovel, no snow blowers, no ice melt, no warm clothes, there was nothing that we would always go, "Oh, I need that. I'll go out and buy it." It wasn't there.

Allison: So there's sort of awareness of the precarity of access to things that we depend on? Is that right?

John: Yes, of course. One-hundred and fifty years ago, everybody, the majority of people lived on farms, more outward areas where they were merchants or they were farmers, they were this, they were that, and that's how they survived...

John resents that his supply of food is controlled by workers at ports in Los Angeles, whose politics he clearly disagrees with, associating union activity, in this case a strike, with communism, a communitarian political ideology he makes clear he holds in disdain.

John owns and operates a small business. He identifies as a libertarian and is in favor of capitalism; but he is also critical of the institutionalized distribution process that makes possible capitalism's claimed efficiency via free trade.

The history of the development of capitalism and industrialization include the separation of most people from land, leaving them dependent on wage labor and monetary pay, for survival (Federici 2014; Marx 1976; Perelman 2000). The United States was settled by Europeans influenced by capitalist ideas and economic aspirations, however for most of its early history, most of its population relied directly on the land, and had a hand in their own subsistence (Dickinson 1995). Access to land and division of labor varied by race, class, and gender—for example, a white owned plantation might have African slaves to directly work the land, however all members of a household typically contributed some form of labor to the subsistence and well-being of the household. This remained the norm in America until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As historian Torry D. Dickinson shows, the transition away from self-sufficiency as a common facet of community life was not an accident, or an inevitable form of progress, but a political process of reform promoted by state agencies and charity organizations (whose boards were made up of business representatives), who undertook political work to discourage what Dickinson calls informal work, thus pushing previously self-sufficient households towards reliance on wage labor (Dickinson 1995:5, 33). Dickinson argues that the devaluation of informal work was an important factor in the production of the corporatist, welfare-state that John describes, and it was in no way inevitable. Dickinson writes,

As the size of firms began to grow in the mid-nineteenth century, charity organizations in the United States began discouraging neighborhood residents from earning income outside of the wage employment system. Initiated by non-profit boards heavily represented by business, this intervention began to nudge many workers in the community toward more wage-earning. Early predecessors to state agencies had started to intervene in informal work by the time of the economic contraction, which began in 1830 and ended in 1850. Workhouse

managers tried to gain access over labor by confronting neighborhood power brokers, who provided ways for low- to moderate-income households to subsist outside of formal wage relations. Parastatal organizations tried to undermine pawnbrokers, sellers of lottery policies, sellers of second-hand goods, and renters of sleeping spaces (33).

These historical political processes are inextricably tied to modern social life, in which most citizens do not have access to land. Nor do they possess the skillsets or knowledge that is necessary to transform land and raw materials into the material goods out of which their familiar cultural worlds are constructed—these skills were commodified via processes that began more than a century ago, as more and more workers were channeled into a deep division of labor. Survival in the modern capitalist economy requires a different skillset—one that produces dependence, rather than self-sufficiency. Dickinson’s analysis suggests that the corporate-controlled economy and the heavy-handed welfare state are two sides of the same coin, as both are implicated in cutting off workers from the basis of their own survival. Having needs met by external systems is to many people a mark of freedom from the burden of daily struggle for survival. But it is a state of affairs that preppers, (as well as other sub-cultures of Americans; see (Ford 2019)) have come to resent. Even as preppers may support capitalist ideals in theory, the lived reality diverges from the ideal. For dependence is a necessary state of a capitalist economy that has made self-sufficiency inefficient, and untenable. Preppers feel the dependence that it produces instead as a vulnerability, and a mark of shame that challenges their identities as independent, autonomous individuals.

### **“That’s Who I Am...I’d Do What’s Necessary”: Responsibility and Identity**

Preppers reject a state of dependence with strong, negative emotional intensity. Emotions researchers typically categorize emotions by valence (pleasurable or

unpleasant) and intensity (strong to mild). The quality of dependence is not necessarily bad; in many conditions, to many people, it is neutral. Our pets depend on us. Children depend on their parents. Humans are deeply social, and as such, always depend on social others. Furthermore, our ecological embeddedness means that we depend upon many non-human others, including plants, animals, microbes, and the roles they play in maintaining functioning systems, ranging from our digestive systems, to ecosystems to the circulation of carbon in the atmosphere. Dependence has several connotations—it can mean relying on others for support or assistance, a state of contingency, or a state of subordination. Preppers focus almost exclusively on the third meaning, equating dependence with subordination, vulnerability, and victimhood. For them, dependence represents subordination, and loss of control.

Rejecting a state of victimhood is a major concern for preppers, many of whom express contempt for anyone they view as a victim. The heightened affect that arises whenever the idea of victimhood comes up suggests the potency of their antipathy for the implied state. Preppers believe that to be a victim somebody has given up their autonomy and allowed their choices to be controlled by an external system (often the government)—a “choice” that is anathema to their own worldview, in which everyone is responsible for their own life-chances, regardless of the circumstances.

“I believe very strongly in personal responsibility,” Hank tells me. We are discussing gun laws, and the tension between his belief that all gun owners should get training, and his aversion to regulations.

Hank: If somebody's going to arm themselves for self-defense, GO GET TRAINING. How to use it, when to use it and when NOT to use it. I believe very strongly in that.

Allison: So, there should be some sort of regulation, or guidelines around...

Hank: No! [interrupting when he hears the word 'regulation'] Not, well... [pauses when he hears 'guidelines'] ... no. No. No, as soon as you put regulations on it then the government goes amuck with that. And I have no trust for the government, whatsoever, with that kind of thing. Because we've seen it happen before. So, it would be a recommendation [emphasis mine]. Because, if you don't do that, you screw up, and put a round in somebody's back, guess what. You're facing the consequences. You should have gotten training in when you can and when you can't use that, that was your personal responsibility.... You should have gotten training, so you know you don't get to shoot the bad guy in the back.

Allison: So, it's not so much regulations on gun ownership or the practice itself, it's just basic legal structure like this is murder, this isn't. And that covers it?

Hank: Right. You need to understand the consequence of doing things. As soon as you get the government involved, then they're going to be over-arching. And I absolutely believe that.

This exchange reveals the intense feelings that preppers express about the need for individuals to accept personal responsibility, to avoid having collective boundaries imposed upon them in any form. Doing so is on the one hand presented as a matter of choice. On the other hand, not doing so is a sign of moral failing. In this way, claiming personal responsibility becomes a matter of a morally worthwhile personal identity in the context of a morally questionable state of dependence. The construction of this claim reveals important tensions between preppers' understanding of self in relation to social organization, and the importance of a socially constructed "other" who serves as foil against which preppers form their own "narrative constitution of identity" (Somers 1994).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In her theory of "narrative constitution of identity" Margaret Somers summarizes the sociological perspective that identities are not fixed, but dynamic and relational. Who we are is constantly unfolding

Hank has told me that he believes that everybody should be armed. To him, it is a matter of personal responsibility, because:

There are bad people out there and they will continue to be bad people that do things to good people and you need to be prepared for that.

When I summarize what I think he's saying for clarity, he is unequivocal about this position:

Allison: Do you think that basically everybody should be armed?

Hank: I think so!

Allison: You do?

Hank: Yeah, unless you have a moral reason not to want to do that, I think everybody should know how to use a firearm and understand the consequences of using that firearm and what the law is. And then practice with it so that you are able to defend yourself and/or your loved ones or the people you're with. Absolutely I do.

Hank asks me if I am carrying a gun at that moment. I tell him no. He says, "I didn't think you would be!" He asks me if I would carry a gun if someone gave me one. I'm not sure where he's going with this, but I sense that he is trying to get me to reveal an anti-gun sentiment.<sup>18</sup> My response is hesitant: "Um, yeah, I guess. I have shot a gun..."<sup>19</sup> I have no interest in carrying a gun in general, but I wouldn't refuse to hold one out of principle.

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and changing in relation to the social circumstances in which we find ourselves, many of which are beyond our power to determine. Narrative is a cultural form that fills in the space between individual experience and the social forces that shape them; as such, narratives are a ripe source of data for understanding how people make sense of social worlds and their relationships to them. I discuss the significance of narrative identity in greater depth in Chapter 3.

<sup>18</sup> Before agreeing to be interviewed by me, Hank, a staunch conservative active in Tea-Party Republican politics, asked me about my own political sensibilities. I answered honestly that I was politically liberal. He responded that he was still willing to talk to me but preferred to know what perspective I was coming from. I appreciate his willingness to engage across the increasingly wide aisle of political ideologies; as I describe in the Data and Methods section, not all preppers were willing to do so.

<sup>19</sup> The only time I have ever shot a gun is during the pistol shooting class I took with preppers in Oregon.

Since I have not given him a counterargument, he goes ahead and creates his own, using a favorite prepper tool: the scenario.

Hank: Ok! So, let's say that we're sitting here<sup>20</sup> and a guy who's obviously screwed up on drugs or whatever else comes in and he starts acting crazy and you're not carrying a gun. I'm gonna have you on the floor, I'd say get on the floor right now and I'll have my gun out. I don't intend to take the guy on *unless he decides to start getting crazy*, and then I will, cause I'm gonna protect YOU. All right? *That's...who I am*. You can't defend yourself, and I know how to shoot a gun. And I'm pretty good with it. So, I would do what's necessary. But I'm not gonna try to provoke things. I'm not gonna get up and, hey! Put the gun down, asshole. No, I'm not gonna do that. That's just lookin for a fight. But if things get crazy...and there's probably somebody else in here who's carrying also. But I will do what I can to keep you safe.<sup>21</sup>

Allison: So, it's both self-protection but also protection of people around you.

Hank: Exactly

The way in which Hank sets up this scenario allows him to make several important points. First, he lets me know that he is armed not because he wants to harm someone, but because he feels responsible for his own self-protection. He is not “crazy” for owning a gun, and gun owners are responsible citizens, not dangerous gun nuts. Hank refers several times to the perception that the general public thinks preppers are crazy; similarly, gun carriers here are presented as a stigmatized, misunderstood group. This exchange fits into what sociologist Jennifer Carlson observes in her study of American gun culture and gun carriers, who see themselves as *citizen-protectors* responsible not just for themselves, but for those around them. (Carlson 2015). The choice to carry a gun

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<sup>20</sup> We are in a public coffee shop that Hank has selected. He later reveals that he prefers to patronize this coffee shop because they allow open carry, while another coffee shop up the street does not.

<sup>21</sup> Emphasizes in caps denote an inflection in Hank's speech; emphasizes in italics are mine to call attention to an important turn of phrase

does moral work that calls upon codes of “masculine protection” a logic of gendered meaning in which masculinity is associated with chivalry, courage, virtue, and heroism (rather than brutal domination). Men’s role of protection takes on a quality of self-effacing service to those less able to do the work of violence. “The “good” man is one who keeps vigilant watch over the safety of his family and readily risks himself in the face of threats from the outside in order to protect the subordinate members of his household” (Young 2003:4).

Like the gun-carriers Carlson interviewed and spent time with, Hank’s sense of responsibility extends to those around him. Hank and I have had one phone conversation and are about an hour into an interview. Before this moment, we have not met. We have no prior relationship. I am a liberal, someone whose politics are in direct opposition to his. I am also a young(ish), middle-class white woman. In extending his protection to me, Hank taps into this ethos of masculine protection, and the gun-carrier as a protector of those unable to protect themselves. Simply by virtue of being in the coffee shop with him and not “acting crazy”, he has deemed me one of the good guys, and he has taken responsibility for my safety in this scenario.<sup>22</sup> According to Hank’s explicitly stated belief that carrying a gun is a moral imperative, by not carrying a gun, I have shirked my responsibility to protect myself. I point this out, curious where this logic will take us.

Allison: And it sounds like, in this scenario, not having a gun puts me out of commission. I’m just useless in this scenario, where having a gun means you have some chance to respond? Does that...

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<sup>22</sup> Just prior to this exchange, he signaled this by including this assumption about me to make a point: “you hang with good people. I hang with good people. We’re not criminals. Right?”

Put in such stark terms, face to face with someone he has essentially just called irresponsible, it gets a little awkward.

Hank: Ok, ok. No, that makes sense. Right. It's...I wouldn't say...well, it's a harsh term, but yes. You would be useless as far as trying to defend. Now. Let's say that dirtbag Joe over there starts shooting and one of us puts a round in 'im and puts him down. Alright, he's down for the count. In the meantime, that poor lady over there has got a bullet hole in her arm. You might have the skills to go over and put some pressure on it and dial 911. So, you wouldn't be useless. You would be responding. As opposed to being in the corner in the fetal position crying...that's useless.

Allison: [laughs] Sure.

Given that he doesn't know me well, he has no way of knowing if I am likely to exhibit passable emergency first aid skills or not. If not, I'm still potentially useless, so he offers me another out.

Hank: I'm not saying that that's bad. Because some...people...most people are NOT prepared for violence, whether its man-made or natural, all right? I was a firefighter-paramedic. I dealt with that all the time. I've seen really bad stuff. But *I've got the mental set up to deal with that kind of thing that most people don't.* And I don't hold that against people, I don't at all. I just don't want people condemning me, oh, you're one of those gun guys, you know? You know, we're sittin' here talking, and let's say that you had said, oh, I would never have a gun, I think gun owners are crazy, and a bad guy came in<sup>23</sup>. I'd still defend you! Because that's my responsibility as a citizen, and as a Christian, in reverse order. I would defend you, and I would defend your right to believe what you want to believe. I mean, that's the first amendment. I would disagree with you, and I'd say after the bad guys are dead, we're sittin' here, and you've crapped your pants and you're cryin', and I'd say, ok you can get up now, he's dead and you're not, all right? So, what do you think about gun owners now?

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<sup>23</sup> This is the line that I failed to deliver on cue earlier in this conversation. Hank craftily worked around my missed cue to deliver the point he wanted to make, which is interesting from a methodological point of view, given the concern that interviews might lead a subject into uncharacteristic self-reflexivity causing them to express a point of view that they do not necessarily hold. This line of thinking situates the interview subject as a "cultural dupe", incapable of shaping their dialogue to their own purposes, as Hank has clearly done here.

There is complexity—and tension—in Hank’s understanding of responsibility. On the one hand, he believes it is irresponsible to fail to take responsibility for your own protection. On the other hand, he personally sees himself as responsible for others around him—morally, based on his religious beliefs, and politically, as a citizen. What’s interesting is that he does not seem to believe that other citizens can be trusted to extend him the same protection—indeed, it doesn’t seem to cross his mind that he would be anything but the active hero in this story. At no point does he suggest that he might be the one crapping himself under a table while someone else takes control of the situation—and this is a point of pride. He communicates this clearly when he tells me, “I’ve got the mentality set up to deal with that kind of thing”, differentiating himself from “most people”.

This distinction—preppers vs. most people—is a recurring trope that preppers use to set themselves apart from those who are unprepared. It is linked to both the idea of the masculine protector and to claims of personal superiority, which preppers call upon to explain how they differ from the unprepared. What these narratives have in common is that they depend on a subordinate, who acts as a foil, creating a boundary between a desirable self and one worthy of scorn, derision, and judgement.

When feeling generous—when one of the unprepared is sitting across from him at a café table listening raptly to his stories, on a pleasant, sunny day, for example—the unprepared may be granted the graciousness that Hank grants me here. I may in fact have some useful skills, even if I am not armed or skilled at shooting bad guys. Even if I don’t, though, by virtue of our proximity and my failure to demonstrate an association with any bad guys, I am still considered worthy of protecting. However, this grace dries up when

applied to a generalized, homogenous group of people who do not claim responsibility for themselves, according to prepper reckonings. When feeling threatened by the state of dependence that preppers believe is created in part by “greedy” institutions, but also in part by the willingness of other individuals to be witless victims, the generosity flags. Preppers become angry, resentful, and spiteful, generating disdain that is directed at impersonal, unprepared others.

On the one hand, Hank’s feelings about personal responsibility and his antipathy towards any sort of government regulation represents a classic conservative belief that government regulations minimize personal responsibility by taking away the ability of individuals and organizations to make choices. On the other hand, Hank himself clearly feels responsibility for other people, a situation he makes sense of by emphasizing his difference, a difference which tacitly signals superiority built on the ability to respond calmly and rationally in the face of danger. Hank is invested in this image of himself—someone who takes responsibility. But in a society where citizens are expected not to carry their own guns to shoot at bad guys, but to call the police, he rarely has an opportunity to act on this self-image.

Dependence is a quality of modern life. Many people view this as a benefit, something to be celebrated, and invested in perpetuating. But preppers frame dependence as a risk. Dependence challenges their sense of autonomy and their political investment in personal freedom. It also generates the existential threat noted above. Dependence leads to vulnerability, as the body’s needs are outsourced to institutions that can fail—in many cases, institutional risk production is offered as evidence that they have in fact already failed. The failure of institutions that individuals rely upon for survival and well being

leaves the body vulnerable to various environmental, economic political and social crises. It also leaves the culturally constructed image of the independent rational self—also a product of modernity—vulnerable to crisis of a different sort. The recognition of material dependence is incompatible with a number of core beliefs that preppers hold about themselves and their relationship to society.

### **Dependence Breeds Risk**

There are three key contemporary beliefs that inform the practice of prepping:

1. The belief that modern institutions breed dependence,
2. The belief that modern institutions are risk producing, and
3. The belief that neither institutions nor other individuals can be trusted.

For many preppers, prepping begins with the perception of this dynamic: they are dependent, and, they come to believe, dependence this puts them at risk.

Preppers believe that the social order of modernity is fragile, and likely to collapse soon. The institutions that they are told they should rely on for emergency response do not in fact have the capacity to respond. From their perspective, institutions like the media encourage dependence and discourage free-thinking. Events like Hurricane Katrina serve as a cautionary tale for how bad things can get for those who don't prepare. Like John, Max, a prepper who lives in North Carolina, cites the poor showing of FEMA during Hurricane Katrina as evidence that the institutions we rely on for subsistence and safety are not reliable:

I think by and large...the majority of Americans at least have become dependent on the media to tell them what to do, when to do it, where to do it, and if that doesn't work they can rely on the government to show up eventually and hand out food, water and shelter, and all this stuff. I think Katrina should have served as a good warning that that's a bad strategy.

As Kai puts it,

We're trained and conditioned to rely on a system...there's this statistic that somewhere during the cold war there was enough grain storage in the United States to feed the population I think for three months or something like that. Now there's enough to give every family half a loaf of bread worth of grain. So they've just sold us out and they're not coming to rescue us. We're going to be lining up for FEMA food stamp cards and it's just more of the dystopian predictions...

Note that Kai observes a change over time. During the Cold War, which officially ended in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United States stored higher volumes of grain, enough that there were reserves that Kai interprets as added security. Over the last 30 years—most of Kai's lifetime, he believes that major changes have occurred, leaving him far more vulnerable to disaster than past generations of Americans. "They", which I interpret to mean the federal government, have "sold us out". This metaphor suggests a profit motif, and the belief that government institutions exist not to serve and protect the populace, but to make a profit. Kai concludes this thought by referencing FEMA food stamp cards. He may be referring to D-SNAP, Disaster Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program, which provides food assistance to low income households that experience damage or food loss during a disaster (Disaster Assistance Improvement Program 2019), but his language—imagery of lining up not for foods but for cards, associated with dystopian predictions calls to mind both Depression-era imagery of people waiting in line for soup kitchens, as well as the more nefarious contemporary conspiracy theory of "FEMA camps", a growing fear that the federal government will fabricate an emergency in order to justify rounding up and imprisoning citizens in concentration camps built under the auspices of disaster relief (Keller 2010). This fear, and other fears preppers reveal about the state of modern dependence, illustrates the wide-spread prepper belief

that modern institutions are risk producing, a belief that generates complicated feelings that combine to form a state of ambivalence.

### **Living in the Belly of the Beast: Ambivalence about Modernity**

Prepping is about survival, the sustenance and continuation of the human body. But prepping is also about something more than just surviving; it is about maintaining the comforts of modern life even if the material networks they are embedded in fail. For most of human history, individuals and communities have had some sort of direct access to the sources of their food, water, medicinal plants, raw materials, and the ecosystems services that produce them<sup>24</sup>. Industrialization, urbanization, population growth, and modern organization of social life have disrupted this relationship, producing what psychologist Kenneth Worthy calls phenomenal dissociation. Phenomenal dissociation is a form of alienation from the environment—that is to say, in modern, wealthy industrial places, people do not feel their connection to the environment on a sensual, embodied level, because “modern life situates each person at the nexus of a series of elongated material and informational networks that separate individuals to an unprecedented degree from the origins of their sustenance, the destinations of their wastes, and the consequences of their actions” (Worthy 2008:148-9).

Schlosberg and Coles refer to these as “material flows” (Schlosberg and Coles 2015) and argue that increasing recognition of problems with unsustainable material flows require a new environmentalism of everyday life that addresses “the production, supply and circulation of everyday material needs” (1). In short, people are embedded in

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<sup>24</sup> “Ecosystem services” broadly defined refers to “the social value of the benefits that ecosystems provide” (Fisher, Turner, and Morling 2009:645) see also (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1981; Westman 1977).

networks of both cultural and material flows. People throughout these systems participate in a wide range of cultural practices that both keep these systems functioning and render them invisible. Preppers are aware that they are situated at what Worthy (2008) calls “the nexus of a series of elongated material and informational networks” (148-9). Schlosberg and Coles argue that various groups of people are re-orienting their cultural practices to address “maladaptation, or a misaligned relationship, between humans and the non-human world, rethinking and redesigning the practices and processes that supply with the basic needs of our material lives in a way that acknowledges the human immersion in—and deeply co-constitutive relationship with—the flows of the non-human realm” (2). It would be a stretch to call prepping a form of “environmentalism”, but I do situate prepping in relation to increasing recognition of the maladaptation between humans and the environment. Preppers make sense of this through a frame of risk that reveals the tension between their critique of the dominant standard paradigm (DSP) of modern life, and their attachment to modern life.

Elsewhere, Kari Norgaard and I argue that a group’s response to environmental risk (in our example, climate change) is informed by pre-existing cultural worldviews, which include cultural frames that filter new ideas and information according to what people already know about the world. When these cultural frames are misaligned with information about the world, people experience emotional responses signaling this misalignment. Beliefs about dominant institutions such as the state and the market, and commitment to the project of modernity is one of four salient cultural frames that we identify as informing how people make sense of environmental risk (Ford and Norgaard 2019:223). Access and commitment to cultural frames are contingent on social location,

which sets groups up to interpret information about risk in vastly different ways. Building on sociological theory of the importance of social location—one’s relationship to social structure—to one’s experience and life-chances, I call attention to the environmental aspects of social location, which I refer to as socio-environmental location; where we stand in relationship to the material networks that mediate between human bodies and the environmental resources that sustain them.<sup>25</sup>

Relatively speaking, preppers live comfortably in the belly of the beast of modernity. The United States is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, with more individuals in the 1% global wealth group than any other country. It is widely considered an economic, cultural, and military superpower. This is echoed in a cultural discourse of exceptionalism, which situates Americans and their history as exceptional, and beyond comparison with the rest of the world. Max, a prepper who resides in North Carolina, draws on this narrative, even as he expresses frustration, anger, and discouragement over the current state of American society, which leaves him feeling constantly at risk. Max acknowledges his relative privilege when he told me,

I never knew hard times. I heard about them. My parents lived the depression. My grandparents were in the midst of it. Some of what my faith is built on and my

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<sup>25</sup> The concept of socio-environmental location is meant to indicate more than just physical location (i.e. I am writing this in Eugene, Oregon) but rather one that indicates my positionality in relation to the networks that Worthy and Hank both observe; i.e. I live in an apartment wired with electricity that is delivered via a municipal power utility; my middle-class income allows me to pay the electricity bill without difficulty. I am connected to the municipal water system and sewage waste disposal system, my trash is picked up weekly by a municipal or county service, I purchase food with money from supermarkets, including goods grown nearby and around the world, and although I occasionally garden and produce something edible, I do not have the skills or knowledge to feed myself well outside of a food distribution system. Situating someone in a socio-environmental location tells us something important about their relationship to the material world and the materiality of the social structures they are embedded in.

work ethic and my philosophy of life and this country, stems from back there. Those are the roots. That's where they came from.

In his lifetime, Max has not wanted for basic goods. He observes that his parents and his grandparents, who lived through the Depression, experienced hardships because of structural circumstances beyond their control—they happened to live in the United States during the country's most severe economic crash in its short history. Even though he did not live through this time, he believes it affected him, indirectly, via its effects on his family. His family's experience of hardship produced a work ethic, a religious faith, and a sense of nationalism that are all tied to the modern-industrial political-economic systems in which his family is embedded.

It would be easy to view a life of plenty as evidence of modernity's success. Why then, does Max fear the collapse of the system that allowed him to live, thus far, without hardship? Max acknowledges that his needs have always been met. But his life experience showed him that this was not always the case for others. Having grown up with a father in the military, Max spent time overseas, where he observed that, by virtue of his nationality, he was afforded privileges that others did not know. Living comfortably within the modern system was not inevitable—it came with being a citizen of one of the wealthiest countries in the world. This suggested that such a lifestyle was contingent, not guaranteed. Max associates this experience with his eventual turn to prepping, explaining,

Max: I can take it back to when I was living overseas as a military dependent. I saw how the rest of the world lives, and that's an experience I would not trade. I have been overseas several times. When I get back to the States, there's no way I can tell people you don't know what you have. You won't know what you have until it's gone and you can't get it back again.

Allison: What are some of the circumstances that [you saw]?

Max: Living overseas as a military dependent you live in relatively nice housing, by comparison. Military housing is not known for its luxury... Whether it's stateside or overseas, it's pretty much standard fare. Around here in the stateside, I would call military housing, as I remember it to be, I would call it upper-lower class or lower-middle class, depending on your rank. Overseas you're rich, you're wealthy by comparison to the house you live in and the furniture, and you have all the utilities, the facilities, a PX, a grocery store commissary to go to, and the food's above par for whatever country that may be because usually military stations overseas are in developing countries and they're outside. Those people just look in with -- The kids standing outside the candy store looking in. It's no wonder Americans don't have a good reputation. They have all this luxury and they act like assholes. Some of them do because they think, "I'm American. I'm entitled. What I say goes". [chuckles] No, no. That is one of the things that I was exposed to and learned from that. The value of what I have strictly by inheritance of previous generations.

I know what we have, because I've seen the rest of the world who doesn't have anything like it. I never lived in the nice places in Europe. I have been in Nigeria, in the Philippines, Panama -- lovely people, but the places I was in I would not go there for a vacation, but, I see how people still live and Americans by and large don't see any of that.

Max draws on colonial discourse that associates modern well-being with a high level of industrialized development in the United States and Europe—"the nice places". Nations like Nigeria, the Philippines, and Panama, which Max views as less developed than the United States and Europe serve as a cautionary tale for how good Max and Americans like him have it, even as he anticipates how easily it can all be taken away. He adopts a narrative of American exceptionalism, a credence that sees America as qualitatively different (and generally better than) other nations (Lipset 1996), even as he is critical of Americans who "act like assholes" and "don't see any of" what they have access to. American exceptionalism in fact, helps account for Max's disdain for those

who see as failing to live up to American ideals: the charge of a special political and spiritual destiny of a new world, to provide a model for the rest of the world (Madsen 1998). In framing Americans who don't know what they've got as assholes, he doubles down on a narrative of privilege that valorizes the assets of industrialized modernity that he seems to associate with the United States; it is access to the modern, industrialized material and informational networks that Americans have that sets them apart, after all.

Preppers' socio-environmental location is one of relative privilege. Few preppers live in circumstances where their survival is in question. Indeed, the opposite is true. Most preppers I observed were middle-class Americans who had all their basic needs met and were able to live comfortably in the present moment. In comparison to other communities throughout the United States and the world, where people are presently suffering through the types of disasters that prepper prepare for without the resources to survive or recover, preppers have access to high levels of resources. The lack of clean drinking water in Flint, Michigan is one such case. Puerto Rico remains in a state of slow recovery after the damage created by Hurricane Maria in September 2017. These are just two examples of many. Environmental justice scholars have long documented the relationship between social location and exposure to environmental harm, including toxic waste siting, exposure to pollution, and the externalities associated with extractive industries and industrial agriculture. In the United States, race and class are especially strong determinants of exposure to environmental harm, with Black, Latinx, and Native American communities, and working class communities and people in poverty more likely to be exposed to environmental harm than higher status white, middle and upper-

class people (Agyeman et al. 2016; Cole and Foster 2001; Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts 2009; Morello-Frosch, Pastor, and Sadd 2001).

This is not to say that preppers did not struggle. Some had experienced bouts of poverty, and most of them were mid-level professional workers, who had suffered losses in the major economic changes that had taken place at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century. Some preppers recognized that they were in precarious financial circumstances due to economic patterns beyond their control; they worried about or had experienced job loss, and other personal tragedies that shook their worlds: the loss of a spouse through death or divorce, debilitating debt or financial troubles, family dysfunction and trauma.

But prepping is fundamentally future oriented--all the preppers I met and interacted with had their basic needs met in the present. Most of them lived comfortable, middle-class lifestyles. They owned homes and cars and could pay their utility bills. They could afford to buy good quality, nutritious food, and they had leisure time that they could devote to non-income generating hobbies. If they lived minimal, off-the-grid lifestyles, it was by choice, not necessity, and most continued to rely on public infrastructure and privately distributed resources in some way; driving gas fueled cars on publicly funded roads for example. In short, they have capital, including economic capital (money, houses, supplies) and cultural capital (education, access to the internet and knowledge about how to use it) (Bourdieu 1977, 1980, 1993). This is not a criticism, but an observation—undoing the dominant material organization of daily life in a highly structured society is no small undertaking; it takes time, money, education, and knowledge of cultural systems. Their present needs being met, preppers orient their

practices around concern for the future. Even as preppers value the ideals of self-sufficiency, many continue to live comfortably middle-class lives that are reliant on technology and collective infrastructure (electricity, gas, supermarkets, etc.). Some were more successful than others in creating self-sufficient, off-the-grid lifestyles; Max shared some of his prepping challenges with me and noted that his attempt at a garden had been “a dismal failure”. He doesn’t believe his real estate could support his family of three full-time, year-round, concluding, “I admit I’m not in a good position right now for something to happen right away as far as food goes.”

Max was concerned about his lack of gardening skills and capacities but didn’t seem inclined to rectify this problem anytime soon. While some preppers embraced self-sufficiency, touting its benefits and pleasures, others saw it as necessary, but preferred not to attempt to live self-sufficient lifestyle until they had to. This reflects a state of ambivalence among members of the thought-community about the value of modernity, and their cultural attachment to it. On the one hand, modernity was rife with risk, kept preppers in a state of dependence, and undermined their sense of self-empowerment, individual freedom, and the opportunity to model their belief in personal responsibility. On the other hand, modernity brought them lifestyles of unparalleled comfort that they had come to enjoy, and that they didn’t want to give up. Samuel and I discussed the tension between enjoyment of modernity and its inherent risks in the following exchange:

Samuel: you know, at one time there wasn’t toilet paper.

Allison: Right

Samuel: Toilet paper’s a good thing!

Allison: So, you think that's bad that there wasn't toilet paper? That that diminished the life experience of human beings?

Samuel: No, I'm just saying that I enjoy it!

Allison: [laughs]

Samuel: I enjoy the evolution; I enjoy the technology. We have more today and that's the progression, that's our technological progress. I, one of my biggest fears for our species is that...we're technologically not asking the questions with the heart that we should.

Allison: So, the technology is advancing but we're not keeping up with it.

Samuel: We're too immature for most of it.

Allison: Yeah.

Samuel: I mean when Oppenheimer pushed the button, he says '...but, we could like, blow up the world.' Literally thought that. Wondered if that was a possibility. But he pushed it anyway. As opposed to Jeff Goldblum in Jurassic Park...he said, no we need to question, should we do this? Yeah, we can do it, but should we? When you look at the Hadron Collider...let's throw a bunch of this stuff together at almost the speed of light and see if we can knock a chunk off of it...now thankfully they did and it was what they kind of expected to happen...

Allison: But it could have been something else?

Samuel: It could have been something else. And they didn't know. There's no knowns, even in the scientific world, even laws, I mean they break down, scientific laws break down on the quantum level, so, there's no know. We don't know anything. Sorry.

Samuel is a mixed-race Asian American man who identifies as politically centrist.

He lives in Oregon, where he acts as the leader of his local prepper club. Samuel recognizes that prepping is associated with political conservatism but tries to discourage members of the group from making it an overtly political space. He believes

everyone is a bit of a prepper, and that prepping is for everyone. In this conversation, he has taken me on a whirlwind tour of the costs and benefits of modernity. Moving from the American feminist movement and changes in gender and race relations (which he views as positive developments), to toilet paper, to the atomic bomb, to Jurassic Park, to cutting edge research in particle physics, Samuel considers all that modern life has offered us, even as it puts us in a position of unprecedented risk. Modernity provides us with growing equality, fascinating scientific discoveries, and the comfort of toilet paper! But we are simultaneously at risk of complete annihilation at any moment, from multiple sources. Simply by living in a nuclear age, we are dependent on the knowledge, but also the ethical choices of scientists and politicians that we will never meet. Samuel's "personal fear that we're...not asking the questions with the heart that we should" captures the essence of this dilemma, and was repeated by many preppers who sought to maintain aspects of their lifestyle that they enjoyed, even as they questioned the integrity of the systems that produced them.

One way this plays out is in discussions of what an ideal society or civilization might look like, should it be rebuilt after TEOTWAWKI. While I frequently observed preppers lamenting the current state of politics today, I rarely observed engagement with the question of how political systems and institutions might be ameliorated in the present. But I did observe conversations about what rebuilding civilization might look like, after this current one had failed. In the blog post on The Organic Prepper, the same anonymous prepper (cited above) wrote an elaborate and detailed post on rebuilding civilization after its fall. The author includes a list of resources that they categorize as necessary for

“Preservation of Existing Knowledge, Modern knowledge that must be preserved [sic]”, which they break down as follows:

1. The Basics: Reading, writing, history, etc. A complete set of homeschooling books will be needed here. Our children as yet unborn must learn the basics, from elementary school through high school, or they won't understand the advanced material below.
2. Science: Particularly the physical sciences such as chemistry, physics, and many more.
3. Mathematics: All types of mathematics, not just the basics.
4. Engineering: There are many fields of engineering including chemical, civil, electrical, industrial, mechanical, mining and more.
5. Medicine: Yes, the advanced diagnostics machines of today will be gone, but humankind will still need medical professionals and medicines.
6. Machines: Generating electricity, petroleum refining, communications, transportation, etc. All of these machines must be rebuilt unless we want to live in the dark ages.

They follow this assessment with a long list of cultural and industrial resources, ranging from Wikipedia, various museums, University repositories of theses and dissertations, to the Svalbard Seed Bank and private collections. The author reports that they are stockpiling paper books, electronic books, and maps, many of which they do not have the expertise to read or interpret, in the event that they should be useful in rebuilding civilization. Recommendations for incorporating plans to rebuild civilization include “building a community of technical and subject experts” in the present and making plans to “keep all these people...alive and well through TEOTWAWKI”. To give shape to this, they offer a list of “essential industries” that warrant the effort of preservation:

1. Electrical power generating plants, fuel supplies, and distribution system.

2. Petroleum refining for gasoline, diesel fuel, lubricants, and essential chemicals, including oil pipelines for petroleum supply and distribution as needed.
3. Trucking and transportation industry for moving supplies and end products.
4. Medicines, doctors and nurses, and hospitals.
5. Food – farming and ranching, processing and distribution.
6. Water processing and distribution.
7. Law enforcement.
8. Military forces.
9. News services, but not fake news.
10. The ability to make and repair existing machines (machine tools).

Interestingly, many of these industries are the very same industries that preppers currently distrust and consider likely to collapse. The author themselves seems convinced that their fall is imminent, even as he exhorts fellow preppers to support his project of planning to rebuild them, even going so far as to suggest “lobbying directly to the companies in those industries or by lobbying directly to Congress or the President convince them to prepare for disaster.” Their proposal is that those industries or enterprises deemed essential (by preppers such themselves) do the following:

Determine essential personnel to continue essential operations and build facilities and store supplies to keep those people and their families alive and well through TEOTWAWKI so that their plants and facilities can continue to produce and distribute their essential products.

Save the facilities and sufficient raw materials to restore production, including spare parts.

Save the supply chain.

Save the distribution chain.

In short, even as they anticipate its collapse, some preppers mourn the potential loss of the world as we know it and see it as their responsibility to plan for its restoration.

One commenter to the post wrote,

This is an incredibly important topic, and there is no excuse for it being ignored as it is. Far too many people have only a short term view. They assume that they can store some food, and on the same day that they run out of supplies, civilization will have been restored. By someone else, of course. Perfect timing...Please continue posting articles on rebuilding. Future generations are depending on it, and it is OUR responsibility to make it happen.

This poster draws on the discourse of responsibility and sets up a binary of those who take responsibility for themselves and civilization, and those who don't. The rhetoric of "most people" is fractal; even as prepper discourse relies on a binary of preppers vs. the unprepared, so too do preppers pit themselves against each other, constantly finding ways to set themselves apart, so that we have here a relationship of short-sighted vs. far-sighted preppers; those who think only of themselves and stockpile food for a limited duration are used as a foil to those who not only prepare to take responsibility for themselves and their families, but who take responsibility for civilization and future generations. Like Hank, in our exchange above, the preppers who create the scenario are in a position to set the criteria for what responsible, heroic behavior looks like, to assign themselves the active, rather than passive role, and to model the criteria for good/bad behavior after their own concerns.

The value of civilization is not an easy question for a group whose common commitment is to protect themselves against its demise though. Another commenter on this thread writes,

Perhaps 'civilization' shouldn't be 'rebuilt'. Given that pre/history shows that virtually every complex society eventually collapses, perhaps we need to consider

keeping things far simpler and less susceptible to collapse. Building a relatively small and sustainable 'society' that actually lives in balance with nature and its environment might be a far more insightful than attempting to recreate a system that has failed miserably. Small, agrarian societies that remain within the natural carrying capacity of its immediate environment might fare far better than rebuilding what has been lost.

This commenter suggests that not just the project of modernity, but civilization itself is an inherently unstable, unsustainable undertaking. This is an especially interesting discourse to observe here, on a prepping blog whose primary author is conservative, and where conservative discourse is the norm. Others agreed, reiterating the enduring value of self-sufficiency, which they considered the antidote to the vagaries of complex society; no-one counter's the above poster's concern about sustainability, in fact they embrace it. This is noteworthy because the discourse of sustainability has generally been adopted by the political left but dismissed by conservatives. Here, the discourse of sustainability is understood through a familiar cultural frame of self-sufficiency, invoked in association with the figure of the American homesteader. In response to Steve, Linda writes,

I agree! I just finished reading the Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder to my grandkids. I've read them before but what struck me this time was this; if they needed something, whether a tool or curtains or a bedstead, they made it out of what they had. They didn't strive to make a million of them, just the one they needed. And health care; today it seems it's a contest to see just how long we can stay alive even past the time of any form of viable life. I'm 72 & I don't want to live out my final years hooked to machines & swallowing poison just to eke out a few more months. There's a rhythm to life & we need to learn to respect it. We don't need to re-create a failure.

Linda sees the simplicity of a single family just making what they need as virtuous, while striving to make a million of them is situated as excessive. Likewise, the technological advancements of medical care that allow for the elongation of lifespans is frames as excessive, in contradiction to the natural rhythms of life.

Not all preppers are willing to let go of modern convenience though. Another reader, Laura, pushed back though, suggesting it was easy to dismiss the value of modern convenience from the comfort they provided. Even as she acknowledges that self-sufficient lifestyles seemed ideal, she still enjoys the benefits of modern amenities like electricity and medical technology, not to mention the unnecessary but pleasurable gadgets.

Partly agree, but all people alive to day [sic] enjoy the gadgets of the 21st century, esp. electronics and medical technology. What would we do without electricity, which is horrible to imagine. Husband just had cataract surgery this month. Hospitals and surgery centers need electricity to operate. People would live in misery as they get older without modern medical care. I hope I am gone if and when this shtf/ emp happens. Not a time to raise kids either, their futures will be nada.

In sum, preppers exhibit complex feelings about modernity that include pleasure, joy, comfort, and worry, anxiety, and discouragement. Many move fluidly through these feelings, and often exhibit a sense of ambivalence, the coincidence of positive and negative feelings directed towards the same object. Modern amenities provide a level of comfort, convenience, and well-being that they would rather not give up, but they also create unacceptable levels of risk.

### **Navigating Risk**

Preppers are aware that invisible risks are embedded in the material fabric of their daily lives. While one can prepare for a storm, or an emergency event with a clear beginning, middle and end, other forms of risk that preppers are concerned about are more subtle. One example is the concern that many preppers express about GMOs, genetically modified organisms, in food. Preppers distrust GMOs and see them as a risk.

But the narratives they use to express this concern does not contain an obvious hero or victim, reflecting their general ambivalence about conditions of modernity.<sup>26</sup>

Avoiding contemporary risk is not quite so simple as rejecting victimhood and claiming responsibility when risk is embedded in all facets of daily life. Samuel offers widespread toxicity in the conventional food system as further evidence that the institutions we rely on for subsistence and safety are in fact risk producing. Purchasing food from industrialized food production systems is not blatantly abnormal, and it is therefore harder to associate with victimhood than certain other acts (such as than living below the sea-level in a hurricane zone). Because many preppers continue to rely on purchased food from super-markets or retailers, they are unwilling to present people who do so as irresponsible, or victims. But they recognize that industrialized food contains risk. The tension they feel around GMOs is an indicator of the complicated relationship between dependence and risk. Everyday food choices are fraught, and each meal an opportunity to choose responsibly to minimize risk.

Samuel told me, “we try not to eat too much processed food, ...we try to get organic, local first, and then we move on to imported stuff from Mexico or wherever it comes from. Try to get stuff with low food miles, go to the farmer’s market...every Sunday.” I asked him why. His answer was circuitous, meandering through a variety of topics pertaining to food production and safety, without settling on a single concern:

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<sup>26</sup> This is an indicator of the sub-culture of prepping; other groups, such as environmental activists and social justice organizers have easily identified heroes, villains, and victims in the story of GMOs, with corporate actors and scientists unconcerned with human health and safety, or the integrity of ecosystems playing the villain, unknowing consumers playing the victim, and movement actors playing the role of the heroes. The fact that preppers do not tell this story is an interesting indicator of their separation from these movements, and their alternate cultural interpretation of the same events offer insight into the ways stories inform political positioning and ultimately action.

Samuel: I think part of it is... I couldn't define gluten. And what I mean by that is that there was this thing [an online video] that was cruising around a couple of months ago, where people in New York [were asked] do you eat gluten? [and they'd say] No, no, no! [then they would be asked] What is it? [and they'd say] Well, uh.... [I don't know]<sup>27</sup>

Allison: [laughs]

Samuel: So part of me wanted to go organic because I have a little bit of a background in agrobiz<sup>28</sup> and what it means to be organic and what it means to be OMRI<sup>29</sup> certified...uh, so I have a little bit of knowledge into a reality that John Q. Public doesn't know. That being said, one of the reasons is because I just consider it to be a purer form of the food. Less polluted with chemicals and pesticides, and those don't really sit well, that's why I try to eat a purer food, or closer to the origin of what it was, and of course when you look at not recombinant DNA manipulation, but the other one, hybridization or whatever, one of the reasons we get the tomatoes that we get is cause of hybridization, which is, you know, genetic engineering, but it's just not recombinant DNA.

Allison: Right...which is, the recombinant would be GMOs?

Samuel: Well, they're still genetically modified organisms, but hybridization is one form of that where you just say, hey plant, you're not this plant, but we're going to get you guys together and bow chick a bow wow....better tomato. As opposed to gene splicing which is recombinant DNA, it's the recombinant genetically modified organism and I'm pretty much against that.

Now I'm not intelligent enough, I'm not well read enough to have a decent conversation about that other than to say, one of the biggest things MonSatan...Monsanto does...with their Roundup ready crops and their GMOs and the political and the judicial things that are going on with those right now, it's just really distasteful for me.

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<sup>27</sup> Much of this interaction involved Samuel acting out the various parts with body language and sound effects. I have filled in the context in brackets to allow for clarity for the reader who is deprived the opportunity of seeing the more theatrical elements of this exchange.

<sup>28</sup> The agricultural industrial business

<sup>29</sup> OMRI is the acronym for the Organic Materials Review Institute, a non-profit organization that provides third-party reviews of materials and products used in organic production, such as fertilizers, pest control and livestock health care goods (OMRI n.d.)

Samuel tries to eat organic foods that are grown locally, as close to where he lives as possible. He offers many reasons for doing so, but the reason that seems to encompass the others is that he sees organic food as “a purer form of the food”. Another binary—pure/impure helps to mark the difference between food Samuel wants to eat, and food he does not. It is worth noting that although my question to him is why he prefers to eat organic food, he does not stick to the quality of organic vs. conventionally produced in his answer—rather he, covers a wide range of the possible risks embedded in food, including the possibility that food is laced with chemicals and pesticides, that food is genetically modified, and that food has quantities like gluten in it, which he has been told to fear but that he doesn’t really understand. Lastly, in his characterization of agricultural corporation Monsanto as “MonSatan”, Samuel displays hostility towards the corporate, industrial food giant, a speech act<sup>30</sup> that alludes to the possibility that political and judicial practices have set up a legal environment in which he cannot reasonably make choices around the inclusion of pesticides and GMOs in the food he purchases.<sup>31</sup>

The risk here is not just what might be embedded in the food products he purchases, but in the flow of knowledge. Samuel doesn’t know what might be in his food. As Worthy (2008) theorizes, we are embedded in material and informational networks that give individuals the information they need to make informed choices. In the politics of GMO labeling, which Samuel invokes in our discussion, the significance of information attached to material goods becomes evident. GMO foods are visually

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<sup>30</sup> I draw from Nina Eliasoph’s discussion of “speech acts” as ways in which people “do things with words” politically. (Eliasoph 1999) Citizens do things with words that signal their political concerns, identities, and interests.

<sup>31</sup> “Organic” is a label that refers to food that is produced according to standards of production that vary across the world. In general, organic is used to mean grown without pesticides.

indistinguishable from their non-GMO counterparts. The goods can only be differentiated by the act of communicating information about the food's production, an act that by necessity can only be done by the food's producer. This is why political action around GMOs has included efforts to require producers to label GMO foods; they have largely been unsuccessful though. Both industry efforts to refute their responsibility to label GMO foods, and citizen efforts to require them to do so are examples of the significance of knowledge in navigating chronic modern risk.

The current environment of risk is such that, even an age of information inundation, quality information can still be hard to come by, and when it is generated, it is often not easily interpreted, or indeed, trusted. Samuel continues, I'm pro-labeling (GMOs), I don't care if it costs the public an extra 15 cents for a tomato or whatever...yeah. I would like to know...

It seems reasonable that Samuel would like to know what he is consuming. His inability to access that knowledge is a uniquely modern problem. The network of material flows his body is embedded in is also a network of knowledge that is obscured; the complexity of the supply chain, the political economic circumstances of neoliberal capitalism, and political preferences of producers have jointly rendered invisible the supply chain that makes up the material network that his body his embedded in. This poses challenges to personal responsibility of choice:

You know, you get lists of stuff, of producers and stuff, and it's just huge. I had a friend a few years ago, General Mills did something she didn't like, and she said she's boycotting General Mills products and I said, are you sure? Cause they have just widespread diversification...yeah.  
By widespread diversification, Samuel refers to the fact that General Mills is a multinational agricultural conglomerate that owns subsidiaries around the world. Because

of this, Samuel doubts the political efficacy or his friend's gesture. Boycotting brands labeled under the General Mills brand will not successfully protect Samuel's friend from their political and economic reach. The risk is both pervasive, and invisible, not easily traceable to a single brand, product, or point of origin.

The risk is produced by an industry—in this case the agricultural industry—that ostensibly exists to feed people and alleviate human suffering—and regulated by the federal government—in this case the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)—which, ostensibly, exists to protect the welfare of its citizens.<sup>32</sup> Yet the products of this industry threaten to invoke suffering, with the seeming approval of the federal government. The idea of chemicals, pesticides, toxins, and modified genes in food is scary because these things are linked to the specter of bodily harm; cancer, allergies, immune-response flare ups, gastro-intestinal upset, liver failure, skin rashes, and other discomforts, or as Beck calls it, forms of immiseration (1992:51). The producers of the food that Samuel puts in his body are potentially toxic, and he sees political acts like boycotting a single brand to be pointless due to the immensity of the problem. This awareness of the risks embedded in everyday things, along with the lack of a clear political path towards minimizing risk are a key condition of risk society.

Under risk society, “harmless things, wine, tea, pasta, etc. turn out to be dangerous” (ibid, 52). People are exposed to innumerable risks over which they have no decision-making power. Further, their access to information about the risks to which they

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<sup>32</sup> In fact, the question of the *raison d'être* of the federal government is a key question at the heart of prepping, which I discuss in Ch. X.

are exposed are mediated, often time by the same institutions that produce the risk in the first place, or institutions that are imbricated with them.<sup>33</sup> Beck writes,

People who find out that their daily tea contains DDT and their newly bought cake formaldehyde, are in a quite different situation. Their victimization is not determinably by their own cognitive means and potential experiences. Whether DDT is contained in the tea or formaldehyde in the cake, and in what dose, remains outside the reach of their own knowledge just as much as does the question of whether and in what concentrations these substances have long- or short-term deleterious effect. (1992:53)

Many of the risks we face in risk society are the side effects of complex modernizing processes—industrialization, transportation and distribution of goods and people, bureaucratization and the legitimation of science as both the driver of industrialization and the main arbiter of risk. The epitome of risk society is the need to wrestle with the side effects of “successful” modernization (Beck 2008:8). Each of these processes of modernity are built into the institutions that shape the material world, rendering them outside of the control of individuals. This leaves individuals who are aware of and concerned about risk without much recourse to respond to it—a challenge for all, but perhaps uniquely so for people whose political identity hinges on individual autonomy and personal responsibility. As Beck puts it, “news of toxic substances in food, consumer goods, and so on contain a double shock. The threat itself is joined by the loss of sovereignty over assessing the dangers, to which one is directly subjected.” It’s not just that risk is pervasive, mediated, and being produced at unprecedented magnitude—it’s that virtually no one is in control of it. As Samuel’s uncertainty about the value of his

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<sup>33</sup> By this I mean institutions that are on the surface distinct, but in fact share expertise, personnel, information systems, etc. See for example the “revolving door phenomenon in US politics (I Vidal Blanes, Draca, and Fons-Rosen 2012)

friend's resistance shows, individuals can't even necessarily find a foothold in the attempt to gain control.

Beck's description of conditions under risk society is reflected in the fears, concerns, and motives of preppers. Many of the risks that preppers are concerned about are simultaneously specific and opaque. The risk of major storms is materially palpable, but the likelihood of their increase in magnitude, volume and intensity brought on by anthropogenic climate change<sup>34</sup> is obscured by the politically polarized discourse of American climate denial (Bacon 2016; Elsasser and Dunlap 2013; Goldenberg 2013; Jacques, Dunlap, and Freeman 2008; Mccright and Dunlap 2011, 2013; Moser 2009). This risk is exacerbated by the continued output of greenhouse gases into an already carbon saturated atmosphere.

Scientists and activists concerned with the lack of public response to climate change have spent enormous resources trying to identify specific variables that inform people's response to climate change alone. What's missing is the recognition that people experience climate change as one of a plethora of modern risks that they are already contending with on a daily basis. Further, just because individuals do not adopt the scientific frames of climate change does not mean they are not grappling with its constituent risks within the context of their own cultural worldviews. Preppers are mixed in their response to climate change; their division roughly follows political party lines, with more liberal preppers including it in the mix of risks they are concerned about, and

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<sup>34</sup> "Extreme weather events" are one of five of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) "Reasons for Concern" (RFCs) for global warming, a classification system used to assess how dangerous various impacts of climate change will be to human societies (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2001)

more conservative preppers generally downplaying it, even as they express concern about risks that align with the IPCC's "Reasons for Concern" about the danger of climate change to human populations. Focus on climate change out of the context of coincident (and co-produced) risks has resulted in the omission of populations like preppers who are hyper-aware of risk, but making sense of it outside of narrowly construed, scientific cultural frames that researchers tend to assume are the only legitimate frames for understanding climate change.<sup>35</sup> To understand how people like preppers, who express deep-seated ambivalence about the role of science in producing modernity, make sense of climate change, we must consider not only traditional social variables such as class, race, gender, religion, political identity, etc. but what Beck calls, risk position.

Beck argues that in risk society, class is no longer the major determinant of the types of afflictions a person will face throughout their life. Instead, affliction is determined by risk position, an individual's relationship to what Beck later refers to as the semantics of risk, "the present thematization of future threats that are often a product of the successes of civilization" (2008:4). Risk position is not necessarily about social location, or material location, (or even socio-environmental location) so much as it is about cultural position, or one's access to knowledge. This is because risk is conceptual—it is not the same as actual harm, or events that have already happened (although the politics of risk are activated in determining causality and thus responsibility, for example in contested claims about whether certain pollutants cause cancer, the question becomes one of risk vs. harm). Unlike disasters which have occurred

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<sup>35</sup> For a useful history of the construction of climate change as a social problem that adopts a scientific framing, see Spencer Weart's work on the discovery of global warming (Weart 2003, 2011)

or the material harm they cause, risk is entirely cultural (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982)—it is the “anticipation of catastrophe”, a perception of the possibility of a future occurrence, not the thing itself (Beck 2008:9).

Risk perception is mediated by institutions which impart culturally available discourse by which people make sense of their vulnerability to risk. The effects of risk are mediated through access to knowledge, and those with more access to information about risk are more likely to be afflicted by it. “This transmission through knowledge means that those groups that tend to be afflicted are better educated and actively inform themselves.” (1992:53), an assessment that applies to preppers, who are generally educated, and who make adept use of the internet, a modern tool that has dramatically changed the capacity of individuals to inform themselves about all sorts of otherwise invisible risks. An affliction by risk is not a material affliction like cancer or having one’s house flood—this is the disaster itself, not the risk of it. Indeed, one could be struck with cancer and have no knowledge of it for years, while someone else who will never have cancer could spend decades worrying about how to avoid it. As this example suggests, risk position is not only cultural (as indicated by its relationship to the semantics of risk and the production of knowledge), but emotional—a felt state, experienced sensually in the body, that is interpreted as information signaling that something is amiss. The layer of emotions as a source of knowledge and an impetus for response is important but undertheorized—a circumstance I address in Chapter VI. For the meantime, it is important to note that the ways risk is understood is not universal, or generic, but structured according to the institutions and systems people are embedded in, in relation to the cultural schemas by which people in various socio-environmental locations have

access to. Work on the cultural cognition of scientific consensus (Kahan et al. 2011), and its application to climate change (Kahan 2012; Kahan, Peters, et al. 2012), for example, offers experimental evidence that people respond to information about scientific findings in ways that are “congenial to their values” (Kahan et al. 2011:147). This confirms what feminist scholars have long theorized as “standpoint”, the understanding that social location and identity deeply shape social experience (Collins 1997, 2009; Harding 2004; Hekman 1997; Jaggar 2013:494).

Risk society is reflected in the threat of nuclear war, climate change, terrorism, disease, and the global circulation of pollutants, toxins, and waste, to name a few. Knowledge of these risks affect everyone who has access to information about them, regardless of class, status, or position. Of course, as Nick Fox points out, “some people are more affected by the distribution and growth of risks, and there are winners and losers in risk definitions” (Fox 1999:13). But in general, for all, the scale and magnitude of risk has eclipsed the political capacity for its management. In short, “the world can no longer control the dangers produced by modernity” (Beck 2008:8).

Beck may have overstated the claim that class position no longer determines risk affliction (what we might call life chance in more contemporary terms); decades of work by environmental justice scholars shows conclusively that environmental harm is distributed across class and racial lines (there are also differences related to gender, but these are less distinct in part because of the spatial segregation that is a feature of racial and class hierarchies, but not gendered ones) (Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003; Bullard 2000; Cole and Foster 2001; Mohai et al. 2009; Noonan 2008; Taylor 2014b). This work focuses largely on already materialized harms, but, access to education and

information (the basis of a risk position) has also long been mediated by class (Lareau 2002) and race (Ferguson 2000). Given the rapid changes in communications technology and transmission of information, access to knowledge about risk may not be as tightly correlated to formal education as Beck assumes, nor is an insurmountable barrier, as the persistent activism of environmental justice communities has shown (Cole and Foster 2001).

Access to knowledge and education are informed by social hierarchies, which, in contemporary society are organized along the lines of race, gender, class, and citizenship, however, there are many ways of knowing, and groups that are not formally educated in the dominant educational system still have access to information and knowledge that shapes risk affliction. Despite Beck's overstatement though, risk society remains useful for thinking about how cultural features such as collective bodies of knowledge, belief systems, values, and identities (what I often refer to collectively as cultural worldviews) inform the ways people navigate environmental risk. Beck's distinctions between (conceptual) risk and (material) harm are important for thinking about how risk society shapes the cultural landscape through which people navigate the material world.

While I find this distinction useful though, I also want to complicate it. The utility of distinguishing between risk and harm is in clarifying the significance of cultural processes in the production of material practices—access to ideas, information, and the perspectives of social others (scientists, policy makers, journalists) inform how individuals perceive risk, and thus how they respond to it. Preppers receive various mediated accounts of modern risk, ranging from weather reports, news coverage of events like Hurricane Katrina, scientific studies on the probability of certain outcomes

like increasing frequency and intensity of storms or an electro-magnetic pulse (EMP), the reactions that political figures or journalists have to these reports, and interpretation by these sources of information in the mediated (most often online) discursive spaces they have constructed as a collective. This information is acted on in the form of a prepping practice: resources (money, time, attention, household goods) are redirected away from whatever they were previously being used for, to build a material framework for responding to these various risks and hazards.

From this, we see that risk is more than just conceptual in several ways. Although risk is perceived conceptually, it is received via existing cultural cognitive schema—the basis of which are cognitive pathways inscribed upon human brains, delivered via material infrastructure like books, newspapers, computers, fiber-optic cables, fossil fuels, and electric wires. Risk is also emotional, and emotions span the dichotomy of culture and material phenomena. I categorize emotions as material, in that emotions are always felt in the body (and bodies are material) and as cultural in that emotions refer to the interpretations we make of bodily sensation or feelings. These words are often used interchangeably, but for analytic purposes it is worth making distinctions. Emotions refer to the interpretations of sensations that are then coded according to the emotion-concepts available to a person based on their cultural belonging (Feldman Barrett 2017; Turner and Stets 2005). Thus, how a group of people experiences risk is informed not only by their access to knowledge, which is mediated by their social location, but by their access to culturally specific emotion-concepts, which channel raw sensation into culturally meaningful experiences. In order to understand how preppers make sense of their risk

position then, we need to know more about their social locations, cultural worldviews, and the emotion-concepts that are available to them from these positions.

How, and why preppers make sense of risk the way they do can only be understood in reference to the material, institutional and cultural context that they are embedded in. The work of Pierre Bourdieu and other theorists of practice can help show why these factors cannot be understood in isolation from each other. In the following chapter, I put the concept of risk positions in conversation with theories of practice, which considers how subjectivity and cultural worldviews converge with macro-structural phenomena such as the state, the economy, and institutionalized systems of race, gender and sexuality.

## CHAPTER IV

### NAVIGATING THE ENVIRONMENTAL FIELD: PREPPING AS A CULTURAL-ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICE

Many people are aware of and concerned about risk—environmental or otherwise, and yet they do not act upon their concerns (Adams 2014; Norgaard 2006, 2011). Indeed, many people who profess environmental values, fail to match them with researcher recognized environmental practices (Blake 1999; Kennedy et al. 2009; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). Yet preppers, who do not generally identify as environmentalists, respond to the double bind between dependence and distrust, including their concerns about environmental risk such as natural disasters and weather events, resource shortages, and severed access to ecological services, by adopting practices oriented towards making real material changes in their everyday lives. They are essentially doing what environmental behavioral researchers seek to document, but without professing the environmental concern that researchers expect to find paired with such a behavior change. Why? What accounts for this willingness to change? What accounts for the form that the changes take?

Prepping is a departure from the status quo, making it an important case study for micro-social change in response to risk. In putting prepping forward as an environmental practice, it is important to note that I do not claim that prepping is necessarily a pro-environmental practice. Pro-environmental practices are not a fixed category, and indeed, what is considered pro-environmental is widely debated among researchers. Kollmuss and Agyeman define pro-environmental practices as “behavior that consciously seeks to minimize the negative impact of one’s actions on the natural and built world (e.g.

minimize resource and energy consumption, use of non-toxic substances, reduce waste production)” (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002:240). Preppers do not have environmental intent, which means that by this definition, their practices are not pro-environmental. But what happens if we temporarily remove the value judgement from this concept? By considering all cultural-material practices that connect people to the environment as environmental practices, we open up the field of available cases that we can study to learn something about the factors that inform how and why people adopt the practices that they do. This in turn can help us understand the genesis of practices that we, environmental researchers, believe are beneficial or harmful to the environment. After decades of research on a narrow set of cases of “pro-environmental” practices (which include things like recycling, donating money to environmental organizations, buying organic foods, etc.), we remain relatively in the dark as to why widespread environmental practices have failed to emerge, despite some important insights on the durability of practices that are largely agreed to be unsustainable (anti-environmental?).

Preppers do not identify as environmentalists but are changing their environmental practices, nonetheless. We can learn something about how, and why they are doing so, by observing their practices in relation to the material environment, if not the language of environmentalism. I suggest that rather than seeking out a narrow list of researcher identified pro-environmental practices rooted in the culture of the (mostly white, mostly middle-class, predominantly masculine) mainstream American environmental movement (Di Chiro 1996; Cole and Foster 2001; Taylor 2014a), that instead, we look beyond the confines of activist and researcher defined behaviors, to see what people are doing outside limiting categories of intent. Given that most Americans

do not identify as environmentalists (as of 2016, only 42% were willing to adopt the label (Jones 2016)), it is imperative that we look beyond the cultural values and beliefs associated with environmentalism to make sense of how people who do not identify with environmentalism respond to environmental risk.

Some of the practices that preppers adopt, such as installing solar panels, growing their own food in gardens, foraging for mushrooms, or constructing grey-water recycling systems, do in fact align with practices that environmental researchers would recognize, and likely endorse. Indeed, my early observations of prepping were inspired by a sense of recognition—preppers were doing many of the same things that my environmentally inclined friends and colleagues were. This impression was solidified when I attended my first large public prepper exposition. The parking lot was filled with more trucks than Priuses, with bumper stickers that erred towards the conservative (“My army kid is defending your honor student” for example), but I also saw some “Well-behaved women rarely make history” stickers on fuel-efficient cars. Inside, I was met with tables upon tables with businesses and individuals encouraging attendees to grow heirloom seeds, to install small-scale renewable energy systems like micro-hydro-electric generators or solar panels, and to purchase water storage and recycling equipment. Other booths showcased traditional crafts (alpaca wool products were in abundance), homemade soap, plant-based medicines, and wildcraft. But interspersed with the solar panels and gardening how-to’s were booths selling gold and silver in case the dollar crashed, a non-profit celebrating American frontier history and gun culture, and a hands-on demonstration of emergency wound care and suture technique. Some preppers do install solar panels and reduce their consumption of globally sourced goods with high carbon footprints, while others merely

stockpile goods sourced from the supply-chain that they expect to collapse, and store extra fuel for their fossil fueled generators. Practices vary widely. Rather than focus on the net change in individual carbon foot-prints, say, I opt instead to focus on the process of micro-social change that might offer important insight on what moves people—especially mostly comfortable middle-class people, who largely benefit from existing political-economic structures—to make major changes to their lifestyles.

This ground-up approach is built on the theoretical understanding that what people do is rather deeply attached to who they are, that is to say, who they see themselves as, within the context of their daily lives, and immediate social connections. Failing to attend to this imbricated layer of structure and meaning perpetuates the all too common error of reducing practices to willful choice, a habit that has been remarkably hard to break, despite its failure to produce meaningful answers to the questions environmental scholars ask (Kasper 2009; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002; Shove 2010). In short, we must locate practices within the multiple, interlocking systems (Collins 2009; Sewell 1992) and social narratives that are “rarely of our own making” (Somers 1994:606), but which provide the outward structure, or pathways, that shape social practices. In this chapter, I situate preppers in an “environmental field”, applying theories of practice and structuration to their emerging practices, and consider what variety of factors contribute to not only the possibility, but also the likelihood of micro-social change. I show that preppers occupy an interstitial space between acceptance and valuation of the “dominant social paradigm” and concern about and displeasure towards it. This begins with awareness of risk discussed in Chapter III, and manifests as the conviction that “most people don’t know how bad it is” but that preppers do, setting them

apart. Their libertarian-influenced cultural worldviews limit the range of possible responses to focus on the individual and at most the household. The body is a key site for preppers to think through the implications of risk society in a way that does not challenge their predominant worldview, allowing them to bypass confrontation with facets of dominant society that they are critical of, but not necessarily opposed to. In short, preppers inhabit relative positions of privilege and status, which are derived from the very systems that put them at risk. Prepping allows them to respond to this risk without challenging the systems that produce it.

I make sense of preppers' ambivalent relationship to structural critique and social stasis by situating prepping in an environmental field, which calls into focus the interlocking structures and narratives in which preppers are imbricated, all of which exert influence on available and appealing responses to risk. I describe who preps, and how the social categories preppers inhabit give shape to prepping as an environmental practice. By attending to who preppers are in relation to dominant social structures (and how they understand themselves narratively within these contexts), we can start to understand why preppers prep. Preppers' faith in the dominant social paradigm is eroding. But their cultural worldviews—the things they know, believe, value, and desire, are firmly embedded in it. This means that as they come into an awareness of dependence and risk, they must confront not only material danger, but the challenge awareness of risk poses to their cultural worlds. Figuring out how to manage the discomfort preppers feel about dependence and risk within the purview of their cultural worldviews is a problem. Prepping is the solution.

## “Most People Don’t Know How Bad It Is”

Preppers articulate the importance of having access to food, water, fuel, shelter, sanitation supplies, weapons, and other survival goods, because they have come to realize how much these necessities are *taken-for-granted* in their everyday lives. Awareness of a circumstance that is often rendered invisible, or, consciousness, is the first step towards change.<sup>36</sup> This may seem self-evident, but in fact many facets of social life are rendered invisible in that they come to seem natural, and thus outside of the realm of critique. The taken-for-granted is assumed to be unchangeable.

A key tenet of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice is the idea that social structures produce the naturalization of their own arbitrariness (Bourdieu 1977:164). Constructed elements of the social world come to seem natural, because the processes of their construction are rendered invisible. Preppers, attuned to risk, begin to see elements of the social world that they previously took for granted, and believe that most people still do. Hank tells me,

Most people don't have any idea how bad it's going to be and have made no plans whatsoever. Most people have a day's worth of food, perhaps less than that, and water, although more people nowadays have got some bottled water...but how much do they truly have? And so, people are not prepared for the bus wheels going [pffpl] (sound effect), ok?

The discourse of “most people” sets preppers apart from others, with the subtle insinuation that preppers are more in tune with objective reality than most people. This

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<sup>36</sup> Several varying literatures document the importance of consciousness in generating social change. For example, much attention has been paid to the importance of framing and frame alignment in collective action (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1992). Literature on the feminist movement documents the importance of women’s consciousness of the problem of gender inequality as an important step towards building a shared identity that can be politicized (Gerson and Peiss 1985). Prepping follows some of these patterns, such as the development of consciousness of risk, without developing into a collective-action oriented movement.

trope helps preppers make a discursive distinction between the default of dependence, and prepping as a lifestyle, the new set of cultural practices they are oriented towards. As discussed in the previous chapter, preppers are concerned about the fact that dependence is built into everyday life—it is the status quo. Instead of reflecting critically on the structural nature of this circumstances, Hank instead focuses on the “choices” of individuals, which he frames as problematic.

Hank offers no real evidence that most people only have a day’s worth of food or less—he is exaggerating to make a point, and he seems to assume that his point is incontrovertible. The point is that most people don’t think beyond their immediate needs because they believe that they don’t have to. While I might quibble with the hyperbole, in general, I do agree with Hank that most citizens of modern, wealthy industrial societies store minimal amounts of food. I do not, however, attribute this to personal choice. In short, the same cultural practice means different things to me and to Hank. The cultural practice of relying on supermarkets, municipal water and sewage systems, and the electric grid is a social norm based on the expectation that supermarkets will be open, stocked, and that food will be available in exchange for money, which will continue to serve as a legitimate currency of exchange. Living a lifestyle where you do not keep more than a day’s (or a week’s worth, to be slightly more generous in our estimations) of food at home could indicate a number of things, such as 1) that you trust that collectively stored food (i.e. in warehouses or retailers) will be accessible when you need it, and that you believe that storing food outside of the home, and going to buy it from retailers when you need it, is a safe, acceptable practice; 2) that you cannot afford to buy food in advance, even if you desired to do so, which is the reality for many Americans (see

Bowen, Brenton and Elliot 2019); 3) that you are habituated to a lifestyle where food is readily available when you need or want it, either in raw form, or as prepared, ready to eat products, and you have not undergone a questioning of the embodied habits that you have been socialized into, and built up over a lifetime, oriented towards a complex, interdependent society with a deep division of labor and a monetary system.

There are many meanings that could be applied to this set of circumstances. For preppers, the fact that many of their fellow citizens don't store large volumes of food and basic supplies, takes on the meaning that most people are unprepared, a state of being that they equate with being irresponsible. Their discomfort with these circumstances suggests a break between their subjective worldviews, and the objective circumstances in which they find themselves. In short, there is a break between their habitus, and the field in which it was previously oriented towards.

Because modern citizens embedded in complex material networks are so accustomed to living in a socio-environmental location where the meeting of our bodily needs is outsourced, it feels natural, whereas a lifestyle requiring immediate engagement with the ecosystems that sustain us might feel unnatural. This is because the sets of skills and knowledge that we have accrued are aligned towards driving roads built for cars, shopping at the supermarket, preparing convenience foods, turning on faucets, buying premade clothing, tools, toys, first aid supplies and other materials from retailers, and relying on gas and electricity for heat and cooling. All of these acts are cultural practices, even if we don't really think of them as such, because they are habitual, embodied, and taken-for-granted (Bourdieu 1977). The environment is structured, and most people's actions follow the pathways that it lays out. Sociologist Allan Johnson uses the metaphor

of “paths of least resistance” to describe how structure informs the conscious and unconscious decisions that we make on a daily basis. While options vary about how to respond to the situations we find ourselves in, ultimately, some options pose less social resistance than others (Johnson 2014:30). Because of socialization and the salience of social norms and expectations, many possibilities outside of the paths of least resistance don’t even occur to social actors who do in fact have agency to move outside the pathways.

The mundane practices that people perform in everyday life are easy to naturalize, yet they are in fact structured by a multiplicity of interlocking structures, that operate on many levels (Sewell 1992). Structure is one of the defining metaphors social scientists use, but its meanings are not always clearly articulated. Historically, various theorists and their adherents have worked to reconcile their theories of structure with the empirical study of lifeworlds, yielding a wide range of structuration theories (Giddens 1984, 1991) and theories of practice (Bourdieu 1977, 1980). One of the major stakes in this debate has been the ability to acknowledge the power and ubiquity of structures, without erasing the power and agency of individuals to effect social change within those structures. In a widely cited attempt to reconcile this tension, William Sewell Jr. (1992) worked to integrate the two most prominent post-functionalist sociological theories of structure (Lizardo 2010) in his reconstruction of Giddens’s structuration theory and Bourdieu’s theory of practice, arriving at what he calls a dual theory of structure. In this chapter, I draw heavily from Bourdieu’s theory of practice, with its focus on habitus, as the embodied, enculturated dispositions that attach people to a multiplicity of structural rules, norms, assumptions, and habits, although I agree largely with Sewell’s intervention in

response to the widespread critique that Bourdieu's theory of practice is overly invested in explaining social reproduction, and thus fails to adequately explain the many cases of social change that empirically must be accounted for. Sewell finds that in an effort to avoid the over-determination of Levi-Straussian anthropological structuralism, Bourdieu puts forward a theory that over-determines both structure and agency, leaving little room for the interplay of contingencies that play out in life, as actors navigate ever changing, and always uncertain circumstances that derive from the multiplicity of meanings that can be (and often are) attached to the same objects, or, in Sewell's terms, resources.

Environmental sociologists have also critiqued theories of practice as insufficiently attentive to the emergence of social change (Lorenzen 2012), but I believe it is precisely this quality that renders theories of practices so useful when considering the widespread failure of environmental practices to permeate society at large. It is Bourdieu's recognition of the inbuilt tendency towards social stasis as a defining quality of habitus that generates the reproduction of existing structures, which makes it so useful for explaining the endurance of dominant environmental practices even in the face of unprecedented environmental, social and economic risk. With some modifications, drawn from Sewell, who also considers the dynamic between stasis and change, theories of practice and structuration can be made to work together to explain micro-social change, as actors transpose the schema they are familiar with onto new circumstances (such as dawning awareness of risk, or emerging structural critique), making use of whatever resources (Sewell's preferred terminology) or capital (Bourdieu's) that they have available.

The tension between social stasis and social change is a central one in investigating the development of prepping as an environmental practice. On the one hand, preppers are critical of, and resistant to continuing to live in accordance with the dominant social paradigm of modernity, a condition brought on by their consciousness of the uniquely modern structuring of risk in risk society<sup>37</sup>. This evidence of resistance to structure is followed by the observation that preppers are working to enact change that resists taken for granted, embodied habits by adopting new practices oriented towards emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency. On the other hand, as I shall argue in subsequent chapters, the form of resistance that preppers adopt, and thus the form of social change that ensues, is indeed indicative of a tendency towards reproduction of cultural elements from the past in ways that reproduce the structures that play a role in structuring preppers' existing subjective experience. Prepping is a case that illustrates the tension between social stasis and social change, and suggesting that outcomes oriented towards both change and stasis are always potentially available, but that the practices that individuals and groups adopt also always remain bounded—with some latitude, as if by a rubber band—to the dispositions, skills, knowledge, and resources available to them—what Bourdieu calls capital, and what Sewell (1992) calls schema and resources. I prefer Sewell's "conceptual vocabulary" (1992:15), which I find offers more clarity and nuance for thinking through the relationship between materiality and culture, and which avoids the transactional nature of capital as a metaphor. Like capital, schema and resources are always derived from past conditions (Bourdieu refers to this as durability), and are passed

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<sup>37</sup> I'm not willing to commit to thinking of risk society as a structure, rather I see risk society as a quality of a multiplicity of structures powerful enough to produce risk of the magnitude and scope that Beck theorizes

on through social systems in a variety of ways, even as actors adapt them, or transpose them to apply to new conditions and uses (transposability). For Sewell, it is this quality of transposability that allows for an inroad to the possibility of social change to occur at the level of the agent (rather than some external change to the structure).

In the world of human struggles and stratagems, plenty of thoughts, perceptions and actions consistent with the reproduction of existing social patterns fail to occur, and inconsistent ones occur all the time. (15)

Sewell offers a “conceptual vocabulary” that extends Bourdieu’s theory of structure in a way I find useful to allow for the explanation of social change. Because these modifications to Bourdieu’s theory of practice will help to explain the unique tension between social stasis and social change that prepping reflects, I summarize them here as follows:

1. There are a multiplicity of structures that exist at different levels and operates in different modalities, with different logics (i.e. the logic of family structures differs widely from the logic of production, but both structure social life simultaneously) (16).
2. Schema<sup>38</sup>, which refers to the meanings and interpretations applied to resources (material and nonmaterial), are transposable. While Bourdieu suggests that the transposable or generalizable quality of habitus means that dispositions (schema) can be applied to new conditions “permitting the solution of similarly sized problems” (Bourdieu 1977:83; Sewell 1992:17), Sewell extends this to argue that schema are transposable *beyond* similar size problems; that, in fact, “there is no fixed limit to the possible transpositions” (Sewell 1992:17); it is this potential to transpose what is already known, thought, felt, assumed, etc. onto a new social situation and modify accordingly, that allows for actors to initiate social change.
3. Although power and inequality of resource allocation matters, all social actors are susceptible to the unpredictability of resource accumulation. This has to do

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<sup>38</sup> Sewell replaces Giddens’s use of the word “rules” with schema (8) and uses it in a way that suggests that schema are meant to indicate cultural meanings applied to resources (11-12); this term is also used widely by cognitive cultural sociologists to indicate shared cognitive structures of embodied meaning (DiMaggio 1997)

with the wide range of possible interpretations of schema that are available to actors. Because various actors may interpret schema differently, given their transposability, the effects of actions on the resources of the actors is never quite certain. Depending on the outcome of one action, schema may be reinterpreted, and actions must by necessity be modified to account for new meanings, and their implications (18).

4. There is a polysemy (a multiplicity of meanings) of resources. Because resources “embody cultural schemas”, their “meaning is never entirely unambiguous” (19). Resources may be interpreted, re-interpreted, and mobilized in terms of all sorts of cultural schema, according to their orientations, intentions, sentiments, or a great number of other variables. As noted above, Hank and I applied different meanings to the same combination circumstances and resource use when he judged the fact that most Americans did not store large volumes of food to be a matter of (poor) choice, and I judged this to be a matter of habit and infrastructural influence.
5. Structures intersect and are never singular. Sewell defines structures as “mutually sustaining schemas and resources that empower and constrain social action and that tend to be reproduced by that social action” (19) Various structures intersect and overlap, on both the level of schema and resource distribution. For example, we can see clearly that the state structures social life, at the same time that capitalism does. These structures are by no means independent of each other, but they do have their own, often intersecting logic, and schema move between them, as do resources. The application of theories of practice that account for structuration must account for the complex relationships between interlocking structures (see also Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, and a long tradition of feminist, and especially Black feminist thought for a theoretically rich literature on this observation (Acker 1992b; Collins 1986, 2009; Hollander 2001; Lorde 1987).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> As Omar Lizardo points out, Giddens’s theory of structure, which Sewell works to salvage from some theoretical inconsistencies, is, at its core, making ontological claims about the “realness” of structure (Lizardo 2010). This is a key difference between Giddens and Bourdieu, the latter of which adopts a primarily methodological structuralism (Lizardo 2010:666), which positions structure as a method to be used by the social analyst, rather than something that exists outside of the analyst’s usage. This is an important distinction, and one of the reasons I prefer Bourdieusian theories of practice over others. For Lizardo, Sewell’s attempt to integrate Giddens and Bourdieu fails because Sewell does not sufficiently address or ultimately reject Giddens’ ontological commitments in his theory of structure, leaving Sewell “embroiled in his own—ultimately irresolvable—set of meta-theoretical dilemmas.” (Lizardo 2010:670). While I don’t fundamentally disagree, I think this potential embroilment does not undermine the pragmatic (methodological) value of Sewell’s intervention, which, as I hope to show, offers an important perspective on my data, thus doing what theory should do in our empirical analyses.

Preppers call many habitual, embodied, taken-for-granted practices into question. But they also rely on and reproduce many practices simultaneously. Recall that resources (which include practices) have a polysemy of meanings. Actions, resource use, and rituals that once seemed innocuous, safe, and resourceful, like shopping at a supermarket, making use of municipal water, or relying on electricity, were attached to legitimizing schema that reinforced these perceptions. In the default *ecological habitus* oriented towards the dominant social paradigm, there is no potential danger attached to shopping for groceries once a week, and only buying what is needed for a short time. Ecological habitus refers to “the embodiment of a durable yet changeable system of ecologically relevant dispositions, practices, perceptions, and material conditions—perceptible as lifestyle—that is shaped by and helps shape socioecological contexts”, an adaptation of habitus to account for the environmental dimension (Kasper 2009:318 see also Ford 2019; Haluza-DeLay 2008; Haluza-DeLay and Berezan 2013; Hargreaves 2011; Shove 2010; Shove and Walker 2014). But if the default ecological habitus is to assume the safety and normality of globalized, industrial consumer culture, *risk position* intervenes. Aware—via a multitude of processes and channels—that in fact, these seemingly innocuous practices are beset with danger and moral quandaries, people must adopt a course of action that accounts for this “new”<sup>40</sup> perception. As Kari Norgaard shows, many people adopt a course of action in which they circumvent having to deal with the implications of risk society by participating in the collective production of socially constructed denial (2011). Others, for example Indigenous peoples, may draw from their

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<sup>40</sup> I put “new” in quotations marks to denote that it’s novel, not to suggest that it is only just happening now. When risk society took hold is an interesting historical question; when various groups become aware of it is a different sort of empirical question.

own cultural traditions to make sense of contemporary risk as a feature of ongoing historical processes such as settler-colonialism (Whyte 2017). Still others, such as preppers, accept the reality of pervasive risk, and respond from the cultural perspectives that are readily available to them. To understand the development of prepping as a practice, then, we must understand where preppers themselves are situated in relation to the various interlocking structures that organize American social life today.

### **“People Don’t Think About Poop”: Disrupting Doxa at the Level of the Body**

Preppers observe that being in a state of dependence alienates people from the basis of their survival—a deeply ecological observation, that circumvents, or ignores completely, comparable realizations that have been made by the environmental movement. Preppers arrive at similarly ecological conclusions, but they get there by way of a very different cultural pathway.

Once preppers become aware of the everyday risk embedded in what I will call the environmental field (discussion to follow), this state of dependence no longer “feels right”. Feeling is central here. The felt, embodied sense that something is amiss serves as the impetus that propels change, although it doesn’t determine the direction that change will take. Bourdieu calls the alignment between the objective (structural) order and subjective (individual or group level) perceptions of the world, “doxa”, which he defines as “a quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organization... the natural and social world appears as self-evident” (Bourdieu 1977:164). Prepping emerges as a “heterodox” discourse that counters the established “doxa” that it is normal, acceptable, and even desirable to outsource the meeting of bodily needs to impersonal, bureaucratically managed supply chains.

Risk generates discomfort that calls awareness to discrepancy between the objective and subjective orders. The body plays a key role, both as the site of feelings that alert individuals to inconsistency between the objective and subjective order, and as a focal point around which preppers orient their changing practices. Having become aware of the vulnerability of the body in risk society, the default material network in which preppers are embedded, resolving the double bind between dependence and distrust requires a re-orientation in relation to the environment, but one that makes sense within prepper's cultural worldviews. Emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency disrupt the status quo by centering the needs of the body outside of the dominant assumption that institutions can be relied on for safety and security. This requires accounting for all sorts of environmental factors that have previously been unaccounted for by financially comfortable, middle- or upper-class Americans. The discrepancy between preppers and most-people that Hank lays out for me, is a difference in awareness of risk, and the body's needs (and vulnerabilities). This extends as far as the family and the household, as preppers think about how to sustain themselves and their families (which may include pets, and non-human others):

Hank: When people get [to Idaho], if they aren't prepared yet, then the hope is that they will go to those [who are] and say, alright, I'm hearing more about [this], what do I need to do? And so that's when we start talking, well, do you have X amount of food, and more importantly, do you have X amount of water, and hygienic supplies. Do you have a dog? How much food do you have for your dog? Are you prepared to go poop in a 5-gallon container?

Because this is reality! People don't understand that. They don't know what to expect. And so, we try to give them an unvarnished view of what the potential is. You're not going to have a refrigerator. And if the power goes out, and you don't have a generator, well, you better start eating stuff out of the fridge first, then the freezer, then you start going for the canned goods, and don't forget Fido, unless

you're gonna eat Fido, you know, this kind of thing, and what do you do with that 5 gallon bucket that you're pooping into a trash bag? Where does that trash bag go?

Allison: It requires some kind of consideration of our daily, bodily needs that we actually don't have to think about in civilization.

Hank: Exactly. That is a REALLY well put...people don't think about...poop in the toilet, and where does it go? ...Bodily functions, it changes when all of a sudden you've got a squat on a 5-gallon container or something like that, and those of us who can't, you might have the little portable toilet seat and everything else, but people, they need to hear those hard facts, THAT happens. And what are you going to do with it? And, well, I'm gonna bury it. How good are you at digging holes, and how many holes are you going to dig, and do you have whatever to put in the hole, and are you gonna have a slit trench, and if it's summertime it's no problem, but you got 4 feet of snow on the ground...and now what are you going to do with it? 'Well, I'm gonna put it in a plastic bag and let it freeze and then come summertime, I guess I'd better go bury it or whatever' you know, but people are not faced with these facts and so that's one of the things we do.

In modern, daily life, most Americans do not have to think about where to dispose of their waste, procure food to ward off starvation, or find clean water. They do not have to do so because access to these goods and services are built into both the material infrastructure and cultural practices of daily life.<sup>41</sup> As Hank observes, even the simplest, seemingly most natural act of pooping is in fact highly cultural, with practices oriented around the assumption of modern sewage, and its continued functioning. Upon it's (projected) collapse, the cultural practices of defecation must be reoriented towards a

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<sup>41</sup> I recognize that many Americans live in poverty, including extreme poverty, and struggle to access these necessities. However, within this highly industrialized, materially developed society, poverty alleviation goals tend to focus on reintegrating the poor into the dominant infrastructure, rather than to offer them the opportunity for self-sufficiency, which requires access to land—a highly contested object of political attention. Within current economic conditions, access to land is a costly piece of economic capital that is generally and increasingly unattainable to the impoverished.

whole new set of skills, such as storing buckets or digging holes. Hank's observation is quite sociological, echoing the cultural sociological finding that people's skills, sets knowledge, and ways of life—all facets of what Ann Swidler (1986) calls "a cultural toolkit"—are calibrated to the material world in which they reside.<sup>42</sup> Knowing how to navigate the material networks that structure daily life is a feature of the modern industrial ecological habitus.<sup>43</sup>

Hank's consternation at most people's failure to account for their own bodily needs outside of institutionalized material networks calls attention to the centrality of the body in prepping, a counter to its invisibility in everyday modern life. Dependence on taken-for-granted material networks renders invisible the body's connection to its ecological life support system, the environment. Preppers call into question the naturalization of the social construction of the material and informational networks that they are embedded in.

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<sup>42</sup> The example of pooping is widely appealing as a case of a "natural" behavior that is deeply socialized not only among preppers, but among sociologists. I am indebted to Dr. Lauren Charles Stewart for inspiration on this matter. Dr. Stewart has shared in personal conversation that they regularly use pooping as an example of why we can't discount the significance of culture in shaping even the seemingly most natural of aspects of the body while teaching Women's and Gender Studies classes. They point out that although pooping is one of the body's instinctive and biologically necessary functions (failing to eliminate waste products is dangerous and potentially life-threatening), that if a student had to poop in the middle of class, it is highly unlikely that they would simply drop their pants and do so in the classroom. Rather they would (probably self-consciously) stand up, exit the classroom, walk down the hallway to open a door to enter a closed off, specialized room built for exactly that purpose. They would then go through another door into an even more closed off stall, lock the stall, and then, and only then, proceed to allow "nature" to take its course. The sequence of events might vary widely depending on where the pooper is located in both time and space. The point being that even this most natural of bodily acts is deeply social, and the social processes by which people perform it vary widely. This is an observation that preppers make in part, when they recognize their dependence on toilets is connected to modern sewage systems, which they distrust.

<sup>43</sup> By material infrastructure, I mean the pipes that carry water to developer constructed homes, the roads and ports that allow for transportation of food and durable goods across long distances, the cars and public transportation systems that people rely on to go to stores and access those goods, the large electric grid that most Americans are connected to, that delivers electricity to homes with the flick of a switch, the gas pipelines that provide fuel for heating and cooking, etc. Each of these systems masks a complex supply chain that stands between the environmental sources of the goods we rely upon, and the bodies that they sustain.

This, ultimately, is why I categorize prepping as an environmental as well as a cultural practice. The development and increasingly popularity of prepping as a response to risk society can be explained by attending to the alignment between old and new ways of being in response to emerging social, political, economic and environmental hazards.

Theories of practice have established that the things people do are not simply a result of individual interest or choice but are patterned according to their position in society. This is not to say they are pre-determined, but because they are informed by the limitations imposed on groups based on their relationship to social structures like the state, the economy, religious institutions, and institutions organized around race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. People develop common taken-for-granted understanding about the way the world is and ought to be based on their positions within these systems. In short, knowledge is constructed differently by different social groups, forming the basis of individual practices, which, although individuals perform them, are produced collectively. Cultural practices refers to patterned sets of actions, habits, performances, and their justifications, which are embedded in systems of meaning that transcend individual inclination. Cultural practices are informed by dispositions that are in alignment with their contexts—material, economic, political, social, and (the generally under-theorized) environmental. Neither the mechanical reproduction of predetermined outcomes, nor the product of individual choices, practices are structured by past outcomes, as people respond creatively to the social worlds they move through, within the limits of circumstance, resources, and knowledge (Bourdieu 1977, 1980, 1987; Giddens 1991; Reddy 1997; Sewell 1992).

The actions and habits that most people engage routinely are so mundane to someone embedded in the context of modern infrastructure that they likely don't think of them as cultural practices at all. This is because they are so in tune with the material circumstances that they come to be taken-for-granted, and thus rendered invisible. But the action of turning on an electric light is indeed a cultural practice, including the embodied knowledge that the little rectangular switch on the wall is linked to an electric system that will produce light upon demand. The knowledge that if you flick the switch on the wall upward, lights will turn on, is something each of us had to learn at some point—it is not innate knowledge, nor is it information or habit that would have been useful in other times or places. For most citizens of wealthy, developed societies, this practice was likely embodied at such an early age that it came to feel natural, and thus not like knowledge at all.

Hank walks us through the ways that the conditions of the modern institutional network he lives in engender specific habits, practices, sets of knowledge, and ways of being in the world. It is taken for granted that I (a fellow middle-class citizen of the modern United States, with common geographical and cultural reference points) share many of the material reference points he uses in his scenario—I too live in the world of refrigerators, toilets, and the lights turning on with the flick of a switch. This world is not just taken-for-granted, it is embodied. It is the one we know how to move through seamlessly. This is illustrated when Hank asked me, “You ever have the power go out, and you walk in a room and flip on the switch?” I nodded yes.

Hank: We all do it! Because that's what we do! You know, we have the power go out, well...I couldn't see! We DO that! We take for granted all the stuff that we've got. And this is the mindset that people have got to get educated on... and that is,

you know what? We get an EMP<sup>44</sup> or we have an economic collapse, and our world is gonna change like that. And you need to [be] mentally prepared for that change and nobody is completely prepared for that. But if you've done anything as far as educating yourself as far as what might happen, you are better able to accept what it is you've just been handed, alright?

Hank describes how citizens of modernity are habituated to having resources—in this case electricity—delivered to their homes, and readily available, with minimal bodily effort on their part. Even when confronted with information that suggests that this resource is not available (having observed the changes that occur when the power goes out), we may go through the motion of turning on the lights because the way we move through the world is habitual, and embodied habits are hard to break. For many of us, this misstep is innocuous—something we might laugh at and tell our friends about once the power outage has passed. Primed to see risk and potential disaster in this small motion though, Hank interprets it as a liability—a potential weakness that interrupts our ability to survive in the event of a disaster that disrupts the systems we rely upon. It is not enough to make use of the resources at hand—Hank, and preppers like him, fear that these systems are likely to collapse soon, for various reasons. People who have become accustomed to taking for granted that their needs will be met, will not be mentally prepared to respond to that change. And Hank believes that “our world is gonna change”.

Recognition of risk society disrupts the implacability of preppers’ habitus, their practice-generating dispositions, which are informed by past conditions and the institutions they are embedded in (Bourdieu 1977). Bourdieu observed that habitus is both structured and structuring—that is to say, it’s shape is informed by the historical

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<sup>44</sup> EMP refers to an electro-magnetic pulse, a burst of electromagnetic energy that could be produced by natural events such as solar flares, or human-caused in the event of a nuclear explosion.

processes that generate the conditions of the present, but the ways people act in response to those conditions plays a role in informing the conditions of the future. Habitus, he noted, is “adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted” (1977:95), and thus, it disposes actors towards system-reproduction. Habitus is also shared among members of a common group. “Internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception and action” (ibid) are shared by members of a group formed in relation to social structures. Our habits, ideas, ways of interpreting new information, and ultimately our behaviors, then, are formed in relation to the institutions we are embedded in, which Bourdieu refers to as fields.

### **The Environmental Field**

Preppers maintain a habitus that is attuned to a rapidly changing field, what I call the environmental field—a network of interconnected institutions, organizations, industries, agencies, and actors that shape the material organization of environmental goods and services of a society. In American society, this field has long been invisible, but it is an essential part of all social worlds; something modernist sociology often overlooks (Catton and Dunlap 1978), but which was often present in anthropological accounts of social life, which attended to material as well as virtual culture<sup>45</sup>. Bourdieu develops field theory in conjunction with his theory of practice. “Field theory conceptualizes society as structured spaces in which agents with habitus and capital struggle for dominant positions.”(Liu and Emirbayer 2016:62). Field theory relies on a

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<sup>45</sup> Cultural sociologists are increasingly interested in and attending to material culture; there is also an interdisciplinary move towards integrating a legacy of binary opposition between culture and materiality; see for example (Alaimo 2012; Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Coole and Frost 2010; Schlosberg and Coles 2015)

spatial metaphor to explain social space as distinct from social structures, and the dispositions of agents. Fields are not structures in and of themselves, but they are composed of the relationships between structures and agents. Practices are a result of the relationship between habitus and the field, made possible by the amount of capital available to actors, a relationship that Bourdieu summarizes formally as:

$$[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice (Bourdieu 1986:101)}$$

Practices emerge in relation to the field in which actors are situated, but the field alone does not determine their practices; rather, the field interacts with the resources<sup>46</sup> actors have at their disposal, which in combination influence their actions.

Understanding the field is central to understanding the practices that emerge in relation to it (Grenfell 2008; Prior 2008). Bourdieu focuses on economic, political, and cultural fields, but also allows for more topical fields of interest, for example, the educational. He does not fully account for what I propose we consider the environmental field: the interrelated network of institutions, organizations, industries, agencies, and actors that shape the material organization of environmental goods and services. The basic human needs that preppers are concerned about that can only be met through ecological systems and the environmental systems that overlay them can point us to a map of this field, upon which we can chart the wide range of institutional players that preppers recognize as partially responsible for the state of dependence in which they find themselves.

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<sup>46</sup> Bourdieu calls the resources that actors have at their disposal capital, but I prefer William Sewell Jr.'s modification of Bourdieu's theory to account for resources and schema rather than capital (Sewell 1992) although I shall use both terms depending on which theorist I am referring to.

Like other fields, the environmental field is informed by the historical processes that produce contemporary conditions, which, in the contemporary United States, must include the colonial state-building project that is the United State—colonization, settling, and industrialization of the Americas by European settlers; a political economy organized by capitalism, as well as the racial, gendered, religious and class struggles that shaped these historical trajectories. The American environmental field is dominated by fossil fuel technology and dependence, marked by what Stephanie LeManager describes as “the charisma of energy, as an American idea and a force” (LeManager 2014:4) Preppers’ habitus is a product of these same processes, and it is attuned towards system maintenance. However, the contemporary environmental field is undergoing rapid and for many, alarming changes, as the processes of industrialization and globalization have produced unprecedented changes to the material world.

As a product of interlocking historical structures including colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy, the environmental field is dizzyingly complex, organized by the principles of modernity, whose political philosophical basis is liberal humanism, justifying a rationalized, bureaucratic system whose ostensible purpose is to meet human needs, but which produces unintended consequences for social life (Weber 1947, 2003). Humans have always relied on ecosystems to meet their needs, but for most of human history these relations were much more direct, ranging from foraging, hunting and fishing, small scale agriculture, and even into larger scale, but still human labor intensive agriculture and production (Smil 2014). This break in direct human-ecosystems relations could be considered a hallmark of modernity, although it is more commonly theorized in

reference to capitalism (Foster 1999), industrialism (Schnaiberg 1980), and rationalism, or bureaucratic domination (Weber 1947).

Three bodies of work consider the importance of the human-environmental interface directly, albeit in very different ways. These include the treadmill of production, metabolic rift, and risk society. Schnaiberg's (1980) treadmill of production theory shows the effects of industrialization on human-environment relations, as the environmental concerns are subjugated by state and corporate actors in favor of economic growth and development. Schnaiberg, Pellow and Weinberg (2000) find that "economic criteria remain the foundation of decision making about the design, performance and evaluation of production and consumption, dwarfing any ecological concerns". Secondly, John Bellamy Foster's theory of metabolic rift links the break between human societies and ecosystem functioning to capitalism, which "fails to acknowledge the ecological basis of the human condition" (Foster 1999). Capitalist systems involve a rift between the site of production and the site of consumption and waste processing, disrupting key environmental cycles like carbon cycles (in the case of global warming), nitrogen cycles (in the case of agricultural runoff and pollution), hydrological cycles, etc. Both theories are concerned with the causes of environmental problems though and focus less on how people within these systems respond to them.

Lastly, Beck observes that industrialization developed ostensibly to meet human needs; for example, industrialized agriculture was intended to feed more people, more efficiently. However, as Beck (1992, 2008) points out, the industrial system, governed by the principles of capitalist production, does more than meet human needs; it now produces unprecedented levels of risk that must be managed by the same institutions that

generate it. Embedded in this map of the environmental field we see this contemporary balance of industrial production and risk management; environmental regulatory agencies, water quality testing and management, complex schemes to deal with chemical outputs, pollution, and other “externalities” of economic activity are almost as numerous as the industrial players themselves. In short, the state of modern dependence and global risk that preppers respond to are co-occurring phenomena. Not only have production systems rapidly changed over the last century, producing new dangers (even as they also minimize old ones), but the capacity for more people to become aware of those dangers, has dramatically changed as well. To be aware of dependence on risk producing systems is to modify one’s risk positions.

There are many potential ways to respond to risk. But as Bourdieu reminds us, responses to social conditions are structured according to group memberships that situate us in relation to powerful historical structures not of our own making. Practices are neither a mechanical reaction, nor an act of total, individual free will (1997:72). Prepping is a response to the disconnect between the current environmental field and preppers’ ecological habitus and all the patterns, habits, beliefs, and schema that are contained within it. Prepping is what Ann Swidler calls, “a costly cultural re-tooling”, but it is one that develops in an iterative process that consistently refers back to preppers’ pre-existing worldviews, which are informed by their relationships to the multiplicity of structures through which meaning moves and transfers. To make sense of the emergence of prepping as a viable adaptation of an existing habitus, we must know more about who developed the concept of prepping, and who adopts it.

## Who Preps?

In a large exposition hall in Oregon, a tall, lanky middle-aged white man in a suit stands before a crowd of several hundred participants of a preparedness exposition to give a talk about geopolitical instability. He discusses the unstable state of the world today, then advises his audience to strategically relocate their households to a safe place, minimizing risk of all possible disasters. Audience members are exhorted to think twice about living in a highly populated urban metropolis no matter how appealing the amenities. While most people might focus on the appealing aspects of city life like job opportunities, access to medical care, and cultural resources and activities, preppers should think beyond these immediate attractions and attend to the risks that come with city living. These include:

- A break in supplies of food and goods that happens in response to a labor crisis,
- An economic crisis that cuts off salary, pensions and investments, undermining access to “basic necessities of life”,
- A nuclear attack that is more likely to target a major city,
- Massive social unrest that breaks out in response to a crisis,
- Clogged freeways blocking exit during a major emergency, or
- A terrorist attack with biological or chemical weapons.

Urban living is portrayed as deceptively dangerous, as citizens lured in by the appeal of modern living give up their autonomy, safety, and common sense once they become dependent on money and institutionalized distribution of basic resources. The solution is to strategically relocate to a safer place, based on the speaker’s in-depth analysis of America’s safest places to live. The speaker, who has written a book, runs a website, and offers personal consultations on relocation, offers to help the audience

identify threats that “most other people fail to see and choose to ignore”, helping them to avoid or mitigate natural disasters, economic collapses, or nuclear war.

Binary discursive codes, which set up a schema of oppositional qualities oriented around a good/bad pole, run deeply throughout American civil political discourse (Alexander & Smith) but they are not the only way of framing tensions around risk, danger, survival, and well-being. By framing risk in a binary discursive structure that places “us” in opposition to “them” (more on the content of the “them” to come), preppers play out their hopes and fears for themselves and their relationship to modern society in scenarios about how a world that has become politically unpalatable to them might crumble. The “us” reflected in the talk I describe above sets preppers up as the in-group of those who are prepared, or at the very least, in the act of preparing. It rescues them from the ignorant masses referenced in the slightly derogatory and commonly used phrase “most people...”, and sets them up as active, rational, independent and smart. And it positions them as the higher status members of implicit hierarchies that structure American social life around race, gender, class, and citizenship. It also associates them with political conservatism and its racial, gender and class projects.

At the end of his talk, the speaker addressed the mostly white audience, and said, You may not all be conservatives...but most of us are...we feel like a minority here especially...public schools creating more and more liberals...but the meltdown will allow people to move East where there is a majority of conservatives.

Although people of various political identities participate in prepping, today’s prepping movement is ultimately rooted in conservative ideology<sup>47</sup>, specifically

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<sup>47</sup> By ideology, I mean historically situated, articulated beliefs about the way the world is and ought to be. I discuss how I use the terms ideology and discourse in distinctive ways in the literature review.

libertarianism. Not all conservatives are preppers, and not all preppers are conservatives, but the justifications for prepping draw discursively from conservative, and especially libertarian thought. This aligns with a broad right-ward shift in American politics originating in the Reagan era, and producing what Matthew Schneider-Meyerson calls “something approaching intellectual hegemony” (Schneider-Mayerson 2015:7), as more and more Americans embraced conservative ideas such as uncertainty in the potential about the legitimacy and potential of government, faith in the private sector and free market, and antipathy towards collective action (Phillips-Fein 2011). Libertarianism refers especially to those parts of conservative thought concerned with the principle of freedom of individual choice, preference for a small state, and reliance on markets to meet human needs and produce social goods. In his study of peak-oil culture, Schneider-Meyerson observes the significance of what he calls a libertarian shift for environmental politics, as Americans, including those who identify politically as liberal, turn to individualistic, market-oriented forms of response to political problems, eschewing traditional forms of political engagement, like attending marches or protests, organizing for political change, or participating in electoral politics (Schneider-Mayerson 2013, 2015).

Like peak-oil enthusiasts, or peakists, as they are known amongst themselves (ibid:3), preppers adopt individualistic, lifestyle-oriented practices rather than traditional political activities, in response to concerns about immanent disaster. While Schneider-Meyerson’s survey of peakists indicates that most participants of peak-oil culture were liberal (29 percent) or very liberal (27), my observations of preppers suggest that most are conservative or very conservative, with strong libertarian leanings. Although I did not

conduct survey research, and so cannot quantify this observation, evidence of conservative influence was ubiquitous during my participant observation and interviews. Even more liberal preppers told me openly that most preppers were conservative, and that libertarian or conservative beliefs were presumed to be the norm in shared prepper spaces.

Speakers, club leaders, and those that I interviewed made very clear that conservatism was the default political views assumed to be held by their fellow preppers. The cultural spaces where preppers gathered, such as expositions and shops, were filled with the symbolic and discursive marks of conservatism: symbols of guns, American flags, signs and speeches honoring veterans and military service, reference to the Founding Fathers, the Constitution (especially the 2nd amendment) and the Gadsen Flag, a yellow flag with an image of a coiled rattlesnake and the words “Don’t Tread of Me” printed underneath. The symbol’s historic origins are traced to the Revolutionary War, however the image has recently been resurrected and used widely by members of the conservative Tea Party movement of the early 2000s. I also observed frequent examples of religiosity and reference to god, church and country—classic conservative ideals. These symbols and the narratives that accompany them were also prominent on many prepper blogs, social media sites, and message boards. They speak to a mythical American past of the heroic revolutionary/settler who faced down the oppression of the British monarchy and rightfully claimed the American frontier from the primitive savages who had failed to develop it, thus giving up their natural right to the land. This mythical American past is widely embraced by Americans and plays a central role in the creation of American as an imagined community (Anderson 1983), serving as what Arlie

Hochschild calls a deep story, narratives about who we are and what we value, that feel true (Hochschild 2016). The conservative deep story builds on the characters of the American story, framing colonial revolutionaries, settlers, and frontiersman as the heroes upon which the American characteristics of independence, autonomy and self-sufficiency are built. Pride in a version of American history that centers European claims to land and sovereignty and legitimizes the colonial take-over of North America is the predominant affective tone of this story, which is reflected in the objects, symbols and discourse of contemporary conservatism.

I noticed the salience of the symbolic political meaning of objects, and the micro-social spaces we create with them one day early on in my field work. I was taking an introductory gun shooting class. Samuel, the course instructor, directed us to meet at the private shooting range where the training would be held. I parked my sedan in a parking lot filled mostly with trucks and SUVs and gathered my things to leave my car. As I did so, I realized that my backseat was cluttered with the trappings of my own cultural memberships: a yoga mat, a stack of academic theory books I had meant to return to the library, and an empty container of coconut water. Feeling very out of place, and a bit worried about calling attention to symbols associated with my more liberal social politics, I quickly threw a towel over the backseat before leaving my car. It struck me that my car had become a micro-social space communicating information about politics, my cultural practices, and my group memberships without my even realizing it. The contrast between my car and the others in the lot sharpened my awareness of the symbols of conservatism all around me; American flags, images of guns, larger less fuel-efficient cars, and bumper stickers not unlike those I noted in the parking lot of the prepper expo described above.

At the exposition, I noted in my field notes the interesting mix of bumper stickers on the cars in the parking lot, including gun symbols, veteran insignia, campaign stickers from the 2012 Romney/Ryan campaign against incumbent President Obama, and stickers advertising Infowars.com, an alt-right conservative news blog. One sticker read, “My army kid is defending your honor student”. There was some deviation from classic conservative symbols, for example I did see one car sporting a bumper sticker with the classic feminist slogan “well behaved women rarely make history”, but it was an exception.

As both the speech and the symbolic imagery documented above show, prepping as a sub-culture is dominated by conservatism and the people who are most drawn to it: white heterosexual men. The preppers I encountered tended to be United States born citizens. Most were positioned at the head of nuclear families that follow traditional gender roles. They were very likely to own homes and property, but not significant amounts of capital, situating them in positions of relative privilege, compared to many Americans, and indeed, many people throughout the world, but minimal political power in a system dominated by wealthy political elites.

To say that prepping is dominated by the ideals of white heterosexual male conservatives is not to say that all individual preppers fall into these categories; not all preppers are white, male, heterosexual, etc. I interviewed several men of color, women, and observed at least one visibly queer family participate regularly in one of the prepping clubs I frequented. At every gathering I attended though, men outnumbered women, and whites outnumbered people of other racial categories. Notably, the movement’s thought-leaders (those producing the books, blogs, expositions, etc.) tend to be conservative white

men, and the ideologies of conservative white masculinity set the tone for prepping as a practice. This includes the understanding that qualities traditionally associated with masculinity, such as strength, control, power, authority, rationality, physical prowess, and a lack of emotionality are superior to, and more useful than qualities traditionally associated with femininity <sup>48</sup>.

In narratives about scenarios and ways preppers might prepare for them, the prepper as hero (surviving disaster against the odds) generally resembles Audre Lorde's mythical norm: white, heterosexual, male, Christian, financially secure (Lorde 1987). Lorde's concept of the mythical norm highlights the ways that individuals are treated differentially in reference to their social belonging to groups that are vested with different levels of power and privilege within systems of oppression. She calls attention especially to age, race, sex (or in more contemporary terms, gender) and sexuality. Based on the calls of Indigenous feminist scholars to consider the endurance and dominance of colonial discourse and power in shaping contemporary identities and politics (Arvin et al. 2013; Barker 2017; Deer 2015), I add citizenship to Lorde's list, with the mythical norm resembling a citizen of the settler-colonial state of European ancestry (in opposition to indigeneity, and contemporary immigration). This addition calls attention to yet another important interlocking structure, settler-colonialism, to accompany those Lorde attends to: patriarchy, heterosexism and heteronormativity, capitalist class structures, religious

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<sup>48</sup> Masculinity is "a configuration of practices and discourses" that is variously embodied and expressed (Pascoe 2007:5) but, within the cultural gender binary that predominates present American culture, its positioning in opposition to femininity has been remarkably durable (Kimmel 2017). Hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), the pinnacle of normative expectations of what it means to be a man in a specific time and place vary widely, varies widely, but its consistent quality has been hierarchical dominance over traits and qualities attributed to the feminine.

dominance, and white supremacy. In short, the mythical norm of a prepper is a figure that serves as a foil for many versions of “the other”.

As the speaker at the expo quoted above notes, conservatism is the presumed norm in prepping spaces. But this is a general signaling of position on the overly simplistic field of left-right division that marks American political discourse. Conservatism is not a uniform ideology, but rather a complex political and cultural phenomenon that encompasses a wide range of specific beliefs and policy prescriptions, while being unified by core underlying identifications. According to sociologists Perrin et al. “Conservatism should be understood as an amalgam of overlapping but distinct modes of thought: a cultural repertoire held together through conservative identification and useful for adherents in responding to new or changed political situations.” (2014: 285).

As noted above, one common discursive pattern that preppers rely on is the idea that they are different from “most people”. In setting up his claim, the speaker falls back on a common rhetorical device that many prepper engage: most people are not smart/forward thinking/rational/independent enough to see through the common assumptions about the benefits of city living, but you (the audience of preppers), with just a little coaxing and the right information, can be. The speaker crafts his words in a way that rhetorically sets preppers apart and confers a tone of presumed but conditional superiority to those who are in the know, as indicated by their presence, and their presumed efforts towards becoming prepared. The audience is offered the opportunity to become one of the “us” in an “us vs. them” configuration, if they act accordingly, and follow their “common sense”, which will most certainly lead them to the same conclusion as the speaker. This commonsense narrative is that it is dangerous out there, but

intelligent, rational, autonomous, independent thinkers can avoid or minimize risk by thinking strategically, preparing for the worst, and avoiding dangerous places like the highly populated (diverse) metropolis.

Prepping discourse varies widely in content, with creative extrapolation of scenarios that rival the imaginative range of science fiction. But most of it is structured along a common rhetorical device: the binary discursive code (Alexander & Smith 199x). Binary discursive codes assign moral weight to the motivations of actors and their motivations, structuring the content of text or speech to convey specific cultural associations that signal the speaker's position in relation to an enduring cultural structure.

Prepping is organized around the following main binary discursive codes:

- Us/them
- The prepared/the unprepared
- Conservative/liberal
- Good guys/bad guys
- Autonomous/dependent
- Helper/needing help
- Active/passive
- Urban/rural
- Free/not free
- Smart/stupid or knowledgeable/ignorant
- Rational/emotional or irrational (also shows up as calm/excitable)
- Sane/crazy

These configurations show up frequently in prepping discourse, which frames preppers as scrappy underdogs who are at odds with the dominant trends of modern life—disadvantaged by the power of the society they distrust, but positioned in such a way that they are able to see reality, and make use of their common sense, even as the majority is easily misled into giving up power in favor of comfort. The underdog is an appealing trope because as a character, the underdog faces disadvantages but also

harnesses their (perhaps slightly unorthodox) resources against the odds. The underdog goes from powerless to powerful by using their wits and refusing to be disadvantaged. The underdog's foil is everyone else who fails to do this. This sets up an us vs. them configuration that is reflective of contemporary American political discourse and the various ways political actors work to set up a relationship of difference, often oriented around inclusion and exclusion.

### **Is Prepping a Movement?**

The cultural content of prepping (and thus the environmental practices it engenders) is inextricably tied to the political positioning of its originators and participants. I define prepping as a cultural movement, a type of social movement that coalesces as a semi-structured effort to shape individuals' cultural practices at the micro-level; in the household, within interpersonal relationships, etc., without focusing on producing external change to institutions or the culture at large (Cherry 2006). Elizabeth Cherry notes that "Many recent social movements, especially cultural movements, are more loosely defined than preceding movements and do not have conventionally identified adversaries or goals" (155). Understanding movements as cultural draws from Mustafa Emirbayer's (1997) relational sociology, which, in the words of Cherry, "describes aspects and phases of action, without attributing action to outside entities. These approaches embed the social actor in dynamic, processual relationships that shift over space and time" (157).

A defining feature of social movements as a concept is that participants work to enact some kind of external change to society. Early theories of social movements such as political process theory tended to focus on movement efforts to influence the state and

political polity exclusively, whereas “new social movement” literature is more attuned to the significance of cultural change as a movement goal. However, a defining feature of prepping as a movement is that preppers advise directing one’s political discontents away from the state, the economy, or the culture at large, in order to prepare for its collapse. There are no formal prepper organizations that are recognized by preppers as legitimate movement organizations. When preppers do adopt formal organizations, they tend to be small businesses, including media producing or aggregating digital organizations, or retail businesses selling necessary supplies or trainings to other preppers. There is no central mechanism for political activity, and although individual preppers may participate in political processes idiosyncratically, prepper political concerns are not collectively directed, at least not by other preppers. Indeed, the response to all political concerns seems to point to prepping—a practice that is politicized, but not politically organized. For many preppers there simply is no political opportunity to organize for or against; as Benjamin (echoed by others) expressed, “it’s too late”; the system is too powerful, too entrenched, and too far gone to fix.

Although preppers loosely refer to prepping as a movement, they do so colloquially. Preppers do not advocate any kind of external action geared towards changing the conditions that they are displeased by. Movement participation amongst preppers is scattered, and I observed no strong correlation between prepping and movement participation. I asked all my interview respondents if they had participated in social movements, curious to know if the discontent with modern socio-environmental circumstances had manifested in any type of collective action, and the answer was generally either no, or a vague recounting of relatively low-scale investment in

movement activity. Some preppers report having participated in collective action or membership in movement related organizations (like the National Rifle Association (NRA), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and the Sierra Club). But others express distaste for movement participation, casting activists as crazy (Bailey), stupid (Hank), or criminal (also Hank).

Bailey, a prepper in Oregon, told me explicitly, “I’m not an activist”, and that this was part of why prepping held appeal. He mentioned that a friend of his had moved to New York to participate in Occupy Wall St. in 2011, a movement he found “fascinating” but, ultimately, ineffective. He reported:

Bailey: I didn’t actually believe in what they were doing...

Allison: What do you think they were doing? Or what didn’t you believe in?

Bailey: Well, I do believe that...I will admit that the banks are corrupt, and Wall St. is bad, all that...yeah, that makes sense to me. But that’s not the way you do it. I mean, you have to become a part of that system to change it. Although I don’t know if you can change it because there’s a lot of people who were doing it for a long time and they have a lot of money and influence.

Allison: People who are trying to change it, or people who are just in the system?

Bailey: Wall St., the banks...you know, whenever there’s money to be made, people will tend to gravitate towards the money. As long as you’re making profit, you know? The social aspect and the concept of community tends to take a back seat, typically.

Allison: You said you think you have to work from within the system to change it.

Bailey: I don’t know exactly what it would look like... I think a lot of the Occupy people, the movement was kind of more popular than you know, anything I can think of...[but] a lot of those people were nuts.

Bailey works to discursively distance himself from “those people” who “were nuts”, thus narratively identifying himself as rational and sane. Activism, with its disregard for social norms, collective messiness, and overstepping of rules lacks the qualities of control, measured calculated response, and the opportunity to exhibit mastery, all qualities Bailey extols. Prepping is not a social movement, and this is part of its appeal for him. He echoes other preppers here who acknowledge that they think social change is possible, and even desirable, but express doubt as to its potential because they don’t trust that individuals are able or willing to take on the powerful institutions that structure their social worlds. But clearly social change is something many preppers desire. I asked, Allison: Do you believe in the potential for social change?

Bailey: I would like it to happen! However, I feel that most people don’t want to do that. We don’t even know how to do that. From an early age, we’re indoctrinated to believe certain things. The government has a lot of say in what we do and what we think. Five years old or so, probably earlier, we are sent off to school. It’s a long way of brainwashing certain beliefs that are handed down that your kids get up in their face every day. You know, I went to college. And I also feel that college is another vehicle for indoctrination. Here you’re taught from an early age that you work hard you can get ahead in life, you work a good job, you pay your taxes on time, and really they just kind of plug you into the machine. I think ultimately what it is, is to have you not talk too much back, and to have you pay taxes.

When Bailey answers this question, his tone and cadence of his voice change, lifting up briefly, and he becomes momentarily emphatic— “I would like for this to happen!” But he catches himself, and dismisses the desire for social change as unrealistic, not because *he* is not willing to do his part, but because “most people don’t want that”. Bailey simultaneously deflects agency (it’s other people’s choice, not his) and claims authority (he knows what most people do and don’t want) to justify turning away from something

that seems to have sparked a momentary feeling of hope and desire. Instead, he doubles down on the reasons why social change can't happen—another major theme in prepper discourse: neither individuals nor institutions can be trusted to do their part.

Unwilling to trust in the collective processes that they believe are necessary to effect social change, preppers turn to individual, household level action as the cultural solution to the structural challenges of late-modern risk. Again, there are exceptions. Some preppers are politically active and do try to work at the level of local politics. There are also notable preppers at high levels of government, such as former Maryland Congressman Roscoe Bartlett. But this was by and large an exception, and while there was some overlap in their activities (i.e. prepping and conservative party politics are both tied to conservative political beliefs), my general observation is that the political activity I observed was incidental to prepping as a culture, and simply an overlapping past-time of several research participants; it was no more central to prepping itself than other overlapping past-times that some preppers might have, such as a love of golf.

Prepping is not a social movement, nor is it a counter-movement, like the climate denial movement, which is invested in challenging scientific findings about risk, in defense of modern institutions and their economic processes (Jacques 2006). Indeed, preppers have a strong critique of the modern industrial complex that is responsible for climate change and are critical of many of the same tendencies that are linked to out of control greenhouse gas pollution—even if they do not believe that climate change is anthropocentric, or concentrate on climate change as a prominent concern. Rather than think of prepping as a movement, I see it rather as a cultural strategy (whose organization and spread of information takes on movement like qualities) that develops as a result of

1) dominant cultural narratives that valorize individualism, and other related cultural “tools” linked to collective cultural ideals around value, success, and responsibility; 2) traditional American cultural movements that develop in conjunction with important economic and political circumstances throughout American history, including settler-colonial mythology and the principle of terra nullius, which served as its foundation (Zerubavel 1992), and the back-to-the-land ideas of self-sufficiency that have been a continuous presence in American cultural life since the late 1800s, which was about the time that self-sufficiency as the default way of life for most Americans was being overtaken by industrialization and the final capitalist push for unencumbered labor (Dickinson 1995). The history of the loss of self-sufficiency and the disconnect from individuals and the land is the history of colonialism and industrialization in America—a historical process made possible by European imperialism, capitalist drive for expansion, and the settler-colonial project that prompted the settling of the United States. Individuals of many classes, religions, races, genders, and countries of origin were caught up in these historical tides, although some had more power and control over outcomes than others.

Prepping is a cultural response to contemporary risk, generated by a loose collective of individuals<sup>49</sup> from common social positions, that has taken off in popularity because it appeals to Americans united by a firm commitment to individualism, and their never fully realized belief in the right to self-determination—a right that has only ever existed at the expense of Native Americans who’s land was taken in the name of

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<sup>49</sup> Matthew Schneider Meyerson applies Manuel de Landa’s concept of a *social assemblage* to peak-oilists. A social assemblage refers to “a fluid, temporally contingent, decentralized grouping centered around knowledge and information across spatial boundaries” (de Landa 2006; Schneider-Mayerson 2015:4).

European American expansion. In short, preppers make sense of their current circumstances in reference to their understanding of their pasts—mythical or otherwise.

There is one major exception to my contention that prepping is not a social movement with external political goals: some of the more conservative movement thought-leaders have proposed that preppers strategically relocate to the inland Northwest, to an area that blogger James Wesley Rawles has named the “American Redoubt”, in order to reclaim this territory for political conservatives. Rawles explicitly names his call for preppers to move to the mountain states a political movement. Citing a news story about drivers being detained for trying to use large bills at a Florida toll booth (the story Rawles links to is from the right-wing libertarian alt-news site LewRockwell.com), Rawles writes,

I recognize the fact that “all politics are local” ... Therefore I de-emphasize politics in my blog. However, an article got my blood boiling: Motorists illegally detained at Florida tolls – for using large bills! So, not only are Federal Reserve Notes not redeemable “on demand” for specie, but effectively they are now no longer “...legal tender for all debts public and private.” It is often hard to pinpoint a breaking point—the proverbial “straw that broke the camel’s back”—as impetus for a paradigm shift. But reading that news article was that last straw for me.

Consider my paradigm fully shifted. I’m now urging that folks Get Out of Dodge for political reasons—not just for the family preparedness issues that I’ve previously documented. There comes a time, after a chain of abuses when good men must take action. We’ve reached that point, folks! (Rawles 2011)

Rawles follows by urging his readers to “Vote with [their] feet”, encouraging “freedom-loving Christians to relocate”, undertaking a “conscious retrenchment into safe haven states.” Rawles singles out “freedom loving” (which likely references libertarianism, which Rawles elsewhere argues is most compatible with survivalist (and prepper) principles) Christians, but notes further on that he is anti-racist, and that:

Christians of *all races* are welcome to be my neighbors. I also welcome Orthodox Jews and Messianic Jews, because we share the same moral framework. (ibid)

The implication is that religious libertarians should take over the local political channels in the inland Northwest territory, thus allowing for the development of a less hostile social environment for political conservatives fleeing urban centers and the coasts. I will discuss the American Redoubt at length further on, but for now I will limit my observations to noting the relevance of this narrative to my consideration of prepping as a cultural vs. social movement. So far, there does not seem to be any concerted *political* action oriented towards encouraging this movement to happen. Rawles encourages his readers to read his survivalist precepts (Rawles n.d.), and, if they agree with them, to move to the American Redoubt. He encourages readers to be active politically, by writing letters to the editor (under a pseudonym) but leaves it at that.

Although this call to action adopts the framing of political movement, the underlying belief in rational, individual choice as the only real potential for political action minimizes the potential for collective political action oriented around this libertarian strain of conservative thought. The idea has been proposed, and it is up to individual preppers to actualize it by making choices within the household sphere (i.e. deciding to move to the American Redoubt and participate in local politics). This is not to say that libertarian leaning conservatives cannot successfully organize into a united social movement (the Tea Party is an example of how they have), but that preppers advocate for individual actions such as preparing for the coming collapse, minimizing dependence on modern institutions, and learning how to live self-sufficiently.

John, a prepper who up until recently produced a popular online radio broadcast and website, positions himself as related to nationally recognized far-right wing

libertarian personalities such as Alex Jones, but specifies that he is doing something different:

Alex Jones is alternative news. He's been around a long time...if you listen to him on a radio, you end up being angry with him the first 30 minutes because that's what he does. He antagonizes people. He's part of this new movement, as I am, of training people, getting people to pay attention to their existing life so that they can exist better. Now he just says, "Everything's fucked up. Everything's fucked up." Me, I'll tell you, "Here's why it's fucked up, and here's how you can fix it." [laughs].

Preppers believe in individual choice and responsibility for one's own life chances. But they also believe they are being set up, duped by an out of control system that does not have their interests at heart. "Everything is fucked up" is a powerful critique of the material and cultural heart of modernity. Prepping is "how you can fix it"—a solution to the social problem of imbrication with a social system not of any individual's making. It is an untangling of dependence, subordination, and the ceding of one's life chances to circumstance and chance. Prepping is a way of re-claiming power, control, and a sense of self-efficacy that aligns with conservative worldviews and the deep story of American individualism (Hochschild 2016).

### **Preppers and Environmental Thought**

There are many counter-cultural challenges to the dominant social paradigm—environmentalism being one of them. But most of them come from the left (Marxist and socialist movements, radical feminism, deep ecology and radical environmentalists, peace movements, etc.). As Schneider-Meyerson argues, conservative ideology, embedded in the policies of neoliberalism, has gained intellectual hegemony politically, in the U.S., and economically, globally. Preppers by and large do not relate to any of the counter-cultural movements listed above, or indeed with movement-oriented activism at all.

Recall Sewell's observation that resources can mean many things, based on the polysemy of resources, which "embody cultural schemas". Although they are situated in the same environmental field as environmentalists, and other actors, activism and environmentalist frames do not align with the cultural schema that preppers draw from to make sense of their relationship to nature and society. Even as they are concerned about environmental risk, the political frames of American environmentalism, movements currently dominated by the American political left, are culturally unpalatable to many preppers. The contemporary mainstream environmental movement has various roots; one of them is the early American conservation movement, which grew out of the outdoor recreational enjoyments of the early American elite (Bosso 2005; Brulle 2000; Reiger 2001; Taylor 2016:51–52). The early roots of American environmental discourse can be found in the political ambitions of elite, Euro-American white men invested in the project of settler-colonialism (Taylor 2016); and it tended to be an insiders game, working within mainstream American politics. Conservationists advocated for federal and sometimes state regulations that set aside land for elite, recreational use, specifically for sports hunting and fishing. This first wave of American environmentalism was not limited to any specific party, but was marked by tension between preservationist and conservationists ideologies, as early Americans grappled with the effects of industrialization and urbanization (Cole and Foster 2001).

The modern environmental movement was sparked during the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, drawing from early conservationist ideas, even as it took some of its inspiration from the justice oriented movements of the mid-century, such as the Civil Rights Movement, and the anti-War movement in response to the Vietnam war. The

mainstream, or traditional environment movement coalesced around scientific-legal political advocacy, involving strategies based on effecting government institutions via litigation, lobbying, and technical advising—a strategy that is more politically aligned with centrist, but left-leaning politics (Brulle 2000; Cole and Foster 2001:29)

Two main frameworks dominate American environmental politics today: mainstream movement-organizations, more closely associated with the US conservation movement, and environmental justice frameworks, more closely aligned with civil rights movements and social justice movement-politics (Cole and Foster 2001). Environmental justice frames focus on environmental inequality, highlighting how environmental harm is unequally distributed, disproportionately effecting the most marginalized members of society, who have the least amount of power within institutional environmental decision-making processes (Agyeman et al. 2003; Alkon 2008; Capek 1993; Di Chiro 1996; Mohai et al. 2009; Taylor 2000). Environmental justice scholars and activists are often critical of mainstream environmental movement politics, which are dominated by privileged social groups like men and whites (Taylor 2014a). Environmental justice discourse is rooted in radical critiques, and its advocates are generally strongly critical of the dominant social paradigm whereas mainstream environmental movement political movement actors adopt a more institutionalized approach. The 1970s saw landmark environmental policies come out of mainstream politics, with bipartisan support. This ended abruptly in the 1980s with the election of Ronald Reagan and the realization of the neoliberal takeover that solidified the dominance of market primacy for the decades to come (Brown 2015; Harvey 2005). Environmental concern was abandoned by the right and institutionalized into corporate-oriented environmental movement non-governmental

organizations (eNGOs), where they participated in left-of-center mainstream political processes, funded by elite foundations (Bosso 2005).

The contemporary environmental movement continues to operate in the arena of governance, generally advocating for regulatory measures and government interventions to economic activity that produce environmental problems. Whether or not preppers value features associated with a protected environment (and my time spent with them suggests that they do), they are generally opposed to the political goals and policy mechanism that the mainstream environmental movement has adopted. The belief that solutions to environmental problems require government regulation is a major barrier to conservative adoption of environmental discourse or politics, even if they share some common interests. Trust in government, science, and civic society organizations like environmental NGOs is a necessary ingredient for managing risk via government programs. This does not align with conservative schema.

The matter of trust is paramount here. As indicated in the previous chapter, preppers are skeptical about institutions in general, and are especially distrustful of government. Their distrust of institutions also extends to educational institutions, scientific institutions, the media, as well as many private sector (especially corporate) firms. Environmentalist discourse—such as narratives about climate change—originate from scientific institutions, are amplified by environmental NGOs, and communicated via media—all sources that preppers widely distrust. To them, the idea that these same institutions that they distrust might be the source of political solutions to the problems of risk, including environmental risk, is unfathomable.

Hank attributes the idea of incompatibility between traditional environmentalist beliefs and conservative politics to conservative media commentator Rush Limbaugh, when I ask him if he's concerned about the state of the environment:

Allison: Are you concerned with environmental issues at all?

Hank: Oh...ha, [soft laughing, sighs] this is interesting. Rush Limbaugh had a great thing, talking about that. Talking about the left and clean water and clean air and he would come out on something, [and they'd say] oh, you're opposed to clean air, having clean water. No. I'm not. I'm opposed to government overreaching, over-arching laws and everything else.

Allison: In the name of those things

Hank: Right. I love clean air! I love clean water! I try to recycle whatever I can. We are not required to do so here in Idaho. I do it anyway, because it's good, you know? Having been in California where you couldn't legally throw batteries in the trash, when I throw my hearing aid batteries away, I still think about that every time. But there's no place to put 'em anyway, they're all gonna go in the trash. But we had a problem, people were saving so much glass, we had a mountain of glass, we didn't know what to do with it! You know?

Allison: Yeah

Hank: So, we're not set up for that. But they recycle our aluminum, our newspapers and our cardboard. Because I believe in doing that. *Don't tell me I have to*. My daughter lives in California, she and my son in law are full blown greenie, socialist, Bernie-ites and everything else, and she was horrified to find out that we didn't have recycling bins, and horrified to find out that we weren't required to do that. And I said, welcome to North Idaho. *We do it because we want to*. People that I know, they all feel the same way. We really do care about the environment. You know, we live here! We've got these beautiful lakes and [mountains].

Hank goes on to tell me how important the environment is to him, and how central it is to his quality of life. He grew up in Southern California, where the smog was so bad that he couldn't see the mountains in the distance until the Santa Ana winds blew

it clear. His zealous antipathy for regulations flags momentarily when he acknowledges that regulations in the form of smog laws played a major role in preventing the problem from being worse:

As much as I don't like what they're doing with the smog laws, you needed to do it. You look at what happened in Mexico City, it's hard to breathe, Beijing was another thing. So I understand that. And we had the benefit of that. That kind of thing.

But he quickly reverts to his strong opposition to regulations, adding, “But just don't tell me I have to.” For Hank, regulations that force people to “do the right thing” erase their opportunity to do so as an act of personal freedom—potentially robbing them of the opportunity to demonstrate their moral caliber. His preferred way of dealing with environmental problems is education that would allow individuals to make personal choices that align with their values. He offers up the experience of observing his fellow Idahoans recycling even though nobody is requiring them to as evidence that most people will do the right thing:

Hank: Educate the public as to the value of doing [something], and the majority of the public is going to say, yeah. You make it easier for me to do that. We don't have trash service where we live, which I love. Because when we lived in California, I had to wheel it out there, and I had a burlap bag I had to soak with ammonia every week so the bears didn't get into the damn thing! Here, when the trash builds up, we drive it over to the station, drop it off, and there's a huge roll off bin for aluminum...they have one for cardboard, the corrugated, and the other one is for newspapers and everything else. And those are always full!

It's wonderful. It makes me feel so good to see how many people come in...and there's people throwing away aluminum cans that they could be [getting] money for, and they don't want to! They just...in it goes. And like I said, that makes me feel great, because people believe in it. Alright?

It is not actually clear that voluntary measures or educational efforts are effective ways of producing what social scientists call pro-environmental behaviors. Outcome

aside though, Hank's response to my question about environmental concern reveals the complexity of how conservative thought interacts with environmental discourse. Even before I asked him explicitly how he felt about the environment, human-environmental relations were a frequent topic of conversation, given their centrality to prepping in general, as I have argued elsewhere.

Hank and I shared some cultural reference points but diverged widely on others. As a trained environmental professional, I associated many of the topics Hank brought up as environmental: the disposal of human waste, access to food and water, fuel and energy supplies, etc. whereas he did not apply an environmental frame to them. I waited for a point towards the end of our conversation to bring up this frame at all, because I already knew that environmentalism and the language around it was contentious for conservatives like Hank. Hank knew my politics did not align with his (he had asked me directly how I identified politically before agreeing to do the interview with me, and I had answered honestly that my politics were pretty left of center). But we had been talking for over an hour and had built up a rapport. In some respects, I was asking Hank to help do an act of translation, to speak about his understanding of the world in the language of mine. My conjecture at this point of my field work was that preppers (and perhaps other people who do not identify as environmentalists) do in fact care very much about the environment, even if they would not put it in the same terms as my environmentalist colleagues and I do. This bore out. The issue for Hank, influenced by conservative thought-leader Rush Limbaugh, was that the environment mattered enormously, but that environmental regulation challenged his belief in individual freedom above all else. "People care!" he exclaimed. His enthusiasm for the topic was evident, and expressive,

and he clearly felt strongly about people who didn't share his respect for a clean environment. But his respect for a clean environment had (to me) troubling undercurrent, associating good, nice, clean environments with European (white) ideals, linking environmental value to ideas of racial purity:

I am disgusted when I see trash blowing on the side of the road. You assholes! Do you have any idea what we have here? You ever been to Europe?

Allison: [nods]

Hank: Clean, isn't it?

Allison: Yeah, quite.

Hank: It's incredible. And it makes me so mad. Why don't we do that? Cause we got a bunch of selfish people in this country. [pfff] off it goes. You know? That's a whole 'nother thing. But the point being that...the people that I know if you were to call them an environmentalist, they'd say...I'm gonna hit you. Don't use that term on me. Do you like clean water, I love clean water, I'm going to do what I can. I'm not gonna have a fuel spill, I'm not gonna let this kind of stuff happen. But get the federal government off my back.

Allison: So, the issue of the environment becoming a polarized political issue has made that unpalatable?

Hank: Very much. That's very well put.

Allison: But people still care.

Hank: People care! But you know, take a hike, federal government. And state government, or the county government, you know? If you want to do that. Because we don't need your interference. We got it! We got it! Leave us alone. Because we believe in this kind of stuff. But when you start putting law on it, that's when people say, up yours, you know? And there are people that say, everything goes in the trash. Screw you! It's going in the trash. So, *which is heartbreaking that people would do that, but that's how human nature is!* Don't tell me what I have to do.

Allison: So, freedom is very much at play here.

Hank: It is paramount. Individual freedom. Nanny government get out. Right. Very, very important up here. That's probably one of the overarching things about everything we're talking about is personal freedom. Tell the federal government to go take a hike. Yeah.

Hank states very clearly that he cares about the environment. He uses three common environmental reference points to articulate this. He wants a clean environment. He becomes angry when he sees litter. He finds it “heartbreaking” that people don’t recycle. All three of these reference points draw from environmental movement framing: the use of the language of purity and cleanliness in reference to the environment (clean/dirty); the concept of “littering”, meaning to dispose of trash errantly, outside of designated waste repositories; and lastly the concept of recycling as a solution to an unclear environment. None of these frames make sense outside of contemporary environmental politics. Clearly Hank has been influenced by environmental frames, even as he accepts some of the movement’s cultural schemas and rejects others. He follows up this show of environmental concern by telling me that he is not concerned about climate change, because “our climate changes all the time”. I pressed him to say more.

Allison: So, it's not an environmental issue worth considering?

Hank: No, not at all. And it angers me! Because of what the radical climatologists, the radical supporters of climate change have done to those who have dared speak out against it. Ummm...it angers me beyond belief. So. There's my opinion about climate change. [laughs]

Hank’s anger was evident in his disposition. Interestingly, he quickly put it under wrap. Even as he acknowledged his anger twice (and I felt it from across the table), he abruptly ended the conversation on this topic by summarizing it in a humorous, but

abrupt manner, “there’s my opinion about climate change”. Sensing that we were at the end of Hank’s willingness to do the work of translation from his ideas about the environment to mine, I let the matter drop and moved on. I do wonder what would have happened if I had pushed him to say more. As I will discuss in the final chapter, exhibiting tight control of emotions is central to prepper identity—a strict observance of masculine feeling rules that discourage or punish men from expressing emotions. Anger is frequently an exception, but in this case, expressing anger about climate change, to someone he doesn’t know well, in a public place, seemed to be beyond Hank’s comfort zone, despite the fact that he had otherwise been a fairly dynamic conversationalist so far—mostly on topics of his choosing.

I include this full exchange, because Hank is a particularly eloquent research participant who summarized succinctly many of the ideas, beliefs, values and contradictions that I observed throughout my time spent with preppers. Although I met several preppers with liberal political beliefs who didn’t mind being called environmentalists, and one who told me he was a proud card-carrying member of the Sierra Club (and the NRA) most preppers did not identify as environmentalists, and many found the word itself off-putting. Even so, all the preppers I met had some interest in the environment, either as a source of disaster, a source of sustenance, or a meaningful connection to a valued natural environment. Like Hank, they oscillated between referencing concepts and adopting frames made popular by the environmental movement and distancing themselves from the movement itself. What movement scholars call frame alignment (Benford and Snow 2000; Brulle 2000; Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1992) was generally minimal, or incomplete. Preppers were willing to acknowledge that

they wanted a clean environment, that they were as invested as anyone in clean air, clean water, access to good quality, nutritious, “clean” food, access to land and wild places, and other features that I consider environmental. But even as they spent much of their time focusing on institutionally produced risk, they distrusted environmentalists and the scientists that environmentalists base their political claims upon as much as (if not more than) any other institution that they see as part of the modern “system”. Even as they prepare materially for many disasters associated with climate change, they reject the discourse of climate change itself. As cultural sociologists Phillip Smith and Nicholas Howe argue, in the public debate (or spectacle) about climate change, “[m]yths of nature are at work on all sides, competing to occupy the moral center of society. What matters is not knowledge and delusion, but trust, blame and consent” (Smith and Howe 2015:24).

The conflict here is not an irreconcilable difference in interest, but an impasse in solution. Environmentalist supported solutions to environmental harm—government regulation—is the very thing that preppers believe puts them in a situation of dependence and exposes them to risk in the first place: excessive regulation, reliance on big institutions, and the devaluation of individual freedom. Not only do preppers believe in individual freedom, they tend to value it more highly than just about anything else. They do not see their cultural attachment to liberalist ideals reflected in any of the environmentalist narratives available, and they are unwilling, and unable to simply abandon the schema that structure their experience of social life. As Smith and Howe colorfully put it, “people cannot innovate their way out of conflict by pulling a rabbit from a hat. As we show repeatedly...they try to *work* their way out using the symbolic systems at hand” (28). Preppers face a major schematic barrier to environmentalist

concerns, even as many of their criticisms of the dominant social paradigm are in alignment with them.

Prepping allows people to act on their fears about institutional production of risk, without having to challenge the dominant culture, in which they are still culturally embedded, even as they move to detach from it materially; or from having to participate in movement politics that their cultural worldviews do readily make available. Recent work on cultural cognition of risk confirms that knowledge about environmental problems like climate change is culturally contingent on belonging to specific social groups: cultural cognition of risk shows that the way people make sense of risk is consistent with their values, and their sense of belonging to important social identities (Kahan 2010, 2012, 2015; Kahan, Peters, et al. 2012; Kahan et al. 2011). This important work confirms what Bourdieu and Sewell theorize about the way meanings and interpretations are applied differentially to the same resources and circumstances. Further, as Sewell and Black feminist theorists observe, those meanings are located within, and move across, intersecting structures. The way individuals experience the world (the things they know, believe, and choose to pay attention to or ignore) is structured by systems of power, and the relationships individuals have to these systems, by way of group belonging (Collins 1989, 2009; Crenshaw 1991; Lorde 1987; Somers 1994).<sup>50</sup>

All of this is to say that the environmental practices we adopt must be somewhat consistent with our self-identities, which are rooted in our cultural worldviews. Because

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<sup>50</sup> Studies on cultural cognition of risk, grounded in experimental, psychological research, only confirm a line of reasoning that has long been put forward by feminist, and especially black feminist scholars. Unfortunately, these literatures do not generally overlap.

US environmentalism is rooted in liberal politics, it may be inaccessible to many people who do in fact care about the environment, but do not have culturally palatable language available to express it. The problems that preppers are concerned about are largely social problems: the increase in disasters associated with climate change, terrorism, nuclear disaster or war are politically avoidable; and instability in the economic system is not inevitable, but dependent on economic policy. Yet prepping is an individualistic practice that at best overlooks, and at worst disparages any hope for collective political solutions. For preppers, individualism, one of the foundational tenets of political liberalism (Bonilla-Silva 2014), the American cultural tradition (Bellah et al. 1996; Tocqueville 2003), and neoliberalism (Brown 2015; Harvey 2005; Reich 2016) serves as a cultural strategy (O'Brien 2015) that aligns with the cultural schema that they already value and embody.

Prepping culture is dominated by people who are relatively privileged within the systems of power that structure contemporary American politics, but not necessarily politically elite. They tend to be middle-class, conservative, heterosexual, gender-normative, white, men and sometimes women who are financially secure, educated and generally able to attain professional employment, but who do not feel like they hold any real power over political processes. They are generally educated, working as technology professionals, engineers, small business owners, writers, and managers. As such, they represent the eroding American middle-class, who occupy social positions of relative privilege compared to blue-collar workers, the working poor, and those living in extreme poverty, but who are nevertheless experiencing a decreasing quality of life. As such, privilege is not necessarily recognized, even as research indicates that within most, if not

all major institutions in American life, whites are favored over blacks and people of color, men are favored over women, middle-class social norms are the standard for professional behavior, and so on and forth. People in these categories receive social privilege, a structural advantage that comes without effort. This is relative to the advantages or disadvantages faced by other people within the system, not a fixed indictment on a person's relative value, as it is sometimes (defensively) perceived to be. People may be privileged in relation to other groups, and still experience suffering or insecurity. The decreasing quality of life associated with economic changes come from shrinking paychecks, reduced purchasing power, the evaporation of company provided benefits like retirement, quality health care, and the general decline of the middle class (Fan and Zan 2019; Pressman 2007). While the effects of economic downturns tend to disproportionately hurt already subjugated groups, for example racial minorities and the poor (see for example Reid et al. 2017); whites, men, and other members of privileged groups may also suffer from these losses, even as they may be buffered by the social status that comes with belonging to dominant groups. Their experience of this suffering is filtered through the cultural schema that are dominant within these group-based identities, such as the idea that self-worth and identity are predicated on role-fulfillment such as being the breadwinner, protector (Carlson 2015; Young 2003), or hero (Holt and Thompson 2004).

Status position also influences perceptions of, and response to risk. It is so widely documented that white men express less concern over risk than other demographics that researchers have dubbed this the "white male effect" (Bacon 2016; Finucane et al. 2000; Flynn, Slovic, and Mertz 1994; Kahan et al. 2005, 2007; Mccright and Dunlap 2011).

Preppers are clearly concerned about risk, (although, as I shall discuss in Chapter VI, they avoid the language of fear often adopted by researchers) but it is possible that because of their relative social privilege, they are not accustomed to high levels of institutionally produced risk. Buffered by high status positions like whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, middle-class upbringings, and American citizenship, preppers are positioned to experience the material benefits of modernity, not challenge it. But various social circumstances are at play that threaten their economic security, sense of social status, and the comfort of their lifestyles, thus heightening their awareness of risk. Their location in the environmental field is thus ambivalent. The attributes of the social strata that they are positioned in work to simultaneously buffer high-status members from risk—by distributing it unequally to more marginalized groups—and to generate identities constructed around narratives of invincibility and strength of their own making—thus rendering the systems that keeps them in both privilege and risk invisible or naturalized.

When they come to realize that they are dependent on institutions to meet their most basic of needs, preppers' sense of autonomy is challenged—this threatens their belief in cultural individualism—a key cultural strategy around which many Americans organize their cultural practices—and in order to salvage that belief, they adopt practices that align with it, reinforcing their sense of identity as that pinnacle of the American ideal: the self-made man. Preppers who are uncomfortable with dependence on institutions identity emergency preparedness, and especially self-sufficiency as the antidote to the state of dependence they find themselves in. Self-sufficiency means different things to different people, but it's main defining feature is that it allows

individuals and families to survive regardless of the state of society, because once they have attained a self-sufficient state, they theoretically would no longer need to rely on social institutions that they would otherwise be embedded in. Thus, self-sufficiency is an ideal to be attained, setting the standard for prepping, and providing a sense of relief from the discomfort of vulnerability that comes from relying on institutions.

According to preppers, truly “responsible” individuals make rational, strategic choices in order to maximize their survival, assessing risk, and preparing accordingly. The ideal prepper is invested with the qualities of homo economicus, the rational man of economic theory that has come to define human worthiness in the state of late neoliberal capitalism (Foucault 2008). No matter what economic, environmental or political crises befall him (it is always a him in the cultural myth), he keeps on gathering information, strategizing how to maximize his shrinking resources, applying “rational” thought to the problem, and coming up with a solution that elevates him above others who were less committed, less intelligent, or less able to act rationally, and be prepared. Rational man is an economic-cultural myth—but for many citizens socialized by and embedded in late-capitalist society, it is also a role-standard, the measure against which they are judged, and by which they judge themselves. As such, it is a major cultural “tool” (Swidler 1986) employed by preppers in their attempt to navigate cultural landscapes of risk.

### **Self-Sufficiency as the Antithesis of Dependence**

In an early post to his website Survival Blog, James Wesley Rawles, one of the thought-leaders of the prepping movement, posted a quote by Edwin Fulneur, the founder of conservative think-tank The Heritage Foundation.

Is the American tradition of self-reliance disappearing? That’s a painful question for conservatives to ponder. After all, we’re dedicated to reducing the role of

government and promoting individual freedom and opportunity. But the facts, while sad, are clear: more Americans today depend more heavily on government than ever before.

The quote was posted alone, without any discussion. None was really needed. The quote summarizes some of the key concerns that lead to the development of prepping. Further, the themes suggested here are discussed regularly throughout the blog, and in the comments, where readers engage with the author, and, at times, each other. It is clear from the selection of this quote that Rawles assumes his readers identify as conservatives, and that he, and they are worried about the size and power of the welfare state and dismayed at the loss of the ideal of self-sufficiency. This quote aptly summarizes preppers' concerns about the state of the modern world, and the costs that come with deepening dependence.

Whether or not we agree with Fulneer that American dependence on government is sad, his observation is accurate. As political scientist Suzanne Mettler documents in the aptly titled *The Government-Citizen Disconnect*, Americans depend on federal government programs and policies more than ever for a wide range of services and protections, like education, health care, consumer protections, and economic security, with 96% of the population reporting participation in at least one major federal social policy (Mettler 2018:4). Despite the many ways people rely on government to sustain their way of life, however, distrust of government is at an all-time high, with less than 20% of Americans reporting that they believe the government is “run for the benefit of all the people” (ibid:1). The tension between dependence on the state and individual self-sufficiency are at the heart of this paradox; Mettler calls this the government-citizen disconnect, a phenomena also addressed by Arlie Hochschild’s study of southern

conservatives struggling with the impacts of environmental degradation, even as they reject the need for government assistance (Hochschild 2016). For conservatives like Fuelner, Rawles, and John and Hank, the state of dependence is “sad”, and in some cases, deplorable (depending on who is doing the depending). For preppers, it is a major impetus for adopting a prepping practice, which represents a refusal of victimhood, dependence, and vulnerability.

Preppers, like many conservatives, are uncomfortable with the modern welfare state (or as they often refer to it derogatorily, “the nanny state”). Material dependence contradicts one of the most important concepts in popular narratives about American identities, and the American spirit: independence. This disconnect between national mythology and self-identity, and material reality sets the stage for the growing popularity of prepping as a response to myriad risks—environmental, economic, political and social— that government (and the institutions it ostensibly regulates) play a role in generating and responding to. Prepared/unprepared; active/passive, agentic individual/victim: these are all versions of the same discursive pattern that preppers rely on. We will see this stark binary again and again throughout prepper discourse. It is a long-standing structural discursive feature of American civic discourse (Alexander and Smith) and preppers are not alone in their reliance on it. But it poses some special challenges when applied to contemporary risk, and the choices individuals might make to navigate it. Risk society is anything but binary.

### **Threat to Individualism**

This belief that individuals are responsible for their own life-chances regardless of circumstances is widely held amongst Americans, spanning divisions of race, gender,

class, religion, political identity, etc. (Bellah et al. 1996). It is also a major feature of the dominant social paradigm. Despite Americans' insistence that individuals alone are responsible for their fortunes or failures, many circumstances shape the opportunities that individuals might pursue. Countless studies show that social mobility and economic success are tied to collective group positions based on race, class or gender. Furthermore, circumstances outside of individual control can impede upon even the best efforts at hard work and ingenuity. Americans may feel responsible for their life chances, even as they are exposed to toxins, displaced from their homes by storms, or threatened by nuclear attack; situations and events that greatly minimize their life chances that, for the most part, are beyond individual control. Acknowledging collective risk, then, comes with a cost. To acknowledge and respond to collective risks, individuals must reconcile their perceptions of risk with their existing cultural worldviews. Material dependence and exposure to risk both challenge the cultural ideals of autonomy and independence.

Calling upon a mythical American past of rugged frontier individualism, preppers reinforce cultural individualism, a quality that has long been considered a hallmark of American national identity. It is also an important tenet of neoliberal politics, the modern dominant manifestation of liberal political economies (Brown 2015, Carlson 2015, Reich 2016). Thus, it is well suited to individuals who remain committed to cultural individualism and individual freedom above all else, and who wish to protect themselves from risk-producing institutions without taking on the risk of challenging the legitimacy of those institutions. Preppers take to an extreme what environmental sociologist Andrew Szasz calls "inverted quarantine", a practice in which individuals isolate themselves from collective risk (often through consumer mechanisms such as buying bottled water or

investing in personal nuclear bunkers) rather than engage in collective action to correct it (such as political processes aimed at improving the quality of public water supplies).

### **Conclusion: Why do preppers prep?**

Preppers experience what I theorize as a double bind of reliance and distrust. Preppers' cultural worldviews are a product of modern institutions and the dominant social paradigm, a set of widely held values, beliefs and worldviews, that those institutions legitimate; these intersecting structures and the social actors situated among them make up the environmental field which shape how preppers experience and respond to environmental risk. Two dominant historical structures that shape modern American life are especially important: late modern, or neoliberal capitalism and Euro-American colonialism, whose spread informs the contemporary geopolitical world order. Both these systems are structured by cultural logics of liberalism, which “holds that the legitimacy of state authority derives from the state's ability to protect the individual rights of its citizens and that state power needs to be limited by the adherence to law” (Fukuyama 2012:54). Liberalism as a political philosophy is built on tenets of universalism, egalitarianism, and meliorism—the idea that people can improve their life circumstances through hard work—in theory, these principles apply to everyone. But its origins are in European patriarchal, colonial, capitalist systems of racial and gendered domination, which serve as sorting mechanisms, investing differently racialized and gendered bodies with differential socially invested status and value (Acker 1992b; Arvin et al. 2013; Bonilla-Silva 2014; Deer 2015).

Within these systems, preppers are relatively privileged—that is to say, they tend to be members of privileged social groups, such as men, whites, the educated middle-

class, property owners, etc. Prepping emerges as an ideal response to risk society because it allows preppers to respond to threats to their bodily survival in an embodied practice that is in alignment with their existing cultural values and worldviews. Preppers, privileged but non-elite citizens of systems of domination, continue to value the ideological tenets of capitalism and colonialism, namely conservative political liberalism. The adoption of prepping is a response to the threats to health, safety and well-being that risk society—a product of industrialized capitalism—produces, in an individualized way that does not ultimately require them to re-evaluate key tenets of these systems; nor does prepping actually pose any threat to risk-producing institutions. Prepping then, maintains privilege even as its participants question the sustainability of the modern system, and its ongoing ability to continue to buffer them from the harm caused by the externalities of contemporary economic activity.

Prepping is a way of reorienting oneself away from the default organization of material life in the wealthy, developed world, in which citizens do not participate in the act of ensuring their own survival, to a mind-frame and life-style in which they actively do. It's not necessarily surprising to learn that a group of people is intent on survival—arguably all people have a vested interest in staying alive. What is interesting about prepping is that this group of people has excavated the language of survival and self-sufficiency from a cultural field whose major narrative—or deep story (Hochschild 2016)—is about the success of the human technological project and its mastery of nature, such that individuals no longer have to worry about such things as mere survival. The prize for the hard work of industrialization, the story goes, is freedom from want and need—the comfortable lives at the end of the elongated material and informational

networks where all we need do to have heat, light, and the ability to cook our food is flick that switch. Thus, the human mind, previously weighed down with the labor of simply staying alive, is now free to create, invent, philosophize, govern, etc. turning to a supposedly higher level of culture (think about a good source on this narrative). The material networks are themselves a product of industrialization, which has produced economic and social systems to do what humans have spent most of their time doing for most of human history: feeding and clothing themselves, procuring water, providing medical care, caring for children, etc.

Contemporary citizens in industrial societies are habituated to living within these networks. Their skills and knowledge sets are in alignment with them, so that rather than know how to raise and slaughter chickens, they instead know how to find the nearest supermarket, select cuts of meat, and prepare them with other consumer food goods. The specifics may vary widely with place, but many of the skills developed in one modern, industrialized socio-environmental location will travel to another. Furthermore, citizens embedded in these material networks are also embedded in cultural systems that encourage and endorse the development and advancement of industrialization and the material progression of modernity. A key feature of phenomenal dissociation is that humans, cut off from direct, sensual relationship to the environment, are instead dependent on institutions to provide resources, goods and services to them (Worthy 2008). Institutions that now organize what Schlosberg and Coles (2015) call material flows are invested in maintaining their position mediating between communities and the environment.

In the deep story of the dominant social paradigm, scientists and inventors have furthered the project of industrialization in order to meet human need more efficiently and collectively, thus freeing the human imagination from the chains of focusing so much time on the work of survival. Individuals acting of their own free will have furthered the project willingly because it is in their best interest to do so, and modernity is ultimately a success story, a triumph of culture and human ingenuity over the tyranny of nature. At the root of this story, taken up and developed by advocates for capitalism, colonialism, and the modern state, are a tangled collection of beliefs and ideas about human nature, and human motivation associated with liberalism, and its most contemporary manifestation, neoliberalism. Liberalism is a political philosophy developed over centuries by Europeans, coalescing in the 17th century in the works of John Locke (Sturgis 1994). A fundamental tenet of liberalism is a theory of the individual, in isolation of social or cultural memberships, as a universal, rights-bearing entity (Gray 1994). Liberalism centers the individual as the sole political unit vested with rights, interests, rationality, and agency. It is also, as various critical scholars have pointed out, inextricably bound up with the development of capitalism, racial hierarchies, and the organization of modern forms of patriarchal social structures. Sociologist of race Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that liberalism is historically tied to modernity, and practices of racial exclusion, and that while espousing the values of universalism and egalitarianism, proponents of liberalism were also endorsing racism, slavery, and the brutal colonial takeover of non-European lands. By framing their interests as universal, the early modern capitalist bourgeoisie set the needs and interests of the aspiring ruling class as the needs and interests of all of humanity (Bonilla-Silva 2014:75). In doing so, they set the standard

for “rational” thought and action, stripping “rationality” of its historical-cultural context and establishing their cultural frames as the standard against which all others were to be measured. Political theorist John Gray calls what he identifies as the new liberalism a peculiarly American phenomena that was embraced in the cultural context of early American identity politics:

In emptying its construction of the person of any constitutive cultural identity, communal membership or ethnic allegiance, the new liberalism effectively relativized the Kantian subject, so that it became a rights-bearing cipher. The role of this cipher, as it can now be interpreted in the wake of the new liberalism, was that of a device whereby the warring cultural identities of latter-day America could be passed over or suppressed. By voiding its central conception of the person of any constitutive history or community, the new liberalism was an historically highly specific, topical and local, response to the cultural wars of identity by which its parent culture is chronically convulsed. (Gray 1994:720)

American “new liberalism”, the precursor to neoliberalism, isolates the individual from the context of cultural systems and historical structures, vesting the individual with rights, rationality and agency independent of the social systems that produce the very concepts that structure these concepts. And neoliberalism, as political historian David Harvey shows, has “become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.” (Harvey 2005:3).

The dominant social paradigm furthers the project of liberalism, intertwined as it is with the economic project of capitalism. This project is inextricably linked with the project of colonialism, with both projects rooted in histories of racial and gender exclusion (Acker 1992, Bonilla-Silva 2014, Dawson 2016, Fraser 2016). Modern citizens of these historical structures and the institutions that they produced are caught in a bind—

they may see cracks in the system, but, socialized into interlocking cultural worldviews which valorize the individual at the expense of any other social unit, they are unable to see their constitutive historical, structural and cultural memberships, or contextualize their socio-environmental locations, without undergoing “a costly cultural re-tooling” (Swidler 1986). In short, preppers see themselves as free agents without a corresponding basis of structure in which to situate their agency. It is unsurprising then that Bailey and others feel powerless to even hope for, let alone work to bring about social change!

The dominant social paradigm champions progress, freedom, and the rights of the individual to pursue happiness, comfort, and anything else that supposedly total freedom can purchase (and it is always an economic exchange). It simultaneously renders invisible social structure, the hierarchies, norms and institutions that organize social life, providing order and continuity to daily life.

Preppers, embedded in the dominant social paradigm, are generally not attuned to structural explanations for contemporary circumstances. Indeed, they often exhibit a lack of structural awareness, which leaves them struggling to explain outcomes that don't fit their individualistic ways of seeing the world. This is a disadvantage, because even as they do cultural work to maintain their sense of individualism and autonomy, preppers recognize on some level that they are responding to social and environmental conditions that are not of their own making. In the following chapter, I explore how preppers use cultural individualism strategically to navigate structural difference by making claims to superiority, that, even as they are stripped of explicit reference to racial, classed, or gendered difference, do the cultural work of otherization. Through this discourse, preppers think their way through their experiences of simultaneous privilege and

powerlessness, focusing on the discourse of marauding hordes of panicking violent citizens who have failed to take personal responsibility to prepare.

## CHAPTER V

### DEFENDING AGAINST THE MARAUDING HORDES; RURALITY, RACE AND GENDER IN PREPPING CULTURE

Anticipating the “the end of the world as we know it”, preppers turn to ideals and practices of self-sufficiency, in which they seek to minimize reliance on institutions that provide basic needs (food, water, energy, etc.). This includes securing access to land and the right to access natural resources. Rural living, made possible by private property ownership and direct access to land and water, is considered an ideal of self-sufficiency. In this chapter, I examine the relationship between rural ideals and their discursive constructions, which are embedded in colorblind racial ideology, settler-colonialism, masculinity. These ideals inform and reproduce environmental privilege as individuals with sufficient resources act on discursive cultural schema that inform justify their environmental practices, even as they distance themselves from those less able to prepare for future, let alone present disasters. I find that preppers rely on racially based frameworks that reinforce color-blind racial ideology and settler-colonial land practices in order to think through their response to socio-environmental risk. Both racial and settler-colonial discourse intersect with gender and class ideology. The centrality of idealized rural living and the valorization of self-sufficiency to prepper discourse has important implications for the adoption of environmental practices that maintain or challenge dominant racial ideologies and structures.

Self-sufficiency, individual responsibility, and thus the need to be prepared for all occasions emerge as the culturally logical response to risk society. As preppers develop awareness of risk generated by institutions that they distrust, they begin to question *doxa*, taken-for-granted assumptions, knowledge, and practices that define the dominant social paradigm. Situated in an environmental field in which their *habitus* is informed by the intersection of objective and subjective conditions, preppers tend to occupy positions of relative privilege within intersecting hierarchical systems. This means, even as they are critical of the conditions of the environmental field, they also benefit in real ways from the structural status-quo. Their *environmental subjectivity* is informed by their position in relation to the environmental field, which they carry with them into the cultural sphere of prepping. Environmental subjectivity refers to the lived experience of relating to the environment in a social context shaped by power, ideology, and agency. The concept works to integrate sociological understandings of structuration and agentic practice, recognizing that, because all people are embedded in ecosystems (whether they recognize it as such or not), all people are environmental subjects, whose social actions take place in relation to environmental fields (Ford 2019; Ford and Norgaard 2020). Some environmental subjectivities reveal differences in environmental privilege amongst groups who share space, but experience it in vastly different ways based on race, class, and other important categories of social difference (Park and Pellow 2011).

As environmental subjects, preppers reflect a unique nexus between ecological awareness and conservative political thought. Preppers are aware of their dependence on the environment and see the value of a functioning environment that they can rely on for subsistence and survival. But preppers do not adopt environmentalist political concerns or

make sense of risk through the environmentalist frames. Rather, they draw from their own, more familiar cultural schema, which include dominant public narratives about race, citizenship, class, and gender to make sense of risk.<sup>51</sup> In this, their environmental subjectivity is revealed to be one of relative privilege, both culturally and materially.

Culturally, preppers rely on mainstream American political discourse that idealizes the autonomous, self-controlled, self-reliant, freedom-loving, democratically inclined individual, a mythical ideal that is embodied in the figure of the European-settler homesteader and the frontiersmen of the United States' westward expansion. This figure, which represents ideals of civic virtue and honest work, is pit against a constructed political other, that is described as a collective, irrational, hysterical, homogenous mob who represents anti-democratic ideals. This ideal is embodied by the invocation of the "unprepared": a foil that preppers call upon in their scenarios to draw a boundary around morally upstanding behavior. In contrast to the prepper, modeled after the industrious homesteader, and freedom loving frontiersman, the unprepared are cast as decadent, lazy, irresponsibly dependent urbanites who favor pleasure, luxury and frivolity over hard work, representing the corrupting influence of unearned wealth and comfort. They draw on what Michael Kimmel calls masculine archetypes, and Jeffery Alexander and Philip Smith observe are personas coded as democratic and anti-democratic, cultural codes that persist throughout American history, structuring political discourse and embodied experience of gender, race, class and citizenship (Alexander and Smith 1993; Kimmel

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<sup>51</sup> I do not mean to imply that environmentalist frames do not also draw on dominant public narratives about race, citizenship, class and gender: they do (Di Chiro 1996; Cronon 1995; Merchant 2003; Plumwood 1993, 2002; Sturgeon 2009). But they do so in different ways from those which I observe in prepping culture.

2017). These discursive constructions are what Sewell (1992) calls cultural schema, and they are an important element in structuring both the environmental field, and preppers' attempts at shifting their ecological habitus to produce an alternative environmental subjectivity.

Materially, preppers rely on resources such as money, property, possessions, skills, knowledge, and other things that allow them to actualize their desire to live self-sufficient lifestyles. Being individually prepared requires resources—despite preppers' insistence that anyone can prepare, the bar for being truly “prepared” is high and costly, and ever shifting. Most preppers are privileged in ways that offer real material benefits—men earn more money than women, whites hold the majority of the nation's wealth, and property owners own land that is considered theirs thanks to the legitimacy of the settler-colonial state's violent attempted extirpation of Native Americans. Not all preppers are men, whites, or even necessarily property owners. But most preppers occupy relative positions of intersecting privilege, that enable them to put their self-sufficient ideals into action. All but one of the preppers that I interviewed owned homes, and all were college educated. Most were white, most were men, and most were politically conservative or libertarian. This is also true of the preppers who I identify as the movement's thought-leaders: writers, bloggers, and message board moderators who set the standards for what prepping is, ought to be, and isn't. Amongst these standard-bearers, property ownership of arable land with access to a private water source was the gold-standard of self-sufficiency, and those who didn't have this were assumed to be working towards it. In this way, economic class-privilege invested in the ideals of the settler-colonial state set the standard for the material basis of prepping. While preppers are aware of contentious

racial dynamics in American politics, and express awareness of class inequality, the continuity of settler-colonial processes remain largely invisible, even, as Jen Preston points out, “its practices and processes operate still within a contemporary neoliberal framework,” one that is most visible when claims over land, and resources are at stake (Preston 2013:43).

While preppers see themselves as independent, autonomous, and individualistic, their commitment to individualism is made possible by the erasure of structural differences that produce disparate life chances for people in varied social locations. Their commitment to individualism is made possible by the prominence of *abstract liberalism*, a key element to Bonilla-Silva’s theory of color-blind racism that is tied to European colonization of the Americas. Abstract liberalism is an expression of European liberal humanism brought to the Americans by European settlers. It is a political philosophy that espouses equality for all while producing outcomes that favor those formally recognized by the state: at the time, white men of European ancestry. Even as entire classes of people are subjugated under formal laws and informal customs, liberalism made claims of universal equality and the freedom of individuals. Its philosophical underpinnings are at work in all the dominant interlocking institutions implicated in the production of risk society: capitalism, patriarchy, racial structures, and settler-colonialism.

Individualism is one of the four key components of abstract liberalism that undergird dominant hierarchies by rendering them invisible. By reducing all rights and responsibilities down to the unit of the individual, divorced of social context, preppers erase or ignore the historical production of inequality at the group level, that is responsible for differential cultural understandings of risk, as well as vastly unequal

access to the material resources necessary to be prepared. Preppers are judgmental of “the unprepared”, even as they insist that they are not racist, or uncaring about poverty or the less fortunate. But no matter how explicitly they deny these associations, their cultural logic is embroiled in the cultural logic of inequality. As a result, despite the good intentions (or complete indifference) of some preppers, there is a racial, classed element embedded in the trope of the unprepared. In one on one conversations with preppers, the racial and classed discourse took on the form of the most polite manifestations of colorblind racism (I don’t see color, I have Black friends, or have helped Black people, expressions of cultural determinism, etc.); on the internet, explicit racism and disdain for the poor was a regular occurrence on some message boards, where it went unremarked on by other participants of the forum, indicating it’s general acceptance in this social space. Racist references to President Barack Obama were made regularly, and one poster fantasized about shooting liberal protesters advocating for welfare reform as a sniper from a nearby roof, then being offered a friendly escort away by police, unsuspected. While some preppers minimize the precarity of the conditions many groups find themselves in, the prepared are generally portrayed as poor, witless, reactive, and therefore dangerous—all stereotypes associated with both marginalized racial identities and poverty.

The unprepared are more likely to be those on the margins, and preppers blame them individually for their marginal positions, relying on an abstract liberalism that reduces all social interactions to the level of individual choice and preference. Yet we know there are lots of people who are struggling to deal with disasters as they happen, or disasters that have already happened but have a long recovery time. Not because they are

irresponsible, but because they are set up structurally to have less to start with. By ignoring structural imbalances that produce unequal opportunities and blaming (and sometimes shaming) the unprepared for their lack of preparedness, preppers invoke the privilege of turning away, focusing their attention not on the collective problems to be solved, but on ways to personally weather the storm. In doing so, they reiterate and reinforce their commitment to individualism, self-sufficiency, and a limited sphere of personal responsibility that does not extend outward into the political.

### **“They Will Be Like A Swarm of Locusts”: The Threat of the Unprepared**

Hank and I are sitting in a café just outside a small city in northern Idaho. Hank anticipates the total collapse of modern society, or, *The End Of The World As We Know It* (TEOTWAWKI) and takes it as his personal responsibility to be prepared by gathering emergency supplies, learning survival skills, and learning how to live a self-sufficient lifestyle so he will be ready when the “Shit Hits the Fan” (SHTF). Self-sufficiency requires land, knowledge, and resources. For resources, safety, and refuge, preppers turn towards the rural.

Hank, a white retiree, chose to move to rural Idaho in part because of its conservative political culture and lenient gun laws, but also for its distance from major population centers, which he sees as a source of danger. Hank is active in local conservative politics and hosts a regular Bible study group. Christian faith is important to him, as is personal emergency preparedness. Hank is closer on the spectrum to an emergency preparedness prepper than a homesteader, a phrase he doesn't recognize. But he still sees cities as dangerous, due to their crowds, their reliance on resources imported from elsewhere, and their potential for crime and violence. Cities, he explains, removed

from land and resources, breed dependence on institutions such as industrialized agriculture, municipal water systems, and electric grids. They are also full of people who, in the event of a disaster, are likely to panic, and, in a state of desperate hysteria, turn to violence.

Here, far from urban danger, Hank believes he is safe from the threat of hungry, thirsty, greedy people that he anticipates spilling out the cities in search of resources once society has collapsed. Hank prefers to live far from urban population density, among rural, “like-minded people”, who share his ideals of personal freedom, individual responsibility, and self-sufficiency. Those who are self-sufficient are less likely to go, as Hank puts it, “feral” when the Shit Hits the Fan:

Hank: If the Shit Hits the Fan, it leads to TEOTWAWKI<sup>52</sup>...the seams start coming apart. So, one of the things we looked at [in deciding where to move] was potential for... you know what the term feral means, right?

Allison: Feral?

Hank: Feral, as in feral cats?

Allison: Yeah

Hank: Ok, well, that is a term that is used for the onslaught of the population that lives and escapes from ...any metropolitan area. They're gonna be hungry and thirsty and very greedy, and things are gonna happen. *They will be like a swarm of locusts*, moving eastward.

Allison: Hungry and thirsty makes sense, but why greedy?

Hank: Because people are not prepared.

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<sup>52</sup> The End of The World as We Know It, pronounced tee-oh-twa-kee

The word feral means “of an animal: wild, untamed” and “brutal, savage” (OED 2019). Hank describes these “feral” people in relation to their lack of preparedness. The unprepared are presented as a homogenous, reactive mob, acting on instinct and emotion, after they are left destitute due to their lack of personal responsibility. Their bodily needs unmet, theoretically anyone—regardless of race, class, gender, or other social identity—has the capacity to participate in the marauding horde. The story is almost artfully neutral, at least if we look only at the literal meaning; the denotative level, in the tradition of Roland Barthes. But stories never just operate at the denotative level (Hall 2001). They are tied up in webs of meaning that social actors tug at when they engage specific narratives, whether intentionally or not. Sociologists often focus on the social act of framing, by which individuals and groups selectively focus attention on some aspects of social life, while ignoring or omitting others (Benford and Snow 2000; Goffman 1974). Within the confines of colorblind ideology, which minimizes explicit racism while perpetuating racist structures (Bonilla-Silva 2014), the story of the marauding hordes remains a *racial story*, a frame that sets up an *us vs. them* relationship between preppers and social others. The unprepared are not of any particular race—but they are racialized.

Hank makes a point to tell me that he is not racist, by which he means that he does not believe race to be a legitimate criterion for discrimination or inclusion. On the denotative level, I believe him. Hank does *not consciously* believe that people of color are biologically inferior to him, and this is his understanding of racism. On the connotative level, though, I observe the shadow of a racial story that is used to make sense of Hank’s current concerns about social and environmental risk. The parallels between *the unprepared* in Hank’s story, and countless racialized others that appear in the stories of

European colonizers are unmistakable, and the end goal is the same: a claim to moral superiority, which establishes a right to land, resources, safety and cultural domination.

Claims to superiority that emphasize moral orientation, physical ability, emotional control, intelligence, and military oriented skillsets are also a quality associated with the construction of hegemonically oriented masculinity, as men “symbolically construct[...] masculine hierarchies in which they situate themselves on top” (Hinojosa 2010), superior to social others. As racial formation theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant point out,

Race is not unique as a category of difference. Gender, class, age, nationality, and culture have all been invoked to capture, and in many cases, explain, difference. This process is not benign. It involves “othering”, which is used to justify subordinate status, unequal treatment, to structure oppression and exploitation in numerous ways (Omi and Winant 2015:12).

Race and gender are both examples of a master category: “a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States” (ibid. 106). Gendered hierarchies of masculine status in which hegemonic masculinity represents the pinnacle of mastery of masculine ideals intersect with other historically specific, constructed systems of power, such as race, class and sexuality. The claims to superiority that preppers make are based on character roles and plot points of American settler-colonial, frontier history, in which white European settlers play a starring, “heroic” role, defending their claims to land against Native Americans who are represented as primitive, violent, excessively emotional, closer to nature, and therefore less civilized—qualities that are used to construct ideals around both gender and race.

In a recurring story I call the TEOTWAWKI narrative arc, preppers work through feelings about risk, social difference, resources, and land to justify prepping as *the most culturally appropriate* environmental practice they can adopt. Rurality serves as the setting of this story, a foil to the chaos, complexity, and danger of modernity (symbolized by the city). Preppers “construct a vision of the rural suited to their circumstances” (Mormont 1990), in which the rural is envisioned as an escape from urban danger, a refuge from social others, who put preppers at risk. Rurality is constructed as an escape from the tension, ambivalence, and feelings of frustration that preppers feel about the entanglements with social others that modernity imposes, which the urban represents. Although they frequently minimize or dismiss structural explanations for inequality, preferring to focus on individual responsibility, preppers are deeply concerned about class and race relations, access to land and resources, and the ideal balance of responsibility they hold towards themselves, society, and social others. Preppers’ ideas about race and rurality, which includes fear of social others, and presumptions of American (white) cultural superiority, are rooted in settler colonial ideology. These ideas structure their response to environmental risk. Preppers’ firm beliefs in bootstrap individualism and adherence to the settler-colonial ideal of *abstract liberalism* (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Inwood and Bonds 2017; Tuck and Yang 2012) limit their “ecological imagination” (Norgaard 2016, 2018) to a mythic, colonial American past built on racialized (Feagin and Elias 2013) and gendered (Deer 2015) power. Intersectional theory and settler-colonial theory both prove useful in identifying the common narratives that uphold different axes of power, and their material consequences (Norgaard 2019b; Pulido 2015).

Prepping is organized into two main practices: emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency. Preppers turn to self-sufficiency—a way of life organized around minimizing dependence on institutions such as municipal water infrastructure, industrialized agriculture and food distribution, and national electric grids—in anticipation of total societal collapse. “Homesteading” practices, including gardening, farming, hunting, fishing, or gathering wild food, relocating to property with direct access to a water source (such as a well, or creek), and point-source energy production, such as solar panels, generators or wood-burning stoves and ovens offer protection from dependence on institutions that might not recover from a collapse.

Prepping is an offshoot of survivalism, popularized by bloggers and self-published authors who were able to find and develop a scattered audience through the internet. While I notice parallels between the concerns of the survivalists Mitchell (2002) studied in the 1980s and the preppers I observed, the communications barriers to finding “like-minded people” gave way to the possibilities of the internet, which facilitates the development of niche communities across time and space. Prepping is also connected to a longer history of American idealization of self-sufficient living, reflected in back-to-the-land movements that have been popular throughout American history (Brown 2011). The practices of self-sufficiency were once the norm in the United States, with most households participating in some meaningful way to produce food, procure water, refine raw materials into household goods, and produce heat for warmth and cooking (Dickinson 1995). The distribution of this labor has historically been organized by gender, race, and class; women and men were socialized into performing different

household tasks, and wealthy households were able to hire laborers or own slaves to share in the burden of household production (ibid).

Prior to industrialization, most households had some involvement in ensuring the subsistence of their members. This shifted significantly at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (ibid); as soon as it did, Americans caught up in the alienation of early capitalist industrialization and urbanization began longing for a self-sufficient lifestyle tied to rural idylls (Brown 2011). Who had access to the resources to make this possible was also a matter of race, gender and class (ibid), due to the legal structure of the settler-colonial state, which imported European models of race segregated patriarchal legal systems. As Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck and Angie Morrill point out, “Because the United States is balanced upon notions of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, everyone living in the country is not only racialized and gendered, but also has a relationship to settler colonialism” (Arvin et al. 2013). Preppers’ longing for an idyllic, rural, self-sufficient way of life is not singular, but shared in a broader history of discursive tension between the urban and the rural, the industrial and the self-sufficient, consumerism and productivism, modernity and pre-modernity; the framing of these social qualities in binary form originates in Western dualist thinking brought from Europe by colonists.

Although self-sufficiency has appealed to Americans across the political spectrum (Brown 2011) prepping today is largely a conservative movement. Although not all preppers I met identified as conservative, conservatism was the default political perspective centered in most prepper spaces, an observation that preppers confirmed in interviews. While the relationship between race and political identity is complicated, the

conservative movement in the United States is dominated by whites, with whites making up 89% of the Republican party (Newport 2013). Whites are significantly more likely than non-whites to identify as conservative (Pew Research Center 2018). Conservatism is more popular among men than women (Pew Research Center 2018), and conservatives tend to hold traditional gender beliefs that position men as leaders and providers, and women as caretakers in need of protection (Schreiber 2016). These race and gender dynamics were reflected in prepper spaces. Most of the preppers I observed and interacted with were white, and men. They were mostly middle-class, as indicated by educational attainment (most had college degrees), professional occupations, and high rates of home or property ownership. Prepping is a movement led by white, conservative, middle-class men.

### **The Culture & Materiality of Rurality & Race**

Rurality serves as “significant imaginative space” (Cloke, 2006:18) in the American cultural imaginary. As Ian Carrillo, Katrina Quisumbing King, and Kai Schafft note in a call for papers of a forthcoming issue of *Rural Sociology* on race and rurality, “popular debates tend to mask the complexities of rural space or obscure the histories and dynamics of race and racial inequality.” This chapter contributes to the literature on the social construction of rurality (Cloke 2006:21), building on Philo’s (1992) observation that “accounts of rural life mainly center white, male, middle class perspectives”. While my work does center white, male, middle-class perspectives, it does so critically, drawing systemic racism theory to understand the role of racist structures in the discursive production of environmental practices. In responding to environmental risk, preppers tell two sorts of stories: the dystopian stories of societal collapse, and the recovery story of

who survives, and how. This second story of recovery builds on fear of the racialized other, and idealized segregationist themes that perpetuate images of the white rural idyll, and the systems of inequality that white-rural discourse reiterate.

The framework of settler colonialism is largely absent from studies of rural sociology despite recent investigation on the effects of gender, race, and other axes of power on the rural (Bell 1994; Campbell and Michael 2000; Cloke 2006; Cloke and Little 1997; King et al. 2018). I am particularly interested here in the intersection of colorblind racial structures, settler colonialism, and patriarchy; settler-colonialism is an inherently gendered, as well as racialized process, as Native feminist scholars make clear. As such we cannot fully make sense of this structure without attention to its gendered and sexual power dynamics (Anderson 2011; Arvin et al. 2013; Barker 2017; Deer 2015; Norgaard, Reed, and Bacon 2018).

Cloke cites concerns amongst rural studies scholars over the dematerialization of social science during the cultural turn, fearing that culture has “usurped the social”, as social categories of race, gender, and class have been recast as subjectivities (Cloke, 2006:22). He follows this with a call to rematerialize, resocialize, and repoliticize our understanding of rural space (24). I respond to Cloke’s call by suggesting that the concept of “subjectivities” can in fact participate in the rematerialization, resocialization and repoliticization of the study of the rural, if we adopt a more up-to-date understanding of “subjectivities”, one that does not pit (external) identity and (internal) subjectivity in opposition to each other, but rather, accounts for the ways “identities based on social categories are inextricably inter-linked and mutually articulated” (Wetherell, 2008:78). Cultural narratives emerge in context of the lived experiences of subjects, as they pull

from their cultural repertoires (Swidler 1986) to justify and explain practices (Vaisey 2009), but both repertoires and practices are informed by their relationship to structure (Bourdieu 1977; Collins 2009; Swidler 2008; Vaisey 2008). I use the concept of *environmental subjectivities*—"the lived experience of relating to the environment in a social context that incorporates the study of power, ideology, and agency" (Ford 2019; Ford and Norgaard 2020) to explore preppers relationship to rural spaces.

People in different social locations *know* the world differently based on their status, or relationship to structure (Bourdieu 1977; Collins 2009; Foley 2003; Harding 2004). Race, gender, class, age and citizenship shape the way we know the world, not due to any essential qualities inherent to social categories, but because structures such as capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy and settler-colonialism sort people into different cultural spaces based on race, gender, class, and citizenship. Intersectionality is a framework that illuminates how interlocking structures of oppression situate people in relation to multiple hierarchical institutions, simultaneously (Crenshaw 1991; Lorde 1987; Nash 2019).<sup>53</sup> Because intersectionality compels us to consider "how identity categories are related to and defined through each other, constantly being re-configured across social contexts..." (Wetherell 2008:78) it helps clarify the complex interplay between structure and agency that was challenged by the cultural turn. Intersectional research "has shown the ways in which social categories based on race and ethnicity are

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<sup>53</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) coined the term intersectionality, but it's citational politics often include earlier scholars who made similar observations without a name, such as Sojourner Truth's famous "Ain't I a Woman" speech (Women's Rights National Historical Park 2017), the Combahee River Collective (1983), and Audre Lorde's "Age, Race, Class, Sex" (1987). Increasingly, scholars are calling for the recognition of Latinx and multicultural feminists in developing intersectional thought, such as Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (2015). For a thorough and interesting discussion of intersectionality's origins and contemporary politics see Nash (2019).

in complex interaction with social class and gender (to name but three social categories)...” (ibid) bridging the gap between purely cultural discourse analysis and material concerns.

If intersectionality poses a solution to the dilemma of overly individualized accounts of identity and overly deterministic accounts of structure, it also poses additional challenges, such as grappling with the complexity of race, class, gender, citizenship, and other salient identity categories in a single analysis (McCall 2003). Yet all of these structures collide in the cultural imaginary of rural land, which has historically served as the object of desire for settler-colonialism (Tuck and Yang 2012). The contemporary American rural ideal represents reverence and longing for place constructed under the “extensive rearrangement of physical spaces and peoples” of colonialism (Banivanua Mar and Edwards 2010:1), stripped of specific reference to what had to happen in order to make possible the (white) rural ideal that preppers (among other Americans) long for. Race, class, and gender have all been used as discursive as well as material tools of colonial dispossession of Indigenous land, with real bodies being sorted, disposed of, protected and provided for based on group belonging (Arvin et al. 2013; Bacon 2019; Deer 2015). Thus, it serves us to consider the places of convergence in racial, gendered, classed and colonial logic, all of which rely on a discourse of the abstract, universalized individual measured up against the standard of the highest status individuals—whites, men, land-owners and financial elites. Those outside of these categories experienced the westward expansion of European-settlers not as an invitation to freedom by way of land, but as what Jules Bacon calls “colonial ecological violence”, acts of disruption and removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands including physical

removal, cultural subjugation, including disruption of ecological knowledge and traditions, forced assimilation, political termination, and discursive erasure (Bacon 2019:63).

### **The Cultural Logic of Abstract Liberalism**

Like many Americans, preppers rely on colorblind racial frames, stories and styles to talk about race (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; see also Eliasoph, 1998) without expressing explicit racial sentiments. Colorblind racism is the dominant racial ideology structuring racial relations in the United States today (Bonilla-Silva 2014:3), working as “the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system” (3) that allows whites to safeguard racial interests without sounding racist (4). Colorblind narratives shift the racial story away from biological inferiority, relying instead on cultural tropes to explain the persistence of racial inequality in the United States. Mueller (2017) frames colorblindness as “a process of knowing designed to produce not knowing surrounding white privilege, culpability, and structural white supremacy” (220). Settler-colonialism too depends on its invisibility as a structure to order political relations and access to land and resources (Dunbar-Ortiz 2018; Norgaard 2019b; Preston 2013; Tuck and Yang 2012).

Colorblindness is a “white racial frame” serving as a strategy that whites use to minimize the fact that “since the USA’s founding, whites have been the most powerful, resource-laden, socially, politically and economically influential US racial group” (Feagin and Elias 2013:939). Omi and Winant argue that formal institutions of white supremacy have been

One way in which whites avoid knowing about structural inequality is an exaggerated focus on individual choice and responsibility. Within the stories preppers

tell, race, class, gender and citizenship ideals converge around the idealization of the individual. The sanctity and responsibility of the individual above all else reflects *abstract liberalism*, one of the central frames of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2014:75). It is also a discursive code of settler-colonialism (Inwood and Bonds 2017), neoliberalism (Harvey 2005; Reich 2016) and dominant versions of masculinity, most notably the masculine ideal preppers uphold, which resembles what Michael Kimmel describes as the Heroic Artisan (Kimmel 2017). The associated quality of autonomy is central to the democratic persona in American civic discourse that Alexander & Smith document as enduring features of American political life (Alexander and Smith 1993). To manage their concerns about risk, preppers rely on individualism as a cultural strategy (O'Brien 2015). Their belief in individualism is a central tenet of their cultural worldview, which is informed by interlocking hierarchical structures.

Although the philosophy of liberalism is based on universalism, egalitarianism, and meliorism (Bonilla-Silva 2014:75) within Euro-American liberal political systems, some individuals are in fact deemed superior to others. Claims to superiority may be organized around varying content, but the relational codes remain remarkably consistent over time. Alexander and Smith (1993) call these “democratic codes”, which, they argue, “create a discourse of liberty” that social actors use to situate themselves and others within the moral regulation of social life (161-2). “Democratically minded persons are symbolically constructed as rational, reasonable, calm and realistic in their decision making, and are thought to be motivated by conscience and a sense of honor” (162). This is remarkably consistent with preppers’ claims to superiority over ‘the unprepared’, supporting Alexander and Smiths’ claims that symbols provide a durable, nonmaterial

structure to social life (156). However, while their structural model of culture accounts for the durability of codes, stories, and plots within a society across time, their claims that culture should be allowed causal autonomy does not do justice to culture's imbrications with political, economic, geographic, or environmental conditions.

The importance of land and natural resources and the political and cultural power to determine who has access to them and how they are managed, are central tenets of colonialism (Norgaard 2019). Accounting for colonial ecological violence against Indigenous societies, in which white European settlers violently targeted Native Americans in U.S. wars of conquest (Dunbar-Ortiz 2018), racial tensions have been a part of rural American since the early days of European arrival<sup>54</sup>. Despite this and growing racial diversity in rural communities throughout the contemporary United States, the rural spatial imaginary remains associated with whiteness (Cairns 2013; Razack 2002). This view is contingent upon the settler-colonial perspective of white, European descendent settlers as legitimate citizens of the state, while rendering indigenous communities and their relationships to land invisible (Banivanua Mar and Edwards 2010; Cairns 2013; Moreton-Robinson 2015; Norgaard 2019a). Land ownership and access to natural resources plays an important role in the construction of whiteness (Arvin et al. 2013; Dunbar-Ortiz 2018; Moreton-Robinson 2015) and masculinity (Campbell and Michael 2000; Kimmel 2017), as social roles are enacted and performed differently in reference to place.

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<sup>54</sup> While land was certainly an important motivating factor in the westward expansion of the United States, the historical record shows that racial otherization of Native Americans as inhuman savages played an important role in justifying the atrocities committed against them in the name of "freedom" for whites (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014, 2018).

## **We're in Such a Precarious State...Because We're Not Taking Responsibility**

Preppers, like many Americans, believe that they are solely responsible for their life chances, and the success or failure of their endeavors (Bellah et al. 1996). They idealize what Inwood and Bonds (2017) call “bootstrap individualism” despite that fact that many aspects of their life chances are outsourced to modern, industrial processes that leave them dependent on institutions and people outside their immediate networks. But, as preppers point out, relying on modern society comes at the cost of independence. This leaves individuals vulnerable.

Kai, an Oregon prepper who runs a small business selling supplies for self-sufficiency, tells me:

We're in such a precarious state where we're vulnerable to so many different potential political economic ecological factors mainly because we're not taking responsibility for our physical security and our own ecological security.

Preppers associate lack of direct access to land and resources with vulnerability, a state of being they find distasteful. Feeling vulnerable is an uncomfortable emotional state for any of us. But it is especially at odds with the self-perceptions that accompany certain high-status identities. As Jocelyn Hollander has shown (2001), vulnerability, especially towards violence, is largely associated with femininity; feeling vulnerable might challenge claims to masculinity, which then need to be corrected by asserting traits culturally associated with masculine dominance, such as willingness to use violence, mastery, and self-control. Feelings of vulnerability suggest a lapse in personal responsibility, both their own, and that of others. If good or bad outcomes are the result of individual choices, the onus is on the individual to exercise responsibility, rational planning (rather than emotional reactivity) and self-control.

## **The Moral Economy of Helping vs. Relying on Help**

Those who are unprepared are not only irresponsible, they are potentially dangerous. Max, a prepper in his 60s who lives in a semi-rural area of the mid-Atlantic, tells me that he conceals the fact that he is a prepper out of fear that his neighbors will take advantage of him:

You don't advertise that you're a prepper. First thing people will think is, they got food, they got guns, they got cash stocked away some place. You going to come home one day, and all your stuff is gone. Your house has been ransacked or they'll show up after an event and you can't deal with that...I don't have enough for you. I don't. I'm sorry.

Even as he is fearful of his neighbors in the abstract, Max tells me he does regularly help a neighbor, a divorced woman in her mid-50s who he is fond of because:

She's a perfect example of what I like because she will ask me sometimes, "How do I do this?" And I'll go over and help her do it, and I'll even let her do it. If she's up to it, I say, "You do it, because I want you to see how easy this is. If you do it, you'll remember", and that's just half of the equation. The other half of the equation is once she's done it, she's so proud of herself and I just smile on the inside because I think I don't have to worry about her becoming dependent on me or anybody else.

Like Max, many preppers give examples of helping others, and acknowledged wanting to help others, but ultimately believed that everyone is responsible for themselves. For preppers, this is not a matter a choice, but of nature.

Embracing the cultural logic of neoliberalism that frames humans as inherently competitive, driven exclusively by self-interest (need a citation on this), Max believes that humans are “intrinsically self-centered”. He invokes the logic of biological determinism to explain why communal social organization is physically impossible, bringing up an example of an early European colony that failed because “their form of

government initially was socialist,” with resources being shared throughout the community.

Well, the problem was, when you have a single man being expected to work and provide for the children and families of other men, that's not fair. What's in it for me? What do I get out of it? ... when you get down to it, human nature is not like that. We are not intrinsically altruistic. We are intrinsically self-centered. I don't mean selfish, but we look out for ourselves first, and then we look out for our neighbor... That is what our intrinsic nature is. ...it's a fact of life and you can't legislate that away.

Assumptions of biological determination, the belief that human behavior and social organization is determined by qualities of the body, are deeply political, and have long been used as the foundation of hierarchical institutional practices (Miller and Costello 2001). Here, they are used to justify belief in self-sufficiency, framing any political organization that requires cooperation, collaboration, shared resources, and interdependence as not just undesirable, but as against nature. The organization of society that facilitates dependence feels unnatural to Max and preppers; if qualities like self-interest, competitiveness, and sex roles are part of human nature, and are being suppressed, they will come out in other ways, such as displays of violence and loss of control that preppers expect will occur when the Shit Hits the Fan.

The fear of being attacked by those who fail to grasp this goes beyond immediate neighbors. The trope of “marauding hordes” coming out of the city to ransack preppers who have wisely relocated to the country is a recurrent one, indeed I believe it to be the core prepper story of justification for why prepping is the most culturally logic practice available to them given modern risk, and it is based on a biologically deterministic understanding of human nature.

## **TEOTWAWKI and the Marauding Hordes**

Preppers believe that resources are scarce, and people are self-interested, leaving them feeling vulnerable to their neighbors:

In a disaster when there's no communication with Uncle Sam you're going to have panicking quite fast, and once they panic, it doesn't matter who you are... most people in this country, they have guns in their house. Americans, they all have guns, they all think they know how to handle guns, but they don't. But at the end of the story, if I don't have food, I don't have water, 'cause I'm not prepared, at the end, they are going to be killing each other for whatever supplies everybody has. So, I see prepping as a step from ok, I have to know what to do in case this happened and civilizations start killing each other. Which is exactly what-- if you check history--its exactly what happened when the Roman Empire fell.  
(Benjamin, Oregon prepper)

The story that Benjamin tells about an earthquake is really about what happens after. His narrative reveals deep seated ambivalence about the people he lives around, the institutions he relies on, and the safety and wisdom of modernity, and the alienation it produces between people and the resource bases that sustain them. If modern society is fragile, preppers ask, who ultimately can we trust? The answer, it appears, is nobody but ourselves.

The TEOTWAWKI narrative arc justifies why prepping is the most culturally logical practice they could adopt given the risks they face as modern citizens. The story starts with a natural or a human-caused disaster, like an earthquake, a storm, a flood, a nuclear attack, or a political coup (the SHTF event). When the SHTF, preppers assert, "nobody's coming to help". Emergency services and government agencies like FEMA are underprepared and overburdened, and so the help citizens have been led to believe will show up does not manifest. Americans who suffer from over-reliance on systems of distribution of basic supplies like food, water, fuel, and energy find themselves unable to

meet their basic needs; they panic, they are armed, and they turn on each other. Preppers tell a story of their fellow citizens, who they fear have been socialized into an untenable state of dependence, and will thus panic, dropping the thin veneer of civilized norms, which instead will give way to hysteria, irrationality, and violence.

Preppers fear violence coming from the city, which they associate with the state of dependence that cities engender, as well as human nature, or, as John, who lives in a rural place in the Inland Northwest, calls it, “H, E & R; Human Emotion and Reaction”. Human tendency towards emotional reactivity is responsible for the impossibility of collaborative efforts, John explains. This sense that human emotionality (interpreted negatively as irrationality) is universal undergirds prepper distrust of both public and private institutions and social others, such as the alienated urban residents who choose lifestyles detached from their ecological embeddedness. Benjamin tells me, “they are going to be killing each other for whatever supplies everybody has.”

The city poses two main threats: *environmental alienation*, and *urban others*. For preppers, population density inevitably signals trouble. Blogger James Rawles advises his readers to avoid the entire Eastern seaboard of the United States, urging, in an echo of the 19th century rallying cry for manifest destiny, “go west!”. He writes,

The population of the US is dramatically lower west of the Mississippi River. In troubled times fewer people means fewer problems. In the event of a social upheaval, rioting, urban looting, et cetera, being west of the Mississippi will mean a statistically much lower chance of coming face to face with lawless rioters or looters When The Stuff Hits The Fan (WTSHTF).

Not only will going West limit the number of looters pouring from the cities, it will also provide greater access to productive land, which will be necessary once society collapses. Anderson, the speaker at the expo, makes a similar claim. Like Rawles, he

advises aspiring preppers to adopt rural lifestyles of productivism, rather than remain dependent on urban lifestyles driven by consumption. He argues,

It's most important to become a sustainable preparer, a producer. So you're not only in a position where you can help your family, but you can help your friends. I'm not talking about being able to help the whole city, but your friends.

Rurality is equated with innocence, as it is assumed that rural residents are self-sufficient, and therefore not a threat. In a blog post titled "What To Do When All Hell Breaks Loose", blogger Daisy Luther warns her readers to get ready for the potential for urban riots to be held throughout the country. She writes,

By planning ahead, we can avoid the fear, panic, and confusion that leads people to rush to the store and clear the shelves like a horde of hungry locusts. We can stay away from the angry masses, the rioters who will use any excuse to steal, and the hungry people who are determined to feed their kids no matter who stands in their way. (Luther 2017)

The hell breaking loose that Luther refers to are protests held by "wannabe Communists and people who hate the President" (Trump).

"I've gotten photos from people in small towns all over the place of signs with the ominous warning, 'November 4th It Begins.'" Luther writes. She provides a link to the places to avoid on November 4th. All are urban centers, including the largest American cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, as well as smaller population centers like Omaha, Nebraska, Austin, Texas, and Portland, Oregon. Luther associates cities with political unrest and danger, while "small towns" are framed as innocent victims being targeted by troublemakers (presumably from outside). She cautions her readers to avoid conflict and keep themselves and their families out of trouble. But it's clear that Luther,

and other preppers like her, believe that trouble has the potential to find them, in the form of “rioters” and panicking people who act “like a horde of hungry locusts”.

**“If you’re missing two legs and an arm, you've still got one arm...”: Bootstrap**

### **Individualism and Erasure of Difference**

In their desire for self-sufficiency, preppers model their practices around utopian white mythologies of the rural American frontier, counterposed against dystopian stereotypes of the urban industrial core. In doing so, they evoke racial stereotypes and tropes, telling what Bonilla-Silva calls racial stories, even as they articulate a non-racist identity. It is worth noting that I did not generally ask preppers about race, but that they frequently brought it up themselves in interviews.

Many preppers went out of their way to point out that they were not racist, and that they did not believe race was a significant category of difference. They exhibited common colorblind styles, such as referencing friendships with blacks, times that they had helped someone of a different race and claiming to value diversity by drawing attention to non-racial diversity. As Hank told me, “identifiable things like race or ethnicity or religion or something like that...you know...I don't care...like I said, I've got friends who are atheists!”

In person, preppers avoided explicitly racist language, but openly showed disdain for groups coded dependent and irresponsible: welfare recipients who lived off of public “entitlements”, liberals who supported Hank’s “nanny state”, and “gangs”, “criminals”, and “bad guys” who would provide organization and guidance to the hapless unprepared that would make up the bulk of the marauding hordes.

Despite colorblind rhetoric that whites use to minimize the significance of racism in contemporary life, the stories preppers tell about urban danger, societal collapse, and a resilient, self-sufficient life use language that draws from colonial history of otherization on the basis of binary opposition. Even when purged of explicitly racial language, the characters, settings, and relational patterns maintain the narrative structure of America's history of racial domination. The heroism of the Euro-American settler is predicated on his role in displacing Native Americans from their ancestral lands, situating the settler in an ever-present relation of defensiveness against an unnamed violent other (Dunbar-Ortiz 2018). Masculinity and whiteness are deeply tied to the procurement of land—none but whites or men were allowed title to it during early American history (Inwood and Bonds 2017). Land, citizenship, environmental safety, and the right to political participation, and opportunity of education and employment were, and continue to be, informed by race, gender, and class (Pulido 2015). The seemingly neutral conception of individual freedom, abstract liberalism, has been presented as universal, but in fact was historically only afforded to Euro-American men—the hero of the American frontier myth. In celebrating this figure uncritically, preppers draw on the racial story of entitlement to land based on identity attributes, even as they believe that just about anyone can (and should) act on personal freedom to prepare. From their point of view, everyone has the ability to improve their circumstances, no matter their starting point. This point of view is benevolent, suggesting laudable expectations in individuals' capacity for self-improvement. But it is also tinged with resentment for those who fail to act on these expectations. Russ tells me,

We have our society has become a society of umm (pauses) expectation that young people now or it seems like the vast majority of the younger generation and

the new ones that are coming up believe in entitlements, that they're entitled to these things. Why? Why, are you entitled to it? What have you done? You have done nothing. Why should you be entitled to anything. Why should anybody be entitled to anything. You work for what you get. Everybody works. They earn and that's what they get.

Russ tells me that he “worked hard my whole life”. He acknowledges that once, as a young man, he drew unemployment, and that he “felt guilty about it”.

Now all of these programs and handouts and things, people think that well it's there and I'm entitled to it. They've lost, gosh, I want to say they've lost respect for themselves but it's stand up and you pull your weight, do your share, however you've got to do it, you know. We're all in this together, nobody rides for free. You've got to do something. You've got to help. If you absolutely cannot help, then we help. But until then you know if you've got, you're missing two legs and an arm, you've still got one arm, you can spoon out the potatoes for the next person in line. There's always something that you can do, you know.

This line of thinking shows remarkable confidence in human capacity. But it also perpetuates what Inwood and Bonds (2017) call “bootstrap individualism”, a key cultural construct of settler-colonialism that minimizes divergent histories of racialized groups that leave some individuals with bootstraps to pull up, and others barefoot and destitute. Preppers feel frustrated that large groups of people fail to live up to this standard though—their frustration is channeled into a familiar cultural configuration I call “claims to superiority”, that, even stripped of racialized language, relies on the underlying structure of us vs. them to set preppers apart from other people.

The story of marauding hordes is presented as politically neutral; that is, their racial and class composition is never specified. Indeed, preppers work to democratize their otherization by insisting that “anyone can prepare” and that those who fail to prepare will be representative of all types. By focusing on choice, preppers claim moral superiority over those who have not chosen to prepare, leaving themselves vulnerable.

But even stripped of racialized, classed, and gendered language, the story of the marauding hordes is encoded with fear and antagonism directed towards symbolic others, paralleling tropes used to differentiate between high and low status groups, including white/racialized populations, colonizer/colonized, men/women, and upper & middle classes/the poor. The basic racialized structure of us vs. them remains intact, even as colorblind conversational norms require the content to shift. In their claims to superiority based on the belief that human nature errs towards irrationality, panic, irresponsibility and violence, preppers fall back on a discourse of biological determinism, an ideological framework that has been used historically to justify myriad inequalities, including sexism (Plumwood 1993), racism (Hainey-Lopez 2006), capitalism and colonial expansion (Cronon 1995).

### **Urban Danger**

Anti-urban narratives call upon images of urban centers as hotbeds of poverty, irresponsibility, strife and violence, invoking racialized and classed codes that link cities with blackness, racial diversity, and poverty. In rejecting urban discord, preppers turn to nature, here represented by a generic rurality, for refuge. This introduces an interesting tension into their discourse, as nature is represented as both a site of sanctuary (or as prepper blogger Rawles calls it, a “redoubt”, a word whose original meaning is fortress), as well as the source of the wild human impulse towards panic that preppers fear. In one of several tellings of the story of marauding hordes, Hank begins with what I perceive to be an attempt to empathize with the unprepared, who he situates as parents trying to care for starving children.

When you have children... there will be a major change in the way you think because you will kill to provide for your child. That's just a fact of life. So you've

got a couple of little ones who are starving, mommy I'm hungry I'm thirsty I don't feel good, and you have got nothing. So what are you going to do to provide for that child that you will die for? You will kill of necessity, to provide for that child.

Magnify that by the population of any large metropolitan area, and what is their response going to be when they need to do those things, and yet they're trapped? They're trapped where they live, I gotta get water for my kid, this kind of thing. They're gonna resort to some nasty things, to do so. they are going to go FERAL.

Although Hank's attempt to justify the initial act of violence by arguing that parents will kill for their children could be read as a gesture towards empathy, it also parallels racial and gendered stories that frame women and people of color as animalistic, closer to nature, and less able to control their instinctive, bodily needs (Lensmire 2017; Omi and Winant 2015; Plumwood 1993; Young 2000). Quickly, the composition of the mob scales up beyond desperate mothers and a feral mob led by gangs:

Now, add to that the fact that you have got gangs. And we *know* there's gangs around any metropolitan area. Gangs have a real advantage because they're already organized, they don't have a conscience, and they are prepared to do all kinds of things to get things taken care of. And they've got the organization to get that accomplished, so they're steps ahead of most people. And because they're ruthless they're going to do things that are going to be really nasty... Those people, once they have done whatever they can to rape, pillage, and everything else in the area, they're gonna start looking where else am I gonna go, and they will head east,<sup>55</sup> like a swarm of locusts, alright?

In the above discussion, Hank uses a variety of dehumanizing tropes. He calls people “feral”, a term generally only used in reference to animals, and “a swarm of locusts”, equating humans to insects, a class of species which are generally held in the lowest regard in Western cultures. The categorization of humans as animals and insects has

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<sup>55</sup> While Rawles warns readers of his blog to avoid the East Coast entirely, on the West coast, preppers advise moving east, away from the equally dangerous coastal population centers.

served as recurring trope in some of the most explicit forms of prejudice (Joffe and Staerklé 2007), evoking fears of contamination, plague, and cultural evasion (Steuter and Wills 2008:52).

Hank also makes assumptions about the moral motivations of gang members, who, he claims, “don’t have a conscience”, labeling an entire group of people as criminals, as opposed to referring to specific acts that are legally coded crimes. These essentializing statements reduce individuals to stereotypes, all of which have histories of being associated with racialized populations. Gang imagery, crime and race are inextricably linked in the American public consciousness (Barlow 1998; Welch 2007).

There are several important intersecting narratives at play here. On the one hand, the ideology of “producerism” links self-sufficiency to visions of autonomous work and personal independence by way of productive land (Brown 2011:51; Kimmel 2017). Historian Dona Brown observes that various back-to-the-land advocates have drawn upon the ideal of independent production throughout American history; a message that has held broad appeal for working class white Americans with little labor power, disenfranchised African-Americans who shared “Booker T. Washington’s belief that independence of thought and action was rooted in the ability to feed and shelter oneself” (Brown 2011:51), and Jewish immigrants feeling violence, to name a few (Brown notes that around 40 Jewish agricultural colonies were established in the US between 1881 and 1915 (ibid 47)). In short, many groups have sought refuge in the country by escaping the urban rat race. But movements towards self-sufficiency tended to submit to dominant racial mores of the times, rather than challenge them. As Brown writes, “Theoretically, most back-to-the-land advocates envisioned a return to the land just that way, as a universal solution to

the problems of “all the peoples”—rich, middle-class, and poor, native born and immigrant...but they did not usually propose that “all the people” go back to the land together...”. Although there were exceptions, back-to-the-land movements did not “risk challenge to the nation’s most fundamental racial institutions.” (ibid46). Like their predecessors, preppers make claims that prepping is for everyone and should be adopted by anyone, regardless of race, class or gender. But the stories they tell of the unprepared have racial undertones that suggest an unwillingness to challenge the “most fundamental racial institutions” of today’s America, drawing on controlling images and racial stereotypes in both their assessments of all that is wrong with the modern world (recall John’s condemnation of the poor victims of Hurricane Katrina in Ch III), and in their scenarios about the way things will likely play out when it collapses. The recurring trope of the dangerous, crime ridden city is one such instance, where racial fears are wrapped up in concerns about the safety and security of modern life. “Urban” itself is often used as a codeword for black (New York Times 2017; Schwartzberg 2015; Watson 2012); commonly, representation of urban life is one of exposure to danger. The association with urban lifestyles with dependence also has racial undertones, especially when linked to stereotypes about criminals, gang members, and other “bad guys”. Urban danger here refers to the threat of other people. This trope draws on stereotypes that associate cities with crime, gangs, and unsavory types that take advantage of the anonymity that large populations and complex social organizations bring.

In the telling of the story of the marauding hordes, preppers as hero are afforded agency, while the homogenous members of the horde are not. Preppers act out, if only in imagination, the frontier stories of early America’s mythical past, while the unprepared

are represented as an undifferentiated “swarm of locusts”, humans reduced to insects, which generally incite disgust, or a group of “bad guys”, and thus the appropriate response to them is clean and simple, not messy, complicated, and emotionally challenging. By narratively grouping “bad guys”, “criminals” “gang members” and the unwitting but desperate unprepared together into a mob, preppers draw on another racial trope linked to European colonial imperialism, in which the white, European hero would prove himself by facing off a homogenous, primitive mob of native subjects, who were not afforded individual agency, or the presumption of reasoning (Young 2000) .

Stereotypes do political work around identity formation and the performance of social roles that are formed in relation to projections of the ‘other’. (Lensmire 2017). The social role of being white is performed in relation to stereotypes of non-whites. Hank need not use the language of whiteness to invoke its presumed cultural superiority. It is evident in the agency and autonomy exhibited by the white settler hero that the prepper embodies in his story. The prepper acts thoughtfully and rationally in opposition to the reactive, impulsive, dangerous mass. The encounter is driven by the dichotomy of the preppers’ preparedness and the utter dependence of the unprepared. The racialized unprepared, the story suggests, have failed to take responsibility for themselves, and thus feel entitled to claim the plentitude of preps that they have not worked for.

### **Rural Longing**

Rural lifestyles come with, as one prepper puts it, “everyday preparedness built in”. The environment then is a tool used to construct a scenario of escape, refuge, and defense that puts distance between the prepper hero and risk society. This is not possible in an urban environment, far from land and resources. Rurality is framed in opposition to

the urban, in a classic binary configuration, where the city represents excess, complexity, and artificiality. Russ, a prepper who lives in the rural Inland Northwest tells me that he thinks many people move to the area he lives in to escape the city life:

I think it's more about people just wanting to get away from the politics, the rat race, the big city life, the headaches and get into more of a little simpler way of life. Get back more into you know natural surroundings and being able to hunt and fish and enjoy yourself outdoors and what have you.

Land is central to prepping, as it is necessary to attain a state of self-sufficiency—minimal or no reliance on social institutions (Ford 2019). As blogger Craig Meissner writes to his email list,

When a population is entirely dependent on the government and huge corporations for their most basic necessities, they have made themselves entirely vulnerable and will be the "perfect victims" of this "perfect storm".

Many years ago, we realized that this "storm" is coming and strategically moved to a rural homestead in order to live a lifestyle with everyday preparedness built in. We didn't want to be among those who flee in fear from the approaching storm. It needed to be a calm and wise decision. We also want to help victims of the coming "storm". There is no way we could without making this move.

The centrality of rural lifestyles was made apparent at an exposition I attended during my field work. One of the keynote speakers, Anderson, encouraged his audience to go beyond emergency preparedness by seeking self-sufficiency. To be truly prepared, preppers must focus on surviving a long-term collapse of society. Self-sufficiency offers protection against the fallibility of modern systems, including industrialized agriculture, food distribution networks, and municipal water systems, which are prone to pollution, scarcity, and disruption. It was clear from his tone that he believed rural living to be superior to urban. About half-way through, Anderson made it explicit, when he asked the

audience how many of us lived in the country. About half raised their hands. “Oh good,” he said. “I don’t know what to tell you folks who live in the city”.

Anderson represents rural life as responsible, rational, and morally superior to urban lifestyles. People stay in the city for jobs, diversions, or to partake of consumer culture, keeping themselves in positions of dependence. The city, linked with dependence, is feminized, and racialized. For example, during a discussion about cutting wood for woodburning stoves, Anderson advises the audience to use an ax to chop wood, rather than a chainsaw, urging the audience to “go back to the way our forefathers cut wood. They were real men, back then.”

Anderson associates rural lifestyle skills like chopping wood with an ideal of masculinity that harkens to past ideals of white, European settlers: “our forefathers”. This reference is made in the third person to a mostly white audience; the speaker assumes a shared national and racial identity.<sup>56</sup> In doing so, he invokes not only gender, but race as a variable that shapes the rural ideal of self-sufficiency. He calls upon mythic American imagery of the white frontiersman (Kimmel 2017), who is positioned as a masculine hero that modern-day preppers ought to emulate. The solution to modern, industrial social dependence is traditional, physical, unalienated labor done by a free individual (white) (man) of his own free will.

This idealized man was one of several dominant forms of masculinity that set the standards against which men measured themselves and others (Kimmel 2017). This, and other versions of masculinity were inextricably connected to beliefs about racial

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<sup>56</sup> In my field notes I estimate the audience to be somewhere between 160-200 people. I count between 5-10 of these to be people of color.

superiority, reflecting what Gail Bederman calls “American’s widespread beliefs that male power stemmed from white supremacy” (Bederman 1995:5). By holding up the image of the mythical frontiersman as an ideal, they validate a specific version of American history that centers whiteness, while maintaining its invisibility. Doing so serves to maintain their sense of innocence, distancing themselves from implication in the social production of the risks they are seeking protection from (see also Tuck and Yang 2012 on settler moves to innocence). As Laura Pulido (2015) points out, despite shifts in the current era of racial formation, race (and other intersecting categories of difference) continues to play an important ideological role in American life, including in the distribution of environmental risk and resources. Even in movements whose primary objectives are not racial subordination, participants employ racism in their efforts to uphold existing systems of wealth and opportunity distribution in place. This plays out especially in movements built on (conservative) white resentment about an increasingly diverse US population and the increasing visibility of a non-white elite (which the election of President Barack Obama is often used to symbolize), which manifests in a discourse of “taking back our country” (politically) as well as specific conflicts over the legitimacy of claims to (often rural as well as public) land (Anson 2019; Inwood and Bonds 2017; Pulido 2015). Central to this narrative is an implicit (sometimes explicit) claim to superiority of some people over other that produces a sense of ownership and the belief in the right to exclude—qualities that Pulido identifies as central tenets of white supremacy (Pulido 2015:812).

## Claims to Superiority

In the story of TEOTWAWKI, preppers set up a us vs. them dichotomy that is organized around determining who they are willing to share resources and community with (like-minded people) and who they want to avoid: “bad guys”, “criminals”, “feral people” and people unwilling to assimilate into “civilized” American culture. The fear is not so much the disaster itself, but the social upheaval that they anticipate will follow the SHTF event. The real threat then is not disaster itself, but the reaction of other people. Not only do preppers not trust institutions, they do not trust those living around them. Cities with high population density increases the number of untrustworthy *urban others* preppers encounter.

This sets up a dichotomy between preppers and the unprepared that preppers interpret through a frame of individual choices. Preppers use generalized language about other people (often phrased as “most people...”) in ways that establishes a claim to superiority. They tell stories about unwitting neighbors and passive people ignoring information all around them, *choosing* to remain dependent and unaware. John tells me,

One of the things that just puts me to shock almost is when I ask a neighbor, "You got any food store?" "No. Why? I've got Safeway here down the street." Give me a break.

That's not ignorance. That's another realm of stupid. I myself, I've been in many-- I was in the Los Angeles riot, Rodney King Riot. I was right there. I was in the LA Earthquake, LA floods. I was in Oakland Earthquake. It's like, "Don't follow me around because shit's going to hit..."

For John, his prepper mindset of always being aware sets him apart from his neighbors, and fellow citizens. Most Americans rely on supermarkets for their food, and this common practice is culturally legitimized, and indeed, structurally almost impossible to

avoid. But John puts his neighbor's common practice in the realm of choice by ruling out ignorance as an excuse, and tells me, "I have a different mindset...I have the ability." But that ability is predicated on hyper-vigilance, a state of increased alertness often associated with trauma:

My whole life, I've kept my eyes open and my ears open. I'm always astounded when something happens, like if I'm talking to you and something happens over there and I go, "Did you hear that?" You go, "What? I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention." How the fuck do you not pay attention to everything around you? I pay attention to everything around me.

While preppers believe in equality and freedom of all individuals in theory, in conversation they continuously make claims to superiority that revolve around having abilities that "most people" do not have: foresight, intelligence, skill, and resources to prepare for coming disasters. This is where abstract liberalism breaks down when it meets preppers' conceptions of human nature. "Most people" do not have the foresight, and thus remain dependent. The dependent pose a conceptual problem for preppers. On the one hand, they believe in individual freedom, including the freedom to give up one's autonomy. On the other hand, they fear that individuals have who given their autonomy up prop up the system of dependence they fear. This lack of regard for the human capacity of "most people" again echoes the feeling of superiority that marks white supremacy, and serves as a justification for the right to exclude (Pulido 2015).

### **Individualism and Culturally Constructed Entitlement**

In an act of erasure of social differences, preppers minimize the historical and social differences that have produced unequal opportunities for whites and other racial groups and focus on what they perceive as the poor initiative and bad choices of people who fail to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps." Preppers genuinely do not believe

race should be a determinant of someone's life chances. But they fail to see how their ethos of deep individualism reproduces inequality, by refusing to acknowledge racialized histories of access to resources, including land. Hank and I explore this tension between racism and what I perceive as a sense of cultural entitlement to determine how people he shares a community with are expected to live after he told me that he believed it was reasonable to tell people to leave his community because they didn't share his conservative political beliefs.<sup>57</sup> The politics of settler-colonialism includes not just the taking of land, but the power to set cultural standards to which all people on that land are held. Hank, who has told me that liberals are not welcome to move to Idaho, demonstrates this in the following exchange:

Allison: [Earlier] you mentioned the Aryan Nation and you called them a bunch of jerks. And I believe you said [before] that you don't consider yourself racist, that this is not about race. What's the difference between saying that we should distinguish who can be in an area by political preference, versus some quality like race or ethnicity or sexuality, or some other criteria?

Hank: That's a great question. Ok. In that case, you have identifiable things like race or ethnicity or religion or something like that. You know, I don't care... like I said, I've got friends who are atheists! I want conservative values, I want people who believe in the US constitution and support the constitution and want to be among people who do the same thing, alright? I do not want a nanny state government. That's what you've got in California, that's what you've got in Oregon and Washington. I don't want that. Your race means nothing. Your ethnicity means nothing. Your religion? Um...that's where things get tricky, because...I don't want to get into the whole Muslim thing, but, because that's a whole 'nother tangent, BUT...um...if you got...I don't want to go too far, cause this is not what we're talking about here...I don't want people to think, oh, he's anti-Muslim. Um...I am

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<sup>57</sup> Before agreeing to be interviewed by me, Hank asked me about my political leanings. I answered truthfully that I leaned pretty left of center. Hank was willing to be interviewed despite our differences, for which I am grateful. Our political differences as well as our shared ties to California surfaced at several points in our interview, such as when Hank jokingly asked if they had checked my papers when I crossed the border into Idaho. As a liberal, I was welcome on a travel visa, he joked, but the very serious implication behind the humor was that I would not be welcome as a resident.

anti...anti-the Muslim religion. If you moved up here and you are a Muslim but you don't go to church but you identify as a Muslim, I'm not going to tell you to get the hell out of my state. Now, I'm not gonna do that, but if I see you demanding that your wi- that people wear burkas and that you stop selling bacon, get the hell out of my state, alright?

Allison: What is it that you mind? The burka? Or the request to be accommodated?

Hank: Yeah! That! The shari'a law is...does not...you can't have US Constitution and shari'a law. They are antithetical, alright? And not all Muslims are like that, and I admit that, ok, *but* ... you start watching, as they move in, and their population increases, they start demanding more and more stuff.

Hank clearly articulates an idea that I heard many preppers allude to. Physiological race itself was not Hank's concern—what he objects to is cultural power that challenges his own. This reflects what Bonilla-Silva (2014) calls *cultural racism*, a frame that relies on culturally based arguments—it is not Muslim people Hank objects to, but their cultural practices, such as wearing burkas or abstaining from pork. Hank discursively shifts away from what he understands prejudice to be—disdain for people based on a quality like race or religion, to critique the culture itself. Hank, who has lived in his rural community for several years, feels entitled to set the cultural standard according to his worldview.

## **Conclusion**

On principle, preppers state that they do not have any ill will towards people of color. They do, however, show contempt for people whose “life choices” challenge their sense of moral order: the “criminals”, the “thugs”, the “gang members”, the “rapists”, the “looters”, the “illegal aliens”, “feral” people, and the “bad guys”. And there are always “bad guys”. There have to be, in order for preppers to feel like the good guys. Preppers have their qualms about many aspects of modernity, but ultimately, their cultural dispositions are a product of Euro-American settler-colonialism, and its intersections with

white supremacy and patriarchy. Their sense of moral standing is invested in the cultural backbone of modernity, which informs how they navigate its ambiguities. A hierarchical binary discursive system is an enduring legacy of American political culture (Alexander and Smith 1993) and indeed, of Western culture more broadly (Plumwood 1993). The same binary structure that produces the distinction between urban and rural produces the enduring appeal of us vs. them.

By highlighting prepper claims to superiority and cultural dominance in the story of the marauding hordes, I have shown that prepping as a practice is informed by and rooted in settler-colonial racial ideology, which shapes ideas about land, social belonging, and relationships between self and others. Preppers construct the rural on top of this historic binary, to serve as the background against which preppers act out and embody abstract liberalism: autonomy, self-sufficiency, independence, self-control and personal responsibility. Because contemporary social conditions produce interdependence rather than independence, preppers turn to imaginary scenarios like the TEOTWAWKI narrative arc to live out ideals of liberalism that are connected to their sense of self-worth. The storyline of the marauding hordes is a fantasized depiction of how these idealized characteristics might manifest should they be needed, given the general lack of opportunity to demonstrate them in everyday modern life. Even stripped of their most overt racialized and colonial imagery, the story of the marauding hordes retains cultural power because it justifies the allocation of status, power, and resources to subjects deemed superior to the undifferentiated hordes. Under colorblind racial ideology, which intersects with the work of settler-colonialism to render its violence invisible, seemingly racially neutral language and ideas serve to erase the racial content of patterns of

marginalization, even as the forms remains stable. So long as there is someone to serve as “the other”, moral claims to cultural superiority, upon which feelings of worth and belonging are built, can be retained.

## CHAPTER VI

### “I DON’T REALLY FEAR MUCH ANYTHING”: EMOTIONS, RATIONALITY AND STATUS

*“The risks which we believe we recognize, and which fill us with fear are mirror images of our selves, of our cultural perceptions.”* (Beck 2008:13)

#### **An Emotional Habitus Void of Fear**

Bailey is a prepper in his mid-30s who lives in Oregon. He’s a single, college educated Asian-American man who identifies as a libertarian. Bailey had been a bit wary about being interviewed—when I asked him to participate, he asked me if I was with the NSA. He was only partially joking. He eventually agreed to meet me at a restaurant about an hour before a club meeting we were both planning to attend. There, he described his prepping practice, his inspirations, and motivation. He told me he listened to a popular prepping podcast that informed many of his strategies, which included financial management (“if you’re dirt poor you can’t buy the supplies that you need, you can’t have the freedom you need”), physical skills like gardening and raising chickens (“[store bought] food is very processed...it’s not really food and there’s chemicals in it...”), and “making community and meeting like-minded people.” It was clear that Bailey was hyper-aware of modern risk, and not happy about it. He expressed concern about diseases that came from chemicals in food, the danger of today’s sedentary lifestyles, and the high likelihood of a near future disaster. He attributed these various risks and dangers not to specific people, agencies, or political processes, but to an amalgamation of them he referred to as, “the system”. Danger, it seemed, was everywhere. But when I asked him, “Are there things that you’re fearful of?” He told me,

I don't really fear much anything. I think there are things that are scary, and more likely than others. And there's other things that aren't likely. Um, zombies? Probably not going to happen. But it's an interesting exercise. An interesting thought exercise. Yeah, like I said, natural disasters here, earthquakes...devaluation of the dollar. So...I don't know if it will get as bad as say Argentina or Germany prior to WWII, but um, if you're making a certain amount of money and never buying anything, then you won't be able to feed yourself or house yourself, and that's a possibility.

Prepper discourse regularly explores the possibility of threats to human life and wellbeing—some chronic and mundane, like the chemicals in store bought foods, and some acute and disastrous—like an economic collapse or natural disaster. All these events threaten to kill, injure, or otherwise endanger human bodies and potentially upend resource flows and social relationships that people depend on not just for survival, but for wellness and the familiarity of daily life. Despite the gruesome quality of their fixation with disasters, preppers regularly claim to feel no fear, and they work to downplay emotion. In conversation, they discuss the collapse of their society as calmly as if they were sharing the plot for a favorite disaster movie—indeed, they often do move in and out of predications for real, future disasters and fictional plots quite seamlessly, as Bailey does in his reference to zombies. On the offset, it seemed that preppers were a fearful bunch. But the more time I spent with preppers, the more I observed an absence of expressions of fear, and indeed a prohibition against expressing emotion more generally. This is not to say that emotions such as fear was not present in prepper discourse—it was. But it was rarely openly displayed or acknowledged explicitly by preppers themselves. Emotion bubbled underneath the surface tension, alluded to, sometimes bursting out in dynamic expression in the middle of a conversation, but rarely acknowledged or addressed. When preppers did speak of emotion, they often attributed it to other people,

projecting assumptions that people's motivations were emotional. Preppers expressed concern over the ways other people handled their emotions—such as the panic they attributed to the unprepared, or the greed they assumed was driving bureaucrats, politicians, or CEOs. But when it came to a matter of their own feelings, they tended to downplay or minimize them. Expression of most emotions broke a cardinal prepper feeling rule: be in control at all times.

Throughout my interviews with and observations of preppers, I certainly noted expressions of fear, worry, anxiety, and other complex emotions (melancholy, nostalgia, frustration, pride, etc.) that were not verbally articulated. But what I noticed was that when uncomfortable emotions related to fear, worry and anxiety arose in response to risk society, preppers rarely named or expressed them. Rather, when they appeared, (that is to say when they were hinted at, suggested, or I sensed their presence by way of my own emotional attunement to my research participants), they were quickly managed through a variety of strategies, in ways that prohibited or denied their development into the expression or acknowledgment of full blown emotions.

The management of fearful emotions served two key functions: it maintained and confirmed valued self-identity characteristics: being seen as rational rather than emotional is a sign of status in a culture that devalues emotions, and privileges cognitive reasoning capacities. And it made preppers feel better. By redirecting difficult, identity challenging emotions into productive, identity confirming behaviors, preppers were able to calm themselves down, thus affirming the status ideals that they already valued. In this chapter, I argue that prepping serves as an emotion management strategy and show four common patterns of emotion management that I observed. I also argue that the reason

preppers adopt the specific strategies that they do is because they are *culturally attached* to their cultural worldviews, specifically their commitments to liberalism and its unspoken gendered, racial and class hierarchies, which are being challenged by the failures of modernity that preppers observe. By cultural attachment, I mean that preppers feel affectively tied to cultural schema that they rely on to make sense of the world. I draw from psychological attachment theory (Bowlby 1973, 1980, 1982), which argues that a motivational attachment system is activated when a physical or psychological threat to significant social others appears. Attachment theory is based on the understanding that people are deeply attached to important social figures (i.e. babies to their mothers, adults to their spouses, etc.) who play a significant role in their psycho-emotional wellbeing. I argue here that attachment-threat can be aroused by threat to deeply held cultural values, belief, or significant cultural logics, whose integrity social actors depend on to make sense of a familiar world. There is potential commonality between this concept and Anthony Giddens's concept of ontological security, which Kari Norgaard argues plays a central role in shaping emotion management of environmental risk (Giddens 1984; Norgaard 2011).

Preppers are culturally attached to the liberal humanism of the modern world, from which both libertarian ideals and the neoliberal political economic system derive. But the tenets of liberalism are incompatible with its manifestation in the neoliberal, settler-colonial state, which has played an important role in the production of risk society. Risk society threatens the attachment to liberal modernity that preppers feel by making visible the injustices and inefficiencies of a system that is ideologically framed as the

most just, and the most efficient.<sup>58</sup> This attachment is significant because it represents a bond to other people, who share their worldview, as well as to the political efficacy of an idea in which they have invested parts of themselves. Our political affiliations, beliefs, and longings influence major life choices like where to live, what kind of work to do, who to affiliate with, and how to engage with the world. When an attachment bond is threatened, people have a variety of strong emotional, embodied responses that must be managed.

### **It Feels Good: The Case for Attending to Emotions in Cultural Analysis**

Bailey denies feeling fear. Should I believe him? The measurement of and reporting about someone else's emotions is difficult empirical terrain. Despite Bailey's denial, I observed high levels of emotionality throughout prepping culture. I also cannot claim to know what Bailey and other preppers are actually feeling. Feelings are, after all, subjective, experienced by and reported out by the subject. And many preppers denied being emotional. Given this denial of emotions, what do emotions have to do with prepping? How do we reconcile the denial of fear with a sub-culture that is seemingly fixated on fear-inducing scenarios?

As I have so far shown, preppers as a collectivity are situated within an environmental field that is shaped by interlocking structures, including a hetero-patriarchal gender order, the racial structure of the settler-colonial state, and late neoliberal, global capitalism and the resulting class system. I have shown that cultural

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<sup>58</sup> Anita Chari discusses the significance of the Financial crisis of 2008 in rendering visible the logic of neoliberal capitalism "by dissolving the appearance of separation between the state and the economy, a fiction that had sustained citizens' investments in the a state that could clearly no longer guarantee citizen's economic welfare" (Chari 2015:2)

schema—systems of meaning, beliefs, ideas, and other elements of culture that make up a cultural worldview—play an important role in linking preppers to these structures, and in shaping the practices they adopt. Prepping follows a cultural logic, a system of reasoning that applies culturally specific sets of meaning to generate reasoning or judgement, “conditioned by the unique contingencies of life histories and structural positions in political-economic systems” (Fischer 1999). Cultural logics are compatible with the concept of habitus; Bourdieu essentially argues that cultural logics are embodied, to produce a habitus, an internalized “strategy generating principle” that is not mechanical, but which serves as a “principle of generation”, thus structuring practices even as they are generated in a seemingly spontaneous fashion (Bourdieu 1977:72).

But while attention to cultural logics can illuminate the internal consistency of narratives that inform the practices individuals adopt, it can’t fully explain the impetus towards action, in a specific direction. Narratives are multidimensional, and contingent; situations call for a range of possible responses, and the responses that actors adopt inform the possible range of actions that follow. Layers of cultural sociological analysis have documented the significance of culture in producing sociological phenomena such as structure and social action. From the macro-structural perspective, cultural systems theorists have argued for the autonomy of culture and documented the persistence and potency of what Matt Norton (2019) calls intersubjective cultural systems, while symbolic interactionists have long documented the internally motivating logic of subjective experience. The lengths to which people will go to maintain the coherence of a social “performance” or plot (Eliasoph 1999; Fine 1997; Goffman 1959; Hollander and Gordon 2006; Stewart 2018) does much to confirm the authority of culture in shaping

everyday life, and its ossification into structuring norm, hierarchies and institutions. On an even more micro-sociological plane, cognitive-cultural theorists have made the case for the significance of attending to the psycho-social dynamics that are produced by the cognitive dimensions of culture—the way culture becomes scripted through collective *mindscapes*, patterns of thinking and common understandings shared by members of the same *thought-community* (Zerubavel 1997:8–9).

Matt Norton works to synthesize the especially large gulf between micro cognitive cultural models and macro systemic models of cultural sociology by arguing for a pragmatist understanding “that motivation arises out of a relationship between actors and their social environment...that culture exists in and enters in to motivation from both these locations—the actor and the environment” (Norton 2019:2). I think that Norton is on the right track, but that he undertheorizes a fundamental element that contributes to motivation, and the impetus to act: emotion. Not only are emotions a ubiquitous feature of human social life, but they infuse the cultural systems that structure interactions and shared mindscapes. Norton locates the motivational impetus of meaning in its processual, emergent occurrence, “a semiotic effect...intrinsically on the move. It is in the movement of meaning and the circuits that it traces that this model reconstructs the notion of a cultural system” (ibid). But it is emotions that provide actors the tools to receive, interpret, and respond to this meaning at an almost imperceptible level of granularity. Emotions serve a signal-function (Hareli and Hess 2012) that shapes situational

understanding, and drives interactions forward, facilitating the dynamic quality of meaning that Norton rightly holds out for.<sup>59</sup>

What I mean to say, is that emotion is everywhere in social life. Humans are fundamentally emotional beings, and a great deal more of our experience of social life is predominated by emotion than sociologists have come to accept (Feldman Barrett 2017). Sociologists began to systematically study the role of emotion in social life in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Collins 1990; Hochschild 1979, 1983; Kemper 1990; Scheff 1988; Shott 1979; Thoits 1989) and a vibrant sociology of emotions section persists in this endeavor, but by and large, the significance of emotions to social life as a whole remains vastly undertheorized. Cultural sociologists are more attune than many to the non-rational elements of social life (Smith and Howe 2015), but the significance of emotions themselves, rather than their output, remain undertheorized in this area as well. This is unfortunate, as, I will argue, emotions serve as a mechanism by which social actors adopt, mobilize, and reproduce, *or* reject, negate and deny cultural meanings within a situation. They play a constitutional role in propelling the mobility that Norton calls for attributing to cultural systems.

### **The Identity Confirmation of an Emotional Habitus**

I have so far documented the centrality of meaning in producing a material-environmental practice, and I agree with Norton that these meanings, although they

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<sup>59</sup> Matt Norton does not ignore the significance of emotion. He includes it in a list of other significant mental phenomena, along with moods, embodied dispositions and cognitive schema (Norton 2019:17) that play a role in the cognitive location of culture. I argue here not that Norton is wrong, but that emotion plays a more significant role in the movement of culture than he articulates in this article. I am grateful for our ongoing, and I hope continuing conversation about the significance of emotion in the relationship between culture and cognition.

follow a cultural logic, are mobile, moving between the systemic and the personal. But meaning alone can't fully explain the development of an environmental practice.

Remember, the polysemy of resources—they can be made to mean many different things.

Why adopt the meanings that groups do? Another layer to the question, why do preppers prep, is that it *feels good*. And it feels good because of what it means to them.

Because prepping aligns with their cultural worldviews, it serves as an identity-confirming act. Social movement scholars recognize identity as an important facet of shaping participation in collective action, as the personal identities of prospective participants must correspond with the collective identity of the movement (Bell and Braun 2010; Gould 2009; Jasper 1997; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Snow and McAdam 2000); identity also plays a role in non-movement activities such as participation in subcultures (Donnelly and Young 1999) and consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Affect control theory (ACT) suggests that people will work to maintain positive identities because doing so creates positive emotions (Averett and Heise 1987; Smith-Lovin 1990). This builds on the symbolic interactionist concept of impression management, which documents the many and varied ways in which people control the expression of emotion in the service of maintaining social cohesion, and adhering to “feeling rules” dictated by status, role, and identity performance (Goffman 1959; Hochschild 1983).

Preppers' positioning within the environmental field generates what Deborah Gould calls an *emotional habitus* that equates expressions of fear, anxiety, and worry with vulnerability, and vulnerability with weakness. An emotional habitus contains an “implicit pedagogy about what to feel and how to express one's feelings about self and

society” (Gould 2009:63) that influences self-understanding, as well as attitudes and beliefs about what is happening in society. As I have shown, preppers experience a double bind of dependence and distrust that leaves them feeling anxious, angry, and worried about the effects of seemingly inevitable disaster. But the emotional practices of conservative white masculinity that sets the tone for the entire thought-community discourages expressions of fear, worry, or shows of emotion that undermine claims to self-control and ultimate rationality. As Gould observes, “the emotional practices of a social group encourage members to align their feelings and emotional expression with the emotional norms and orientation of the group. These emotion dynamics can thereby foster a particular resolution to a widespread ambivalence” (ibid). This dynamic is evident in the ambivalence preppers feel about modernity, that I describe in Chapter III. Occasional expressions of confusion (as when I ask Hank if he agrees that some rules or regulations might be useful given his admission of irresponsibility amongst gun owners), anger (as when I ask him to share his thoughts about climate change), anxiety (as when Bailey worries about the devaluation of the dollar, above) or grief (as when Max bemoans the loss of American greatness domestically and on the global stage) are quickly glossed over, rationalized, minimized, or deflected, resulting in an emotional habitus marked by ambivalence.

Preppers discursively constitute themselves as rational, calm, collected, thoughtful, and strategic. The ideal prepper is the antithesis of worried, fearful, and vulnerable. He (the ideal prepper is almost always masculine in gender) is independent, autonomous, and in control. Prepping is a practice that emerges within the context of hierarchical social relations, in which individuals are judged (and judge themselves)

according to American cultural standards of the ideal individual and his (again, the ideal is almost always gendered masculine) social relationships to other individuals and institutions. Rationality—at all costs—is the American ideal. And rationality is traditionally pit against emotionality. Prepping then serves as a strategy for emotional management (Hochschild 1983) that not only allows preppers to manage difficult emotions, but that helps them prevent the development of feelings from pre-conscious affect—the capacity to be affected—into emotion—feelings imbued with significance—in the first place.

Let's look at what happens when I ask Bailey about his feelings. In the above exchange, I ask Bailey a somewhat direct question about his feelings—are there things you are fearful of?<sup>60</sup> Bailey had been listing all sorts of distress-inducing risks, and I was curious about his relatively flat affect, as well as the discursive strategies he uses to minimize fear. This flatness is not specific to Bailey—I noticed over the course of my conversation with preppers how calmly they spoke of the many disasters they discussed. There was an almost professional detachment present in the quality of their speech (lack of uncontrolled emotional expression is a defining quality of professional cultures, which is why I use this comparison).

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<sup>60</sup> Note that I do not ask Bailey how he feels—I learned early on that this question often backfired in interviews. You would think that researchers who study emotions would be in tune with emotion norms, or “feeling rules”, the often unspoken norms and rules that inform what emotions are socially acceptable to display in specific contexts, but I have found that my personal and professional interest in emotions often lead me to transgress feeling rules about hiding or minimizing the role of emotion in certain social contexts. I often want to know what people are feeling in the moment and have generally not been shy about asking. This direct approach did not prove effective. When I would ask respondents how they felt, they would generally deflect, telling me instead what they thought—oftentimes eliciting a more deliberative, rationalized answer than our earlier conversation indicated. I quickly learned that I was more likely to get at what they felt through indirect questions, or by “poking” at topics or phrases that were accompanied by a burst of emotion, as I do later in this conversation with Bailey when we discuss his desire for social change.

First, he denies being fearful: “I don’t really fear much anything.” The most direct statement I get about emotion is the negation of fear. It’s not quite an absolute statement—the modifiers “really” and “much” leave some room for exception. But it is a strong declarative statement that negates the suggestion embedded in my question—that he is afraid.

Bailey follows his denial of fear by deflecting his attention away from his own subjective emotional experience, to make a generalized statement that “there are things that are scary” and that some of those things are “more likely” to happen than others. He has skillfully shifted my question about his emotions into an answer about general probability of events outside of his control. He offers up the case of zombies, fictional monsters that have captured the American public’s attention, and notes that it is “an interesting thought exercise”. We have now returned squarely to the realm of the cognitive.<sup>61</sup>

By focusing on a fictional disaster, Bailey further distances himself from the topic of his own fears of bodily harm. Because zombies aren’t real, they cannot hurt him, so by choosing this disaster (rather than one more likely and more imminent) he buys himself some additional conceptual space from feeling. The scenarios he lists after are more realistic than zombies, but still far removed—distant in time and space. He offers some evidence of historical precedent (economic crises in Argentina and Germany) that could

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<sup>61</sup> Euro-American cultures have long positioned cognition and emotion in opposition to each other, in a hierarchical binary that subordinates emotions to the “higher” state of cognition, to which we owe thought, and rationality. Contemporary researchers have debunked this, showing that in fact, cognition relies on emotion, and that emotion and cognition are imbricated thought processes that cannot clearly be separated out. Conceptually, the analytic distinction can be useful, but the binary opposition persists in culture, where, as I argue in greater detail below, it continues to do much harm.

happen again here, and now, focusing again on probability (“that’s a possibility”) and returns us to the comfortable territory of individual responsibility. He notes that individuals should be putting away reserves to prepare for these events. while glossing over the structural nature of the circumstances that would require individuals to do so (a World War). Later in the conversation, he told me, “I’m not a very emotional person, and I try to look at things pretty rationally...I mean, I’m not a robot, but you know ...”. Bailey, like most preppers I met and spoke with, highly values rationality, and, as indicated here, wants to be considered a rational, rather than an emotional person.

### **Emotions or Rationality: A Gendered Dualism**

Bailey echoes a common American assumption that there is a stark divide between rationality and emotion, with the one infringing upon the other (Gould 2009; Lutz 1996; Plumwood 1993; Turner 2009). Although the theory that emotions and rationality are oppositional has long since been disavowed by advances in neuroscience (Damasio 1994; Feldman Barrett 2017), this remains a common sense understanding of emotion.<sup>62</sup> Not only is it widely assumed that emotions and rationality are distinct, but the configuration is hierarchical, with rationality lauded as a valuable, masculine, heroic quality, while

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<sup>62</sup> This cultural construction is not limited to American culture. Psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett notes that an oppositional view of emotions pitted against rationality “has been around for millennia, in various forms. Plato believed a version of it. So did Hippocrates, Aristotle, the Buddha, Rene Descartes, Sigmund Freud, and Charles Darwin.” She goes on to note its continued prominence in today’s culture, where it is embraced by prominent thinkers and popular culture alike, despite significant evidence countering it. (Feldman Barrett, 2017:xi). Historically, the idea that rationality and emotions are mutually exclusive has been used to sort groups into hierarchical positions that privilege peoples deemed more rational over those categorized as emotional. The classic example of this is gender (Lutz 1996). Catherine Lutz writes, “...any discourse on emotion is also, at least implicitly, a discourse on gender...As both an analytic and an everyday concept in the West, emotion, like the female, has typically been viewed as something natural rather than cultural, irrational rather than rational, chaotic, rather than ordered, subjective rather than universal, physical rather than mental or intellectual, unintended and uncontrollable, and hence often dangerous. This network of associations sets emotion in disadvantaged contrast to more valued personal processes, particularly to cognition or rational thought, and the female in deficient relation to her male other.”

emotion is considered brute, excessive, weak, and feminine. Yet rationality is not possible without emotion. Neuropsychologist Lisa Feldman-Barrett writes,

The science of economics used to employ a concept called the rational economic person (*homo economicus*) who controls his or her emotions to make reasoned economic judgements. This concept was a foundation of Western economic theory, and though it has fallen out of favor among academic economists, it has continued to guide economic practice. However, if body-budgeting regions drive predictions to every other brain network, then the model of the rational economic person is based on a biological fallacy...An economic model at the foundation of the U.S. economy—some might say the global economy—is rooted in a neural fairy tale.” (80).

This sense of opposition between emotion and rationality is an important discursive theme within prepper discourse, and practice, as preppers do cultural work to present themselves as rational, while portraying social others (including institutions, and fellow citizens, especially the unprepared) as irrational, that is to say, ruled by instinct, nature, and emotion.

This stark divide between people, practices, institutions, or ideas coded as either rational or emotional is not unique to preppers, although they adapt it in ways that are unique. But it draws from a much deeper cultural well, one that depends on a Western model of dualisms that, as ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood argues, depends on a relationship of “denied dependency” (Plumwood 1993:41). As observed by feminist theorists, and summarized by Plumwood, dualisms serve in the “construction of a devalued and sharply demarcated sphere of otherness” (*ibid*), and are thus useful in the politics of domination, as they distinguish the boundaries of otherness that make possible systems of oppression that depend on subordination. Emotion is generally perceived in relation to its supposed opposites—concepts like reason, rationality, or knowledge (Jaggar 1989). Further, dualisms rarely function independently in cultural contrasts; they

are a schematic form that is transposed across structures, and which have proven remarkably durable. Philosopher Alison Jagger writes,

Not only has reason been contrasted with emotion, but it has also been associated with the mental, the cultural, the universal, the public and the male, whereas emotion has been associated with the irrational, the physical, the natural, the particular, the private and, of course, the female (Jaggar 2013:486).

Displays of “excessive” emotionality are typically gendered feminine, and to be feminine, in a patriarchal culture, is to be weak, vulnerable, and dependent (Hinojosa 2010; Hollander 2001; Lorber and Farrell 1991; Pascoe 2007; Young 2003); all qualities that preppers do cultural work to distance themselves from.

Preppers engage in emotion talk that downplays emotionality, reproducing cultural assumptions that emotion and emotionality are signs of weakness, and vulnerability. In doing so, they performing acts emotional management that allow them to deal with the feelings of discomfort that are generated by risk society, without endangering their sense of themselves as rational, a self-concept that is imbued with cultural valuation and sense of self-worth. As Catherine Lutz shows, a “rhetoric of control” pervades talk about emotion. She found that women were more explicit about the work they did to control emotions, as women navigated a subordinate position within male-dominated society; in women’s emotion talk, she identifies a narrative about “the doublesided [sic] nature—both weak and dangerous—of dominated groups” (Lutz 1996). Preppers demonstrate what is perhaps the other side of this narrative—obscuring acts of emotional control by making claims to rationality and lack of emotionality. In addition to colorblind racial discourse that minimized or disavowed racism without acknowledging its historical legacy, preppers also minimized or downplayed consideration of gendered

difference, status, and power. Preppers rarely made explicitly racialized or gendered comments in my presence (online was another matter), and yet they regularly use groups of out of control, overly emotional people as a foil that showcases their own calm, controlled rationality in comparison. One main case of this is the figure of the marauding hordes, discussed in chapter five. The second, which I will discuss in greater detail in this section, is the shadowy figure of the career politician or bureaucrat, ruled by greed, excess desire for power, and uncontrolled emotion amplified by institutional power. In the exchange I describe above, Bailey demonstrates how preppers manage emotions by using cultural strategies—both discursive and material—to deflect attention away from identity-contradicting feelings like fear, anxiety, worry, or despair.

Masculine identities especially are predicated on tight emotional control (Bennett 2007; Kimmel 2017; Warren 1983) and the disavowal of any qualities deemed feminine (Hollander 2001; Kimmel 2017; Pascoe 2007; Young 2003). Not all preppers are men, and of those preppers who are men, not all achieve the ideals of what theorists call “hegemonic masculinity”, the culturally constructed ideals of masculinity that are attributed the most power and status at any given time and place (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). But masculine ideals, specifically those demanding tight emotional control, disavowal of vulnerability and weakness, and the valorization of competence, achievement and self-reliance, set the standard for what it means to be prepared, accompanied by the claims to moral superiority that distinguish preppers from the unprepared.

## **Cultural Attachment – Bringing Together Narrative, Identity and Feeling**

To link prepping and masculinity is not to situate it in an essentialist reading of male emotional control (although preppers themselves sometimes do so), but to make the connection between an emotion culture and its derivative practices, and what feels natural, appropriate, and safe to a group of people who have been socialized into a set of cultural standards in which certain identities, practices, behaviors, and expressions are valued, rewarded, and celebrated, while others are linked to loss of status, power, and feelings such as shame. Margaret Somers gives us the concept of “narrative identity” to historicize the formation of identities in reference to social narratives that provide the discursive material with which we make sense of ourselves in relation to society.

By shifting the focus on narrative away from purely representational functions, Somers argues for a social ontology of narrative, that is, an understanding of how narrative informs social action in ways that produce social realities, rather than simply narrating them. I combine this concept with Deborah Gould’s concept of “affective ontology”, which argues for the centrality of emotions (and affect) into the formation of narrative, which in turn informs action. Accounting for affect and emotions in this configuration of social action helps explain what Somers calls “causal employment”, as emotional attachments (to identities, to other people, to social groups, to outcomes) propel actors through the social actions that make up the story. That is to say, people remain in their narratively constituted identities, and adopt practices and discourse that are aligned with them because they are emotionally attached to them—not because they have cognitively determined that an action/identity is the best or most logical one. I call

this phenomenon *cultural attachment* and argue that it is the missing link between cognitive cultural schema and intersubjective cultural systems.

### **Emotion Management Strategies Used by Preppers**

While emotion management strategies are fluid, and dynamic, I observed four patterns of specific strategies that preppers adopt to manage their concerns about risk society without expressing fear. Emotion management strategies are process of managing emotions that protect or facilitate appropriate social interactions and situational dynamics (Hochschild 1983). All of these strategies resemble what psychologists call “defense mechanisms”, processes of managing emotions that defensively protect the psyche from being overwhelmed by emotions that challenge or overwhelm one’s understanding of self, or, as Kim et al. put it, “to reduce intrapsychic conflict” (Kim, Zeppenfeld, and Cohen 2013).<sup>63</sup> This intrapsychic conflict may derive from incompatibilities between culturally derived beliefs, and experience. Put another way, Kari Norgaard observes, the collective construction of what is appropriate or inappropriate to feel or display “is an important social and political process. In such constructions, we see the intersection of

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<sup>63</sup> Traditionally, psychological defense mechanisms were pathologized, and ranked according to their level of maturity, with distinction being made between immature and mature defense mechanisms (dating back to Freud). There are many problems with this tradition, not the least of which is the failure to situate various defense mechanisms within their cultural and structural contexts, which might do more to explain why actors adopt the emotional strategies they do than internal problems or levels of maturity (which can never be determined objectively) within their psyches. Bowins (2004) reorients the use of the concept of defense mechanisms away from the pathology to emphasize their more “normal” (2) expression and to account for their resilience as part of an “evolved strategy” (2) to “maintain emotional homeostasis” (1). While I do not fully agree with Bowins’ sociobiological bent, which fails to account for social or cultural context, I appreciate and rely on his de-pathologized account of defense mechanisms, finding it more useful, and less hierarchical than its Freudian origin point. There is a qualitative difference between sociological theories of emotion management which focuses on the performance of group dynamics, accounting for differential layers of status and power experienced by various social actors (Hochschild 1983) and psychological theories of defense, which focus on protection of the psyche and self-identification. As I show here, these processes overlap, as concepts of the self are drawn from collective cultural schema and valuation of social positioning.

private emotions and the macrolevel reproduction of ideology and power” (2011:98).

Given their narrative identity as rational, collected, in control, and able to deal with just about anything, preppers exhibit the following emotion management strategies to downplay distressing feelings about modernity and risk:

1. They deny fear/emotionality
2. They deflect attention away from emotions
3. They project emotions or emotionally laden motivations onto others
4. They sublimate, channeling negative emotions into actions with positive outcomes

Denying, deflecting, projecting, and sublimating (see Table 1) all serve to redirect emotional energy away from being expressed in individual bodies that have been primed not to show fear, due to the *emotional habitus* of prepping, in which ambivalence sets the tone, and emoting is discouraged. These strategies allow preppers to navigate their ambivalence about modernity in a way that maintains their high-status narrative identifications, by emphasizing their rationality, self-control, and dignity, while attributing loss of control, greed and excessive (dangerous) desire to social others. As many preppers observed, prepping is more than just stockpiling supplies and hoping for the best. It is an embodied, affective way of life that trains body and mind to anticipate disaster, maintain control, and act rationally at all times and at all costs. It begins with the denial of fear.

*Table 2: Emotional Management Strategies of Preppers*

Emotion management strategy	Description	Tactics	Examples
Denial	Preppers claim not to feel fear or anxiety, and at times, not to even know what fear is. This claim is made despite fixation on threat and danger, which is widely associated with fear/anxiety response (Bowins 2004; Rapee 1997)	<p>Outright denial</p> <p>Persistent claims of rationality</p>	<p>“I don’t really fear much anything” (Bailey, also Samuel)</p> <p>“I’m not a very emotional person, and I try to look at things pretty rationally...” (Bailey)</p>
Deflection	Preppers avoid talking about emotion, and change the subject when the topic is brought up	<p>Use of disaster scenarios as a discursive strategy to talk through feelings about bodily harm in ways that position them as objective, rational, and supremely analytical</p> <p>Use of cognitive processing to redirect questions about emotions away from emotional states</p>	<p>Johanna, when asked about fear, redirects from emotion to knowledge (““they just don’t know”) (see below)</p> <p>Samuel asking me to define fear, shifting the conversation away from feelings, back to the realm of the cognitive (see below)</p>

Table 2, continued

<p>Projection</p>	<p>Preppers project distasteful emotions onto social others thus downplaying their own difficult emotions in relation to those of imagined others. This reinforces their sense of rationality and control.</p>	<p>Discursive framing of out of control others, including individuals and institutions.</p> <p>Displaying distaste for emotional excess creates a social boundary between them and social others</p>	<p>The trope of the marauding hordes project panic, fear, greed and lack of control (see Chapter V)</p> <p>The trope of greedy institutions projects uncontrolled desire, and excessive control over others associated with social, economic and political power (see below)</p>
<p>Sublimation</p>	<p>Sublimation involves the redirection of emotional energy away from potentially socially damaging behaviors (i.e. blowing up in anger) to a socially acceptable, creative, and productive action thus ending up with a benefit rather than a cost.</p>	<p>Preppers adopt material, embodied practices that give them a feeling of empowerment by “doing something” rather than nothing. This takes two main forms:</p> <p>Preparing for emergencies and Adopting self-sufficiency practices (see Chapter III)</p>	<p>Benjamin tells me that prepping calms him down because it makes him feel ready for anything (see below)</p>

**“I Don’t Really Fear Much Anything” – Threat Detection and Denial of Fear**

Preppers regularly perceived present conditions as threatening—yet, like Bailey does in the above quote, they also downplayed their own feelings of fear. Denying or downplaying fear was a pervasive theme that I observed in all types of preppers,

including those focused on emergency preparedness, self-sufficiency, and survivalist preppers (outlined in Chapter III). This strategy took the form of two main tactics: 1) explicit denial of fear, 2) persistent claims of rationality.

### *Outright Denial*

Most preppers I spoke to denied feeling fearful. But is it true that preppers don't feel fear? Fear is strongly associated with threat detection (Raber et al. 2019). But that doesn't mean that it is felt or experienced in similar ways by all people, for the same reasons. Like Bailey, David, who practices emergency preparedness personally and professionally, but distances himself from the label of "prepper", denied acting out fear, telling me, "nothing really scares me."

Feelings are subjective, "result[ing] from the cognitive processing of situations in which we find ourselves"(LeDoux 2014:2876).<sup>64</sup> I do not wish to challenge preppers' claim that they do not feel fear. I cannot make this claim. I can observe that rejection of

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<sup>64</sup> Scholars of emotion have long debated the relative subjectivity of emotions, with most scholars holding out for the presence of objective, universal, biologically driven emotions, categorized as primary emotions, a theory known as the classical view of emotion. Fear, anger, grief, and joy are among the contenders for universal emotional status. However, neuropsychologist Lisa Feldman-Barrett convincingly argues that this is an outmoded model of emotion that has never sufficiently been substantiated by evidence weighty enough to indicate universality. Based on her reading of the scientific evidence, emotions are in fact entirely *constructed*, as people's brains apply culturally appropriate meanings to the bodily sensations that they experience using culturally specific "emotion concepts". Feldman-Barrett calls this the theory of constructed emotion (30). A key point of evidence she applies to this theory is the failure to find any specific bodily "fingerprints" for single emotions, including the supposedly primary, universal emotions. Instead, the same physiological sensations might be differentially interpreted based on context and circumstance, while individuals reporting the same feeling (i.e. anger) might experience vastly different physiological sensations (for example, your heart might race, your blood pressure elevate, and you might grow red in the face, while mine slows down, I grow pale, and immobilize). I find Feldman-Barrett's theory of constructed emotion convincingly argued, and largely base my analysis on the understanding that even as I read emotion onto preppers' social action, I cannot claim any more objectivity than they, reporting their emotions or lack of emotions, can. This poses some analytical challenges, that I get around by attempting to avoid projecting specific emotions onto specific preppers. I prefer instead to observe emotional intensity, categories of emotion, or emotional valences such as pleasant/unpleasant, which is why I speak regularly of discomfort, without trying to pinpoint a more specific emotion if one is not reported.

fear was a prominent discursive theme amongst preppers, in conjunction with hyper-fixation on threat detection, which is associated with fear popularly and within the social scientific literature (Tudor 2003). Rather than try to get at what preppers *really* feel, I propose that by turning our attention to the ways preppers discursively navigate an affectively charged topic (risk), even while claiming not to feel fear, we can begin to make sense of the ways that social actors use available cultural logics to manage emotions effectively, without threatening their sense of social order. They do so in a manner that is identity protecting, and status confirming. This allows them to reframe what might be considered fearful language or behavior into an act of courage. In one instance of this, blogger Daisy Luther writes that preppers who read her blog should consider building a “safe room” in their houses, a secured room where members of the household can retreat if they are under attack. She writes:

Some folks may read this and think to themselves, “I don’t need a safe room when I have my 12 gauge shotgun and my 9 mm. That’s just running away.”

I completely understand your point. Most of the people who read prepping and survival sites are not of a “retreat” mentality. But, if a gang of 12 thugs (possibly wearing badges) kicks down your door, how likely are you to shoot every single one of them before someone gets off a lucky shot and hits you? Hint: If you aren’t tactically trained, the likelihood of this is pretty slim.

Here’s another reason: do you have vulnerable family members in the house? Children? A spouse or elderly relative? Someone who just isn’t a fighter? Even if you intend to engage, you may have people in the home who are not willing or able to do so, and it will be better for you if they are safely out of the way.

A safe room is honestly just another prep. It doesn’t mean you are cowardly. It means you are ready for a variety of scenarios and that the safety of your family is paramount. It is a layer of protection that allows vulnerable people to retreat until help arrives (Luther 2014).

Luther goes out of her way to communicate that creating a safe room is not an act of retreat, which could be read as cowardly, but is a strategic, rational way to prepare for the unknown, one that foregrounds protection of the vulnerable. She goes so far as to reject the language of panic, which infers victimhood that is anathema to the prepper persona:

When you retreat to your safe room, you have one goal: to end any possibility of interaction with an unwelcome person. Please don't call it a panic room. That indicates that you are a scared victim. You are retreating to a safer location because you don't intend to be a victim. In a military gun battle, do soldiers move behind sandbags or into trenches? Of course. They want to limit the likelihood of being shot or otherwise injured. You may or may not be a trained soldier, but your goal is the same. It is to avoid being injured by a person who may be intent on injuring you.

She validates this position by referencing soldiers in battle, an unequivocal symbol of masculine, military heroism, often represented as protecting the innocent and the weak. The rejection of fear, panic, and acts that could be coded as cowardly produces an the need to reframe practices so that they align with the cultural logic of conservative masculinity, which is based on the belief that rationality and emotionality are distinct and mutually exclusive, and that rationality is superior to emotion. Even in fleeing home intruders “intent on injuring you”, preppers discourage expression of fear. This is presented as a strategic, tactical plan that will minimize the need to “panic” or to emote at all. Prepping is appealing to many preppers because it helps them avoid feeling fear, even as they fixate on topics that are conceptually linked to it, thus substantiating their understanding of the natural ordering of the world.

Downplaying the significance of emotionality in driving their practices, preppers use affectively neutral language to talk about threat. Hank for example, tends to use the term “potentials”:

Hank: So I've read a number of books that talk about sort of end times...you ever heard, you seen the term TEOTWAKI?

Allison: The end of the world as we know it, yeah

Hank: And then of course the shit hits the fan

Allison: Definitely

Hank: Ok, so both of those, so one leads to the other, alright? If the shit hits the fan it leads to TEOTWAKI. In reading Patriots<sup>65</sup>, I made a lot of sense what the potential was, particularly living where we did. And I knew a lot of people in the area who had read the book, we would sit around and discuss potentials.

“Potentials” here is used as a euphemism for threat, that minimizes its emotional valence, downplaying the need to fear anything.

#### *Claims to Rationality*

“I’m not a very emotional person, and I try to look at things pretty rationally...”, Bailey told me, with an air of pride. As noted above, being seen as a rational, rather than an emotional person is a badge of honor for preppers, who worry that during a disaster, others will panic and lose control. Having a plan, having prepared for all contingencies, and having mastered self-control is highly respected among preppers, and it is considered a mark of a real prepper who is worthy of respect and survival.

Few preppers were as explicit as Bailey about their self-image as exclusively rational, but many hinted at it. It was most apparent in the boundary work they did to illustrate how others were more emotional than they were, narratives which generally emphasized their belief that others were very likely to lose control. This strategy overlaps

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<sup>65</sup> A novel by prepper thought-leader James Wesley Rawles, popular amongst preppers

significantly with projection as an emotional management strategy, and I discuss it at greater length below.

### **Deflection**

Like Bailey, Samuel also claims not to fear anything, really. This was interesting to me, given that Samuel, amongst all the preppers I interviewed, exhibited the highest level of emotional intelligence, “a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions (Mayer and Salovey 1993). Samuel acknowledged his emotional self openly. While describing his belief that it was essential to practice necessary skills (such as shooting a gun) to the point of mastery, he acknowledged:

Samuel: I like to think it's a probability that if the aliens did invade and it was, you know, time to step up, I like to think I would do that to defend it [America], as opposed to going quietly into that good night, you know?

Allison: Yeah.

Samuel: Of course I could be peeing a corner...

Allison: Cause you don't know what's going to happen until it actually happens?

Samuel: Yeah

Samuel is a middle-aged, mixed race Asian-American man who leads a local prepper group. He identifies as politically centrist but is somewhat wary of politics. Samuel is openly critical of the political agenda he believes influence many preppers practices, telling me, “I think that people who fear...some sort of economic collapse, uh, whether that's hyperinflation or something like that, or debt to China, the Chinese, uh, I think that [those] people ... have a political agenda.” In many respects, Samuel shows up

as an outlier in my data—he is a man of color, he is optimistic about human progress, and he openly embraces vulnerability, and uncertainty, for example. It is because he is an outlier in many respects however, that his articulation of core prepper principles and practices are often insightful and revealing.

On the matter of fear, Samuel’s reaction to the question “What do you fear?” is reflective of a sense of ambivalence about fear I observed in many preppers—because of his high emotional intelligence, and his ability to articulate his self-reflection, I believe he reveals something important about how preppers manage fear. The exchange below took place right after our discussion about the ethics of technology (included in Ch 1). Recall that on the one hand, Samuel reported appreciating technological progress, (he enjoyed his access to toilet paper!) and expressed the belief that life was generally getting better thanks to modern technology and social processes. But he also had concerns that human ethics were not keeping pace with technological development, a circumstance that was responsible for the production of unprecedented levels of risk. When the topic of fear came up indirectly, I took the opportunity to ask him directly, “what are you afraid of?” He takes a moment to think before answering my question with another question (a form of deflection):

Samuel: [sighs] [long pause] What does afraid mean? I’m not trying to be...anything, I honestly want to know, because...

This interview was an early one in my data collection, and although I had a sense that the topic of fear was related to my research question, I did not have a formal definition of the concept on hand. Fear, or being afraid, is a common enough phenomenon that I frankly was not expecting to have to define it. Samuel’s question took me off guard. As you can see below, I fumbled for an answer that would encourage

Samuel to speak openly about his feelings, and in doing conflated fear and anxiety as I tried to incorporate both the innate, embodied, and socialized qualities of a fear response:

Allison: Um, I mean as an experience of an emotion of fearfulness, of either anxiety around something or a fear response...anxiety towards something that you worry will happen or a fear response that you have experienced when certain things have happened...um...I am arachnophobia, I'm very afraid of spiders, and when there's a spider around me, I...it's a physical response of...I sweat, I get jumpy, anything I see out of the corner of my eye I think is a spider...so that's a very visceral fear response, and when I'm doing, or I'm thinking about doing a project in the garden I get slightly anxious when I anticipate there being spiders.

[long pause]

Samuel thinks about my response, and then responds with an answer that I see as a deflection.<sup>66</sup> He focuses on my poor example of a phobia, and then ruminates on his general human experience in generalized abstract terms:

Um, I don't...to the best of my knowledge, I don't have any phobias, um...I've been around the sun a few times in my life and I've experienced in my opinion a pretty broad continuum of...part of that continuum of the human experience...on so far as to say good or evil, I can't do that because it's a sphere, right? I've experienced a lot of different things in my life, um, uh...I don't know.

Recall that for most of our interview, Samuel has been articulate, decisive, and self-assured. But his answer here is hesitant and uncertain. Hoping he will say more, I encouraged him, but to no avail:

Allison: That's a valid answer.

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<sup>66</sup> Please note that I do not believe Samuel is intentionally trying to deflect attention away from the question. Indeed, the long duration of his reflection suggests that he is genuinely trying to answer my question thoroughly, and he seemed somewhat distressed when it seemed (to us both) that he could not. This is a main reason why I prefer the language of emotion management strategies to defense mechanisms, as the former is somewhat more neutral as to intent and motive. I believe the act of deflection is semi-automatic, and not at all nefarious. Samuel and I were co-creating the interview space, and he had so far been a willing and companionable participant. He seemed quite stumped by this question but continues to try to deliver a well-thought-out response. His efforts, more than his answer, are the significant finding.

Samuel: That would be my answer, I don't know, nothing comes to mind.

It is possible that my fumble to define fear (the example of a phobia is misleading, since a phobia is a very specific type of fear) throws Samuel off course—he doesn't have any phobias that sound like this, therefore he doesn't fear anything. But I don't think this fully explains his dissembling, blank slate of a response. Fear is not such a specialized concept that someone should need an expert definition in order to answer such a question, especially given the topic of discussion (preparing for disaster). This is not to say that I think Samuel was faking his response, or putting on an excessive social performance of fearlessness—it is clear to me that he is being genuinely thoughtful about how to answer this question, which means that, although I, the researcher, associate the topic at hand with fear, this is not how Samuel understands it. This is the finding. Preppers don't feel fear, because they have adopted prepping as a practice to manage fear, an emotion that is highly costly to display. By focusing on an extreme case of fear, and claiming not to feel it, Samuel deflects the attention away from my more generalized question.

When Samuel does come up with something he fears, it is in fact quite different from the scenarios of large-scale societal collapse:

Samuel: You know, I can say that, I am afraid that my wife would die...or, I fear that my wife would die. And, the reality is that I understand that if that were to happen I would be devastated, that I would enter a very profound grief, and I know that that's my human experience, you know? ... I suppose if that's the first thing that came to my mind in your question, that that's probably it. You know?

Allison: That's a good indicator, the first thing that comes up.

The event that Samuel identifies as something he fears is a personal disaster—the loss of his wife, his closest companion, would produce grief, an intensely emotional experience of loss. David, who I reference above, gives this same answer—the only thing

he can think of that he fears is the loss of his wife. Other preppers gave similar responses. If they did fear something, it was the loss of a wife, or a family member—a close companion who was their main source of emotional closeness. It is noteworthy that in these cases, fear takes the form of harm coming to somebody else’s body, rather than their own—the effect of his wife’s death on Samuel would be a profound grief, which he does not want to experience. Even after acknowledging this is a fear though, he soon backtracks, moving again away from emotion, to intellectualize the question. Second guessing whether or not he actually fears his wife’s death, he reframes the thought in a way that minimizes emotionality:

Yeah...but I don’t think it’s that I fear it...it’s something that I don’t want to happen, so if fear is the desire for something not to happen, that’s why I was [asking] what does fear mean?

Grief is an emotional experience that Samuel would prefer to avoid. In this, he echoes the observation of Jack Barbalet, that “the object of fear is an expectation of negative outcome.” (cited in Tudor 2003:240). This definition intellectualizes a deeply emotional experience though, as, even after identifying a specific fear, Samuel moves quickly out of emotional terrain, returning to the safety of the cognitive. He has already intellectualized fear by wanting a precise definition of it; and the definition he comes up with translates an emotion—an embodied sensation imbued with meaning—into desire, a psychological state that includes both cognition (perception of an object of desire and a positive or negative valence) and emotion (emotions are attached to the achievement or failure to achieve the desire). Of course, we are talking hypothetically here—it has been clear throughout our conversation that Samuel is not feeling fear during the interview—indeed, this thread of our discussion began with a refusal of fear. The interview context

does matter—Samuel seems intent on delivering a well-thought out answer to my question. But the social pressure to be a good interviewee does not, in my mind, negate the relevance of his attempt to balance the contextual social expectation, and his general way of thinking about fear. Further distancing himself from admitting fear, he continues,

I mean, I've jumped out of airplanes, I've climbed Mt. Hood, I've done...you know, any kind of physical thing... I don't think I have a great fear of that, of any of that stuff. Economic insecurity, I've been poor, there's been times, I mean, well here's the prepper thing, when I was probably, I don't know, 3 to 8, we used to hunt crawdads for food, and rabbits for food, lamb's ear, watercress, fiddlehead ferns, you know, that was part of my diet, was hunting and foraging. So...

Here, Samuel links prepping and freedom from fear—he need not fear economic insecurity because he has skills and knowledge that he could turn to in dire need. Samuel need not fear for his own bodily safety, because he believes he has done everything in his power to secure his health and safety, no matter what happens. Prepping, then, alleviates fear, and other uncomfortable, negatively perceived emotions like worry, anxiety, and vulnerability—all of which are associated with weakness, lack of personal power or control over one's circumstances, and dependence.

All humans experience difficult to handle emotions, and there are an infinite number of ways societies influence their expression, management, or repression. Negative emotions serve as a motivating factor that drives prepping, but this alone is not sufficiently explanatory. Kari Norgaard documented a similar mix of emotions about climate change (one element of risk society) present amongst the Norwegian villagers she studied—yet the residents of Bygdaby channeled their feelings into patterns that Norgaard describes as socially organized denial. Norwegian villagers worked hard to avoid, minimize, and deflect attention away from their complicity in the production of

global climate change, even as they ostensibly knew about and cared about the climate crisis. Preppers, on the other hand, do not work to deny risk—indeed, they are hyper aware of it. Not all preppers believe climate change is human caused, although most that I spoke to acknowledged that the climate was changing.

### *Rejection of Emotion-Based Framing*

Likewise, Johanna, an emergency management professional who gives community trainings on emergency response rejected a fear-based framing of collective emotion about the threat of disaster, after telling me that her expertise in preparedness was in high demand: “people call me off the charts these days”. I observed, “it seems like there's a lot of fear, would that be a word?” to which she responded,

Johanna: I don't know about fear, just they don't know. They just don't know.

Allison: Uncertainty.

Johanna: Yes, it's helpful when you tell them, “Here are some tools and resources. Here's where you can get more information.”

Rejecting my attempt to center emotion, Johanna reframes my question to focus on lack of knowledge: “they just don't know”. Yet there are clearly emotional dynamics at play that make this lack of knowledge cause for concern, and thus action. Having perceived a threat (in this case, media attention on the likelihood of a major earthquake in the Pacific Northwest), many people were responding by calling her for advice, ostensibly to act on her recommendations in material ways. But despite her preference for a knowledge-based framework to make sense of public response to risk, knowledge in and off itself does not necessarily lead to action—despite cultural expectations that it will (Norgaard 2011). Emotion fills the gap between the cultural acts of perceiving, knowing,

and focusing attention on something, and the drive to action (Ford and Norgaard 2019; Norgaard 2011).

This tension between threat perception, and the denial of emotion indicates a complicated relationship between emotion, culture, individual identity, and group belonging. What is at stake when preppers and emergency managers minimize the role of fear, even as they fixate on threat detection and response? Do preppers really not feel fear, and if so, how have they severed the fairly well-established link between threat perception and feeling afraid?

### **Projection of Emotion onto Others**

At a public exposition for preppers, I stopped at a booth selling books and offering consulting services to people who were interested in “strategic relocation”, which entailed doing a thorough risk assessment of various potential locations before moving to the place with the most tolerable risk levels. I was approached by a middle-aged white man in a suit and tie, and we had the following exchange (recorded in my field notes):

I identify myself as a student and ask him if most people are concerned about specific threats, and if that’s changed as the movement has become popular. He tells me that the movement to be prepared is growing; he thinks it’s because people are waking up, but that a lot of new comers want in now, they want to be able to instantly be prepared, but that it takes broader changes, becoming self-sufficient as a whole, not just worrying about one particular threat. He thinks that’s how people start, being fearful of something specific, but the people who stick with it become more well-rounded...

People wanting to become preppers, now that it was growing in popularly, he observed, often turned to prepping because of a specific fear. This observation was made with a hint of disparagement. Real preppers, he implied, had nothing to fear. Those who stuck with it

and became more well-rounded in their preparations, that is, prepared for more not just a single disaster, but adopted prepping as a way of life, had nothing to fear. By projecting fear onto rookie preppers, and contrasting them to experienced and thus well-rounded preppers, this speaker suggests that fear is something that other people feel, but not preppers. The projection of emotions onto others is the third form of emotion management I observed, and it takes two main forms: 1) projecting panic, fear, and loss of control onto unprepared individuals, who are either potential preppers, or who become a source of threat to preppers (see Chapter V) and 2) projection of greed and lack of self-control onto institutions and the individuals who run them.

Despite their denial of fear, preppers regularly describe threat-based scenarios of loss, disruption to daily life, and the potential for harm, often in violent form, to come to their bodies. For example, a prepper named Megan, featured in the National Geographic Doomsday Prepper series expresses concern over the loss of access to oil, a resource upon which modern life depends. She says, “if the Middle Eastern countries suddenly cut us off for gas, we’d very very quickly be in big trouble”, noting that there is about a 3 day supply of oil in food available in the city where she lives. “We’re going to starve,” she continues:

That’s going to send everybody into a panic. They’re going to run out to all the supermarkets and buy up everything you need to survive. People are going to start stealing other people’s food. You’re going to hear gun shots, a lot of them. People are going to start to kill each other when peoples’ kids go hungry, they’re going to go after you. Your life will be in danger, my life will be in danger and it’s going to happen in a matter of days.

It's not clear where Megan has gotten the information that there is only a three-day supply of oil and food in Houston, and it's not particularly important here. What matters

is that she takes this for granted—it is a common sense assumption within the cultural logic of prepping that there is not enough to go around, and that if she doesn't anticipate this turn for the worst, she will starve. The threat of starvation is certainly terrifying and speaks to an emotional habitus structured by perceived scarcity, and the insecurity this generates. As we saw in the previous chapter, feelings of insecurity are symbolically attached to the story of the marauding hordes, which Megan invokes by predicting theft, gun violence, and murder. As Gould observes, there is an emotional valence attached to narratives (57) whether emotion is articulated or not, and here the detection of threat and prediction of violence evoke terror (an intense form of fear), anxiety (distress associated with fear or detection of danger, real or imagined), and a sort of defensive self-protection.

The episode documents Megan trying to prep for survival in a small one-bedroom apartment. She stores as much food, water, and supplies as she can fit into her small living space, but ultimately plans to “bug out” to Mexico in a SHTF event. As the camera follows her around her home and town, she muses on the various plans she has for survival, which include shooting her housecats in the head because “unfortunately cats are not as useful as dogs in a survival situation”, (she pantomimes shooting the cat and laughs nervously), buying prepper spray, and considering how many months she could go before being forced to prostitute herself in exchange for essential goods (3 or 4 months is her estimate). Her plan includes walking out of the city by cover of night, and the show concludes with her struggling through a practice run. Having failed to meet her goal time, she muses, “if the SHTF next week, I probably wouldn't make it. If it hits in the next 5 years, I'll be ok.” She states this calmly, as if assessing the likelihood of an impersonal outcome that has nothing to do with her own chances of survival. Even as she considers,

plans, and strategizes for the worst, Megan minimizes emotion, maintaining an air of collected, controlled calm.

Preppers project distasteful emotions onto social others, including both institutions and individuals. In doing so, they are often communicating their distaste for emotional expression that differs from their own, namely emotional excess or reactivity. This is an instance of projection, a defense mechanism “in which the person unconsciously attributes unacceptable internal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to other people or to the environment.” (Ziegler, 2016:139). Projecting is a form of deflection—it averts attention away from their own feelings, to focus on the presumed feelings of an imagined social other. This strategy allows them to downplay their own big emotions, which reinforces their sense of rationality and control. It also situates preppers in a position of power, in that they take on the responsibility of managing the emotions of others, who will be panicking and therefore dangerous. As Benjamin explains,

I have four times the food that you need for one family to survive everything. And I told my friends that in the event of a disaster we will help whomever we can until it hurts. And that’s it. And I would not allow anybody killing anybody in front of me just for the heck of it. I mean there has to be some *law and order, stability*. And that’s the first thing.

You have to learn to manage people that are panicking. Just being calm, collected...even if you know they’re screwed! You have to be calm and collected and organized. Because that’s the way to go, you know.

Benjamin uses his status as a prepper to assert authority here—he “will not allow” killing “just for the heck of it” because he values law and order and wants to maintain stability. Part of prepping, he indicates, is the act of managing people who are panicking, by controlling his own emotions, staying calm despite disaster. His use of the generalized

second person here is interesting; when he says “you” he does not mean me, his interlocutor, specifically, but is revealing a generalized assumption about the proper (morally superior) way to act in an emergency. The heroes will remain calm, collected, and organized. They will be in a position to help others, if they choose, whereas those who don’t behave according to these emotional norms symbolize the breakdown in law and order, creating danger and chaos not just for themselves but for those around them.

Two popular prepper narratives that illustrate the projection of emotion onto imagined social others include greedy institutions and the individuals that run them, and panicking individuals who are emotionally reactive and therefore dangerous. I wrote about the racial and settler colonial dynamics of the marauding hordes narrative in Chapter V; in this section I explore its relevance as an emotion management strategy, with a particular focus on the ways preppers project distasteful emotions like panic, hysteria, unbridled fear, anxiety, and terror, onto undifferentiated groups of people that they preemptively accuse of dangerously excessive displays of emotion. This narrative takes inchoate, abstract risk, and personifies it, fitting uncertainty into a story with clear good guys and bad guys, and morally unambiguous practices that follow logically from a now embodied threat. In the story of the marauding hordes, preppers are the good guys, which means they are calm, rational, self-sufficient, and of course prepared.

The panicking mob, whose members are in dire circumstances as a result of their lack of personal responsibility and preparation, must be overtaken by emotion (panic and hysteria) because if they had been thinking rationally, they would have prepared. The violent hysteria of the marauding horde personifies preppers’ fears of emotional expression; any loss of rationality is a potential slippery slope into chaos, violence,

disorder, and loss of control. Emotional reactivity, uncontained, is the real threat to preppers, whose sense of safety hinges upon maintaining the tight levels of emotional control imposed upon them by narrative identities at the cross-roads of masculinity, settler-colonial citizenship, whiteness, and middle-class social norms.

*Greedy, Out of Control Individuals*

In Chapter V, I wrote about Hank, who had moved from California to Idaho to live amongst “like-minded people” and to protect himself and his wife from the onslaught of panicking people that he felt sure would spill out of urban areas in search of the very supplies he had painstakingly gathered and stored over the years. To characterize the threat that preppers are concerned about, Hank adopts the popular prepper narrative that I call the story of the marauding hordes, discussed in detail in the previous Chapter. Here, I want to call attention to the role of emotions projected onto others, which is central to the plot:

Hank: Ok, well, that is a term that is used for the onslaught of the population that lives and escapes from ...any metropolitan area. They're gonna be hungry and thirsty and very greedy, and things are gonna happen. *They will be like a swarm of locusts*, moving eastward.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Hank’s characterization of the people who participate in the marauding horde draws from problematic stereotypes and controlling images invoking groups of people who historically have been portrayed as culturally inferior: people of color, who are portrayed as dependent on whites, criminal, prone to gang participation (which symbolize both criminality and an excess of communitarianism); women, who are portrayed as excessively dependent, emotional, and closer to nature, and thus more likely to give in to violent instincts in order to fulfil their

maternal instincts, and poor people, who are portrayed as morally weak due to their failure to “pull themselves up by the bootstraps”, and who are thus more prone to fall into the fits of emotional reactivity that drive the marauding hordes. In the era of colorblind racism and political ideologies built on the erasure of difference, the marauding horde remains undifferentiated by specific details about class, race, and gender. But the structure of the story parallels racist, sexist, classist, colonial discourse that demarcates groups of people in an us vs. them formation, one that characterizes the superior “us” as rational, controlled, and individually agentic, and the inferior “them” as emotional, uncontrolled, and lacking the capacity for individual agency, thus giving up their personal power to the impulse of the mob. When Hank describes the onslaught of what he calls “feral people”, he characterizes them not only as hungry and thirsty, but as greedy. I ask him to say more:

Allison: Hungry and thirsty makes sense, but why greedy?

Hank: Because people are not prepared.

At first, I read Hank’s answer as a deflection—he does not address his claim that panicking people will be greedy. Greed implies want in excess—especially for superfluous goods, like wealth or possessions (dictionary.com). It makes sense to me that people without their needs met because a disaster has cut them off would be hungry and thirsty—value neutral states that speak to the human body’s signals of necessity. But the assumption that they would also be greedy (along with the use of dehumanizing language around “feral people” and moral judgements such as “bad guys”) shifts the tone away from neutral territory into the realm of other people’s projected characters. Greed is not

an emotion, but it is a deeply emotional concept with moral implications. As A.F. Robertson writes, “greed is an insult that strikes right to the gut” (Robertson 2001).

When individuals perceive others to be acting out of greed, they are ascribing motive to an act that takes the act out of the realm of necessity (which Hank gives nod to), incompetence or lack of skill, and into the realm of morally unsavory, unchecked desire for something that exceeds what others perceive they have a legitimate right to expect. Once someone is accused of acting out of greed, they presumably have transgressed the bounds of fairness, and are now doing wrong to others. Gregoire, Laufer & Tripp describe perception of greed as “an inferred negative motive” about an actor’s “opportunistic intent” (Grégoire et al., 2010:738), and observe that inference of greed as motive tends to lead to anger, outrage, indignation, and resentment—all emotions expressed by preppers in reference to the members of the marauding hordes. By ascribing greed as a motive, in addition to hunger and thirst, Hank provides a plausible justification for the strong negative emotions he directs towards the fictitious members of the horde, more-so than if he had focused only on their legitimate bodily needs.

Hank has acknowledged that the social, political and economic system that we live in breeds material dependence on institutions. Although this configuration challenges his sense of autonomy, it is clearly a systemic problem. Preppers do regularly blame individuals for failing to identify dependence as a problem, and for failing to act to correct it (by prepping). They do sometimes go so far as to blame people whose basic needs go unmet by the system (they tend to adopt conservative rhetoric about welfare in which blame is placed on the poor for failing to pull themselves up by their bootstraps), but this alone does not explain the intensity of emotions preppers direct towards the

marauding hordes. The inference of greed makes up the difference. Once the unprepared are recognized not just as needy, but as greedy, preppers feel justified in expressing their disdain for the moral failings of social others who have not acted like them. As we have seen in the previous chapter, preppers construct symbolic claims to superiority that are predicated on levels of preparedness, and the amount of self-control and mastery of circumstances that being prepared requires, given the default of material dependence.

Having sidestepped my question about greed, Hank tries to support his claim by illustrating how lack of preparedness would breed desperation during a disaster. In a rhetorical move that operates by playing on my own emotions, he quizzes me on my levels of preparedness, where he largely ignores any answers that indicate competence to focus on perceived weakness:

Hank: How many days' worth of water and food do you have...do you live in a house or apartment?

Allison: House.

Hank: Ok. How many days of water and food do you have stored in that house?

Allison: Um, I'm pretty good on food, I'm a cook so with my pantry I could do like 6 months?

Hank: Ok, but how much is fresh, versus how much of it is canned, and what are the dates on the canned food, and more importantly, how much water do you have, and do you have a bucket that you can go poop in when the water systems quits?

Prepper recommendations for how much food to store varies widely, but 3 weeks is a minimum, with most preppers recommending 3 months or more. My answer is satisfactory, which means it does not produce the effect Hank appears to be going for. He tries again to identify a weakness in my level of preparedness that would activate my

sense of unease by asking about the type and quality of my food, and escalates the scale of disaster (not only is my food supply in question, but I am now being informed that I may have to poop in a bucket). By focusing on perceived weakness, and assuming that I am not as prepared as he is, he works to construct symbolic dominance over me. I am unwilling to fully grant this, but also unaccustomed to having the interview turned around to me. Still hoping to get an answer to my question about greed, I do some sidestepping of my own:

Allison: I have some of those things<sup>67</sup>, I've actually become a bit of a prepper doing this project!

Hank: Good! But that's because you're focused on your PhD dissertation! But of the neighbors that you know, your friends, how many of them are aware of the potential, that when the wheels come off the bus, we don't have water power, pressure, what are they gonna do when they gotta go poop? They don't know. They're not prepared for it.

Despite their insistence that prepping is growing in popularity, preppers often assume others are insufficiently prepared, a tactic that establishes symbolic dominance. Having failed to provide him with a meaningful example of vulnerability that could lead to panic and greed, Hank gives up on me and moves on to my loved ones, who he assumes are unprepared. It is interesting that he repeatedly brings up the poop bucket, a tactic I interpret as trying to shock me into disgust, and thus apprehension, as I realize how unprepared I am. Having again failed to achieve this reaction, Hank shifts his focus back to his own experience, and his perception of unspecified social others, personified by urban residents, who represent the epitome of modern dependence.

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<sup>67</sup> I do in fact own a bucket although not for this purpose. But any bucket could be a poop bucket in a pinch.

Recall the regularly repeated trope that “most people don’t have any idea how bad it’s going to be”, which is used to set preppers apart from the unprepared, in a way that reiterates the moral superiority of prepping. What I want to call attention to here is the framing that Hank uses to *naturalize* an emotionally reactive, and therefore violent response. The cultural logic is as follows: systems have bred dependence, which has left most people vulnerable to disaster, without realizing it. When the disaster does strike, they will be dramatically unprepared.<sup>68</sup> Because they are unprepared, they will turn to violence. In Hank’s words, “that’s just a fact of life”. The idea that someone would instantly go from hungry and worried to violent is not in fact a “fact of life” but an anticipated response derived from the association of emotions as passionate, wild, out of control, and dangerous. Indeed, within a modern American economy in which food insecurity affects million people (Bowen, Brenton, and Elliott 2019), people regularly live with hunger, worry, and no doubt fear, anger, and rage without turning to violence. Why does Hank, a retired middle-class home-owner, with a healthy expendable income, judging by the goods he reports storing (which include stores of food, water, guns and ammunition, and a generator, among other things), equate hunger, thirst, and fear for one’s well-being due to lack of access to resources with violence?

The answer lies in the belief, drawn from dominant Euro-American cultural logic, that emotions are antithetical to rationality, dangerous to civility, and a dark, potent, negative force that threatens to undermine the enlightened political processes of *abstract*

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<sup>68</sup> Hank exaggerates the severity of the situation to make a point. While surveys suggests that most Americans do not have large stores of food sufficient for an enduring emergency (Ballard 2018), most people have more than a day’s worth of food on hand. I have been unable to trace this assumption back to a data source.

*liberalism*. In disavowing fear, equating their cultural logic to a universalized rationality, and denying emotionality in themselves, preppers accept and reiterate the supremacy of “rationality” at the expense of emotions, leaving very little room to allow themselves to feel the full range of human emotions that risk society engenders. By projecting emotions like panic, fear, and desperation onto social others, who are then judged to be greedy, and thus dangerous, preppers deflect attention (their own as well as that of others) away from their own fears, concerns, and feelings of isolation by constantly reframing the topic to center on the perceived weakness of others.

### *Greedy Institutions*

The second case of projection that is pervasive in prepper discourse is the projection of emotions like greed, selfishness and intemperance onto institutions, and the people who run them, who are often characterized as power-hungry, avaricious career politicians and soulless bureaucrats. Preppers create distance from feelings of greed, or covetousness by characterizing social others as greedy, selfish, and inappropriately controlling, even as they are engaging in practices like stockpiling supplies and celebrating individualism and self-interest in their own lives.

Self-interest and responsibility to self and family above all other social obligations is a strongly held prepper value. But its shadow is selfishness, greed, and isolation, which cuts individuals off from the broader needs and interests of the communities in which they are embedded. Preppers struggle to hold a strong individualistic belief, while also maintaining that their self-interest is morally upstanding, rather than self-centered and miserly. Projecting greed and inappropriate self-interest onto abstract, imagined social others, in this case institutions and the people who run

them, allows preppers to work through their feelings of distress that comes from the knowledge that they are embedded in systems that don't prioritize human health and wellbeing, without forcing them to scrutinize the relationship between their own political beliefs and the production and proliferation of these systems.

Government, and the state is the top institution that preppers report distrusting. I asked John partway through our interview if he trusted the federal government. He responded, "Hell, no. You know better that to ask that." We both laughed. "I have to get it on record though," I said. He responded,

I know. Here is the thing, government is made up of individuals. Individuals are made up of what's known as human emotion and reaction.

They most commonly reference the federal government, elected officials, and non-elected government employees. Sometimes they mention specific agencies, but more often than not they speak in generalities. Occasionally state or local government agencies are referenced.

The federal government meaning this large, this strange creature is made up of individuals who have their own hates and fears and wants and perversions. Everything that's good or bad of us makes up each one of them.

You'll find the problem is that, yes, they're trained, I don't care where they're parked. The ATF, FBI, IRS, the CIA, the FBI, EPA, the FD-- I don't care. They're trained, generally, for their position, but then if you piss them off they'll violate their training just to make you wrong. They screw with you. We see all the time. You hear about it all the time. That's not just federal, it's city, county, state, and federal.

When preppers raise concerns with government institutions, most do so with ire. Their affect is infused with feelings of anger, frustration, and a sense of betrayal. This is especially true of conservative preppers who echo the language of the Tea Party, which

mobilized its members around idealization of The Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the intention of the Founding Fathers. For these preppers, what they perceive to be a divergence from the Constitution is interpreted as a betrayal and a threat to their rights—some conceptual, and others material, especially the right to bear arms. Although some preppers showed partisan preferences, they mainly expressed discouragement and disdain for the entire project of government, which they felt existed only to accrue more and more power and money, and not to serve the people. Although conservative and liberal preppers differed in their understanding of what service to the people ought to look like, all agreed that it was not being achieved. John expressed frustration at what he perceived to be the out of control size and power of the federal government, using the example of asset seizure an event in which the government seizes private assets, ostensibly with due cause:

John: The government, and it doesn't matter who it is, Democrat, Republican, *they have perverted the law to suit themselves, and to give them more power, and that's what it is ...* They can do whatever they want to do and they generally get away with it. You ever hear of asset forfeiture?

Allison: Yes.

John: Yes, big time. It's a big thing. This is what's funding a lot of the police departments in the United States. You better never travel with cash and get pulled over. I don't mean 100 bucks, I'm talking \$5,000 or something like that.

Allison: Because they seize it?

John: They'll take it. Yes, they'll seize it. I know people who've had airplanes seized because they pissed somebody off in the DEA.

John recounted having had some personal assets seized in the past<sup>69</sup>. I asked him to explain why, saying, “What was the logic?” He replied, “There's no logic. Government does not rule by logic, it rules by fear.” When he recounted his efforts to fight the charges, he found it would be a costly, time consuming process. He concluded:

They do that on purpose. The government does this on purpose to bully people into giving up property. I know people who've lost 10,000 acres. The government wanted it. They tried weird ways, and finally ended up in eminent domain, and it's still vacant. The property's still empty, bare and dirt. That was 20 years ago.

Preppers project greed-motive onto institutions like the state, financial institutions, and even seemingly more benign institutions like health care and the education system, which ostensibly exist to serve the public good, not make a profit, but which have been commandeered into prioritizing profit over human growth and well-being. Bailey expresses frustration over what he perceives to be an ingenuous motive shaping his expected life course within the modern American economy, in which schools, taxation, and work opportunities are all a product of financial profit making by an unnamed elite metonymically represented by Wall St.:

Here you're taught from an early age, if you work hard you get ahead in life, you work a good job, you pay your taxes, and...and really...they just kind of plug you into the machine... Wall St., the banks, whenever there's money to be made people will tend to gravitate towards the money. And...um, you know, as long as you're making profit... [trails off] (Bailey)

Similarly, in an online forum during the COVID-19 crisis, one prepper argued that the government was in possession of a cure and was intentionally trying to “tank” the economy to ruin people financially. Someone else noted that NY State was prohibiting

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<sup>69</sup> I am intentionally obscuring the details in order to protect his privacy

the use of anti-malarial drugs to treat COVID-19 infections and wondered why. The original poster responded:

Greed, bigpharm losing out. Many investors lose out if this big help from the government stalls. We are a weak group of citizens here in the USA. The government, whoever the hell they really are, are in control, and know it.

Not only are the government and corporations both perceived to be driven by greed, but they are conflated, and assumed to be working in collusion. The conflation of state and the corporate private sector is something that preppers perceive, that is also well documented by the literature on neoliberalism, which observes the conflation of the state and the private sector (Krippner 2007). It is interesting then to observe how preppers, whose cultural logic draws from libertarianism, describe their frustration with the conflation of public and private motives—a discourse infused with affective tones that I read as discouragement, disappointment, disapproval, and resentment. Resentment, an affective undertone that dominates preppers’ emotional habitus, is linked to feelings of betrayal, and the sense that one has been treated unfairly. Recall that affect is not the same as emotion, but emotional potential—nonconscious, noncognitive feelings that have not yet been captured into culturally recognizable form. In the quote above, Bailey articulates a critique of institutions including education, the taxation system, the labor market, and Wall St. all of which he perceives to be acting out of greed. He attributes this to a generalized theory of human self-interest (a cultural assumption associated with capitalism), but then he trails off. His sense of discouragement is palpable, but never named—why?

Bailey’s critique of what he calls “the system” is infused with the potential of political emotions, but these affects do not have a cultural outlet that allows for their

“capture” without challenging Bailey’s identity as rational, masculine, unpolitical, and libertarian. For most preppers, there are cultural and identity-based limits on what Gould calls a *political horizon*—a group’s sense of what is politically possible (2009:3). As we saw in chapter 1, preppers are largely critical of the dominant social paradigm. They generally don’t have much faith in either technological progress, or in the ability of contemporary political, economic or social institutions to manage the effects of rapidly developing scientific and technological advancement. They believe fully in the philosophy of political and economic liberalism informed by constitutional democracy—indeed their cultural identities are constituted out of narratives that derive from these ideologies. But these abstract beliefs, dating from the European Enlightenment, do not offer much in the way of a practical politics under risk society. Preppers, and others who have been disappointed by the failure of a political promise<sup>70</sup>, are then left without a way of expressing the full range of feelings that might arise from the failure of a deeply valued set of ideas to manifest; a political possibility that acknowledges the limits of traditional political-economic systems without asking its devotees to fully reject a loved and valued cultural ideal.

The element of love is crucial here—it is this that produces what I call “cultural attachment”, which posits that people have emotional attachments to cultural elements such as beliefs, values, ideas, stories, etc. Drawing from Somer’s work on the narrative constitution of identity, and psychological attachment theory, which documents the

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<sup>70</sup> Indeed, I believe our (loosely defined) collective emotional energy is currently infused with felt but unarticulated affect derived from the failure of contemporary political institutions to live up to their lofty, universalist, Enlightenment era ideals—prepping is one of many potential forms of emotional management that people might turn to in order to stave off, redirect, express, or otherwise direct affect towards or away from conscious knowing.

significance of the attachment that all humans have to important social bonds, I define *cultural attachment* as the emotional attachment that people have for certain cultural narratives and practices. Attachment theory is premised on the understanding that “humans have a basic need for social connection, such that they must form and maintain interpersonal relationships, and derive a sense of security, acceptance, and belongingness from those relationships” (Mathes et al., 2020:3). Psychologists tend to focus on the importance of attachment to human development, and the generation and maintenance of relationships throughout the life-course, but I propose adapting attachment theory to attend to the cultural and structural elements that give shape to social bonds.<sup>71</sup>

Interestingly, economic institutions that are culturally coded as hyper-rational, organized according to capitalist ideology of self-interest, are here categorized as greedy, that is, being driven by the desire to accumulate an excess of wealth. Within the logic of capitalism, excess is the goal: to use capital to generate capital in excess of the necessity—as Marx puts it, to exceed use value to create exchange value (cite), which, by its very nature, is in excess of the necessity of immediate use. Of course, what is “useful”

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<sup>71</sup> I believe that theories of emotional management (Hochschild 1979, 1983; Koole and Rothermund 2011; Norgaard 2011; Schweingruber and Berns 2005) offer inroads to this perspective. What I wish to do here is to bring online the significance of the body in directing the selection of cultural schema that are engaged, and in generating specific cultural-emotional responses. Attachment theory (Bowlby 1973, 1980, 1982) recognizes the fundamental necessity of connection in the human organism and calls for us to account for the potency of the sensory-emotional-cultural connection. Deborah Gould gets at this in her discussion of affect theory, and by using the concept of emotional habitus to ground emotional politics in the body (Gould 2009), and work on cultural cognition documents the association between group-belonging and cultural schematics, but does less to document the mechanisms by which these outcomes occur. I believe the tools needed to link the elements of self-concept, social attachment, cultural schema, and emotions are widely available in sociology, starting with the tradition of Cooley, which recognizes the significance of the internalized social other, in his theory of the looking glass self, and the tradition of symbolic interaction, which is predicated on the understanding that humans engage in interaction with the goal of maintaining social bonds in tact via adherence to norms and socially sanctioned modes of performance (Cooley 1902; Scheff 1988; Turner 2009). More should be done to integrate them into a theory of practice though, as I only scratch the surface here.

or “necessary” is always a subjective matter, prone to varying definitions of enough that create divergent boundaries between the concepts of scarcity and plenty.

Greed is a perceived, rather than felt emotion that contributes to feelings of anger and despair, as preppers felt held hostage to someone else’s more powerful desires. For instance, Bailey describes an education system that as “brainwashing” the public to buy into a narrative of complacency, so that they could be plugged into the money-making machine. Often institutions were conflated into a conceptually ambiguous mass of power. Although some iconic companies or agencies were referenced by name (Walmart, Monsanto, the FDA, the EPA) for the most part, individuals referred to “the government”, “big business”, “corporations,” or, in order to encompass the whole range of imbricated institutions, “the system”. Perceiving the power that a seemingly irrational economic system has over leaves preppers with uncomfortable emotions that they struggle to contain. The affect-laden quality of these narratives illustrates intensely personal feelings of betrayal: from a conservative perspective, which many preppers adopt, institutions have limited functions that justify their existence. The institutions that they criticize are seen as either overstepping their political-economic legitimacy, or as failing to accomplish the task they are set up to achieve. The failure of these institutions is deeply disappointing, made more so by the default state of dependence that complex, rationalized, bureaucratic society generates.

The awareness of dependence on “greedy”, risk producing institutions challenged preppers’ deeply held beliefs in individualism and brings up concerns about trust—a fundamental quality in an interdependent society. A conversation that I had with Samuel illustrates the tension between his sense of individual responsibility and autonomy, and

the lived experience of relying upon risk-generating institutions. Attempting to justify his reliance upon an institution that he ultimately admits to not trusting, without undoing a central cultural value, Samuel goes to great lengths to claim responsibility for his own actions, even while acknowledging risk factors far outside his control.

Allison: Do you trust food companies?

Samuel: [long pause] Well, the short answer to that is yes, because I buy stuff off the shelves and I put it in my body every day.

Allison: Ok...

Samuel: So do I trust them? Yeah. Um, do I like it? Not really! Do I really trust them? [emphatically] No. I have no idea what's going on! And part of it's my ignorance. There's x number of rodent feces that are allowed in every can of chili. And it's pretty crazy how high, how big it is! So part of it is my own ignorance, and some of those thing if people heard it they would just be floored they would just be really taken aback. So do I trust them? No. But do I trust them? Yes.

Allison: So your emotional response would be not trusting them, but you also act out trust by participating in the system.

Samuel: I think that's a true statement, yeah...

Allison: Do you feel like you have choice in that?

Samuel: Well yeah, if I go back...yes! Absolutely! Absolutely I have a choice. Because... [he gets up and goes to the kitchen comes back with a bowl of cherry tomatoes]...I can tell you just about everything about these. Cause they came off a plant in the backyard. Now can I tell you the potting soil that we got? I mean I do my research, I know the company...but can I really tell you that they didn't put something in there? Cause I know, I have a background in agrobiz, and I know that there are certain things that [they] will certify as organic that it can have a certain amount of this or that in there, and I know that people will color it, color it very specifically to match the potting soil so it doesn't look like there's anything else in there, when there really is.

Allison: So that's a circumstance where you're doing everything you can to control what is in your food by growing your own tomatoes, but to a certain extent you still don't have a choice in what's in your tomatoes.

Samuel: Well...um...I would say that I don't choose to exercise the ultimate expression of choice. Because if I did, I could definitely get...you know...seven gallons of dirt, have it analyzed, know exactly what's in it, right? Know exactly the feed that the chicken used for my chicken manure fertilizer. Now I could go to that level. But I don't because...

Allison: It's extreme.

Samuel: For me that would be extreme, yeah...Want one? [offers me a cherry tomato]

In this passage, Samuel demonstrates a complex double reality (Norgaard 2014). By claiming that his practice of buying and eating industrial food stuff symbolizes trust even as he acknowledges that he does not feel trust, Samuel struggles to make sense of his own actions in conjunction with a powerful narrative that revolves around choice and control. Indeed, he goes to great rhetorical lengths to insist that he does ultimately have a choice, and thus control over his own exposure to risk, even as he must identify more and more extreme actions that would be required for him to exercise that choice, as the logic breaks down. He does not choose to exercise the ultimate expression of choice (in this case having his backyard soil tested) because it becomes extreme, but he does not frame this extremity as a lack of choice in the first place.

Dependence gives rise to feelings of vulnerability, fear, shame, disappointment, and anger. Charlotte Bloch (2002) writes that shame, disappointment and anger are “the emotions of damaged social bonds” (127). These feelings fuel alienation (Scheff 1997), which takes two forms, either isolation or engulfment. Vulnerability, fear, shame, and disappointment are prohibited emotions in the emotion culture of prepping. Feeling

vulnerable is an uncomfortable emotional state for any of us. But it is especially at odds with the self-perceptions that accompany certain high-status identities. Vulnerability, especially towards violence, is largely associated with femininity; feeling vulnerable might challenge claims to masculinity, which then need to be corrected by asserting traits culturally associated with masculine dominance, such as willingness to use violence, mastery, and self-control (Hollander 2001). Class status may be associated with vulnerability, as those with greater wealth are perceived as potential targets for violence (ibid); as we see here, preppers, whose stores of goods represent wealth, are perceived as being at heightened risk. Hollander also finds that whiteness is associated with vulnerability to violence, whereas people of color are associated with potential danger. This is affirmed by work on stereotyping of marginalized groups, which Patricia Hill Collins calls controlling images: stereotypical portrayals of oppressed groups that serve to ideologically justify their oppression (2009:76).

The projection of greed onto individuals and institutions is linked. Both assume that social others are unable to contain their dangerous emotions. Even as they resent institutional greed, which they believe produces the dependence they disdain, preppers fear violence coming from individuals. They attribute both to what John calls “H, E & R; Human Emotion and Reaction” ...“individuals who have their own hates and fears and wants and perversions”. Human tendency towards emotional reactivity is responsible for the impossibility of collaborative efforts, John explains, using the example of government inefficiency. This sense that human emotionality (interpreted negatively as irrationality) is universal undergirds prepper distrust of both public and private institutions and social

others, such as the alienated urban residents who choose lifestyles detached from their ecological embeddedness.

Preppers, whose feelings emerge in the context of an emotional habitus informed by interlocking fields such as gender, sexuality, nationality and citizenship, settler-colonialism, class, race, family, religion, and the specific emotion cultures of community spaces such as the internet as a whole, as well as niche online communities, must navigate a rough terrain of feelings that are more or less socially acceptable—finding ways to manage their emotions that do not threaten their sense of self, social identity, social belonging, or material wellbeing. To understand how they do this, and how it contributes to the development of prepping as a practice, we turn to the fourth emotion management strategy I identify, sublimation.

### **Sublimation: Translating Emotion into Productive Activity**

Daily life is full of emotional stimuli, generating emotions that must be regulated. Although some are intentional, many emotion regulation processes happen implicitly, without the conscious attention of the subject (Koole and Rothermund 2011). Because preppers largely disavow emotion, there is little room for intentional, explicit emotional regulation. And yet, as sensory, embodied humans, emotions are present, and must be managed. Preppers deny feeling fearful about the many threats they detect. And indeed, most of the preppers I spoke with exuded a sense of calm, self-satisfaction<sup>72</sup>.

Despite their denial of fear, many preppers report that the act of prepping is what allows them to feel calm, collected, and reassured that they will be alright *no matter what*

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<sup>72</sup> This word may have negative connotations, which I do not intend. One may be satisfied with oneself or one's actions without being self-centered or egotistical, and it is this meaning I wish to convey.

*happens*, suggesting that failure to prepare might indeed leave them feeling fearful. Having *done something* to prepare for a range of scenarios, before disaster strikes leaves them feeling empowered and in control. Having exerted control over the environment that they have the most agency over (their immediate and perhaps extended household) preppers feel reassured that when the time comes, they will be able to maintain their valued affect of calm, strategic rationality. By being prepared, they reverse the default position of dependent vulnerability, constructing instead a circumstance in which they control the resources that others will become dependent on. This is indicated in a *discourse of needing help/providing help*, where preparedness puts preppers in the position of being able to help a select number of others, rather being reliant themselves.

I referred above to the identity confirmation role that prepping plays in substantiating preppers' self-image of themselves as worthy, responsible people, capable not only of taking care of themselves, but of protecting others. This is illuminated when Russ provides a counterexample of a time when he believes he failed to live up to this ideal, by relying on government unemployment payments, an act that left him feeling "guilty" and unworthy of respect:

Russ: I did well, but I worked hard my whole life. I think I drew unemployment once and I was out of work for quite a while and seeing that my funds were dwindling and was starting to panic, so I did draw unemployment, but then of course back then too it was much harder. It wasn't

Allison: When was that?

Russ: That would have been thirty years ago, and *I felt guilty about it*

Allison: Even though you'd paid into it?

Russ: Yeah, it was still kind of a guilt trip.

Allison: Interesting.

Russ: Well, that's part of it. Now all of these programs and handouts and things, people think that well it's there and I'm entitled to it. They've lost, gosh, I want to say they've lost respect for themselves, but it's...stand up and you pull your weight, do your share, however you've got to do it, you know. *We're all in this together*, nobody rides for free. You've got to do something. You've got to help. *If you absolutely cannot help, then we help.*

Allison: Ok.

Russ: But until then you know if you've got, you're missing two legs and an arm, you've still got one arm, you can spoon out the potatoes for the next person in line. There's always something that you can do, you know.

Drawing on unemployment is in direct contrast to an ethos of bootstrap individualism, in which individuals find a way to take care of themselves no matter what. Interestingly, Russ associates this sense of individualism with the recognition of collective belonging when he justifies his feelings by telling me that “we’re all in this together”. The belief that “there’s always something you can do” speaks to a sense of confidence in the human spirit that has been let down by the willingness of his fellow citizens (and his past self) to ask for help. By acknowledging that “if you absolutely cannot help, then we help”, he leaves open the door for exceptions to this seemingly hard and fast rule. But it’s unclear who he would extend this exception to, given his extreme example, and his own sense of himself as undeserving of public support. Russ, like other preppers, and like many men, casts himself in the role of the protector, or the person who helps others, not a person who needs public protection and help (Carlson 2015; Young 2003).

Preparedness reasserts and confirms preppers’ narratives of self as people who protect, maintain self-control, and do not depend upon others. By redirecting emotional

energy away from personal fear, anger, shame, or other distressing feelings, preppers implicitly regulate their emotions to produce feelings of calm, self-satisfaction. Here's how Benjamin explains this:

I got to a point where I was too stressed out about this stuff. I was going towards the path of *my little friends that are crazy*. So I said to myself, we could be here for 10 years, 20 years, and nothing could happen. The same earthquake that I keep telling you could happen here, yeah, it could happen tomorrow, but it could happen in 10 years, 20, 30, 40, hell I could be dead by the time this thing happens! So I said, ok, same with the EMP pulse, same with the super volcano, Yellowstone volcano...any disaster could happen tomorrow. That's fine. But guess what. I did my part. I set up as many systems as I can...I still have all this stuff to set up, but I just put it on the back burner. I said some stuff I learn when I can. But the rest of my life, I ...my kids, my wife, and I go watch movies...that's how I relax, by the way, every time I'm stressed out with my life I go to the movies or rent a movie and watch a movie about the end of the world. Funny. I watch zombie movies because of that. Because by the time I'm done with a movie, I realize wow, those are problems.

Allison: [laughs]

Benjamin: I don't have any problems! Those are real problems. And believe you me. If you look at my iPad I have hundreds, almost a thousand books on the end of the world. And this is one of the things that I learned. When you read books about the end of the world you actually analyze situations that could never happen to you. but you analyze what could happen...so you think about the possibilities. So it's scenarios that I don't have to exercise because I already read them in a book. And so it has helped me a lot to think about possibilities and also take precaution.

Allison: So preparing is both stressful emotionally but it's also kind of cathartic, in that you're working through scenarios because you feel more prepared you...alleviate that stress.

B: [interjecting] Right! It actually, at the end, it calms you down. Right now, I know I'm pretty ready for anything...pretty much. Except for the zombie apocalypse.

[we both laugh]

Benjamin: I know it's not going to happen! But if it did, if it did, trust me on this one, I could survive it too.

Benjamin is more forthcoming about his feelings than some preppers; he admits to hitting “a point where [he] was too stressed out about this stuff”. Of course, within prepping culture there is variability as to how strictly individuals adhere to or navigate feeling rules. But there is also a temporal aspect to Benjamin's narrative that makes this admission acceptable without breaking the emotion norms of rational self-control; he admits that in the past he was too stressed out, and that he risked going crazy, but that prepping and prepping stories allowed him to overcome these negative emotions, that had they not been managed appropriately, would have taken a socially-unacceptable form of “going crazy”. The fear of being perceived as crazy, or of actually going crazy is a common trope that preppers adopt. In it, I find further evidence of prepping as an act of sublimation, the redirection of socially unacceptable emotion into socially productive purposes.

When I approached preppers for prospective interviews, one of the main concerns they raised was that I took their practices seriously, and that I not try to cast them as “crazy”, as many felt the media had. I do not believe preppers are “crazy”—indeed, I find their practice entirely “rational”<sup>73</sup> within the context of cultural logic (Fischer 1999), a system of reasoning that applies culturally specific sets of meaning to generate reasoning or judgement, “conditioned by the unique contingencies of life histories and structural positions in political-economic systems” (Fischer 1999). The understanding that the

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<sup>73</sup> Unlike preppers, I do not believe rationality or reason refers to a fixed quality that is objectively true. My understanding of what is rational is based on feminist critiques of reason, which situates reason within cultural logics of a group (Collins 2009; Grosz 1994)

ideational is constitutive of the material-economic was articulated by Weber, who “understood that the human mind does not work according to strictly behaviorist, “rational,” or logical principles. The mind also works in part by psycho-logical (vs. logical) principles—often patterned by culture—that allow imperfect humans to live and cope with a sometimes scary and unknowable world.” (Kim et al., 2013:639).

Prepping—both its discourse and its practice—calms Benjamin down. His use of disaster movies and books to feel better by comparison (“those are real problems!”) speaks to the importance of disaster stories and scenarios for preppers, as well as the power of stories to mediate emotional experiences in life. Like Hank, who enjoys considering what he calls “potentialities”, Benjamin enjoys discussing possibilities both real and imagined, in language that downplays their material threat to his body and those of his loved ones. Fictional accounts of disaster provide thought-exercises to be analyzed for strategies and tactics, that are simultaneously emotionally engaging, and emotionally distant. By watching or reading about fictional characters living out fantastical scenarios like zombie attacks, preppers can think through threats to their own bodies, homes, and families, without having to directly face the likelihood of harm that might generate more explicit, sensory-activated fear that would challenge their sense of selves as rational, calm, collected and controlled.

It is the practice of prepping though that allows Benjamin to work through these scenarios in an enjoyable, rather than stressful way. Comparing his circumstances with the characters in zombie movies who must overcome zombie attacks is only stress-reducing if he feels adequately prepared to deal with the types of scenarios that he thinks are reasonably likely to occur in his lifetime—a major earthquake hitting the Pacific

Northwest, which received high levels of media attention during the time of my study, the explosion of the Yellowstone Caldera, or another volcano in the geologically active Northwest, or an electromagnetic pulse (EMP), a burst of electric energy originating from either solar flares or nuclear explosion. Because he has gathered emergency supplies, envisioned countless scenarios, trained himself to keep and shoot guns, and acquired other skills such as emergency first aid, communications and more, he feels “pretty ready for anything...pretty much.”

Benjamin’s story illustrates the fourth emotion management strategy that I regularly observed preppers adopt: the sublimation of unacceptable distressed emotions into a socially acceptable, identity affirming activity. Sublimation is a concept introduced by Freud, who theorized it as one of several psychic defense mechanisms that redirects attention away from unacceptable sexual drives (libido):

Sublimation is a process that concerns object-libido and consists in the instinct's directing itself towards an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual satisfaction; in this process the accent falls upon deflection from sexuality. (Freud 1914)

Freud’s theory of defense mechanisms focused on how people protected their positive self-image from “internal events, specifically, impulses that were regarded by the ego as unacceptable” (Baumeister et al., 1998:1082). Freud’s use of sublimation focused specifically on the redirection of sexual or aggressive drives, but subsequent adoption of the concept became far more generalized (Hartmann 1955). Contemporary psychologists have moved away from the theory that personality and behavior is driven exclusively by sexual or aggressive drives but integrated the concept of defense mechanisms to apply to self-esteem and the maintenance of a positive self-concept more broadly (Baumeister et

al. 1998). Sublimation as a redirection of distressing emotions is a form of managing emotions, but with a specific outcome of psychic protection against challenges to one's perception of self.

How might a seemingly antiquated Freudian concept of redirected libidinal drives help us understand contemporary preppers? I argue that preppers redirect their emotional energy<sup>74</sup> away from manifesting in their bodies as fully formed negative emotions such as fear by deflecting attention away from emotions to focus on analysis and cognition, by projecting shameful feelings onto others, and by adopting prepping-compliant practices that feel good, that is, that are embodied, pleasurable, and concrete (for example, gardening, shooting, constructing storage facilities, etc.). As such, they are harnessing potentially uncomfortable emotions into creative projects that reinforce self-perceptions as active, productive, rational, and empowered, and that also provide a perceived social benefit<sup>74</sup> of being prepared for “just about anything”, no matter the circumstances, thus negating the socially unacceptable state of dependence that they disdain.

In short, preppers turn to narratives and practices that assuage their uncertainty and distress, reacting strongly to cultural messages that challenge their understanding of the world, and relying on cultural narratives that reaffirm them, thus shaping their actions. We cannot fully understand the adoption of practices without recognizing the ways culture and emotions work together. Kim, Zeppenfeld and Cohen (Kim et al. 2013) address this in a paper that they suggest may be the first source of empirical evidence of

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<sup>74</sup> I do not agree with Freud's assessment that all drives are ultimately sexual or aggressive and prefer the more contemporary language of emotional regulation in general. But the redirection of distress into a creative practice of prepping closely resembles Freud's concept of sublimation, and its more contemporary adaptations, so I use it here with some hesitation, and modification.

sublimation in action, by putting Freud's concept of sublimation in conversation with Weber's sociological theory of culture in his famous work on the Protestant Ethic. Kim et al. point out that "Weber considered defensive motives to be crucially important" (639) and identified the cultural logic of Protestant beliefs in predetermination as a motivation to prove salvation (thereby defending the psyche against the belief that one was destined to burn in hell) by demonstrating a strong commitment to one's "calling" (Kim et al. 2013; Weber 2003). Weber did not explicitly tend to the significance of emotions in social life (Turner 2009), but his thesis revolves around the resolution of anxiety via a cultural practice. This argument is compatible with Freud's theory that sublimation involved the redirection of socially inappropriate drives into creative activities such as scientific discovery or artistic creation. While he was ambivalent about the generalized applicability of the theory, noting "the weak point of this method is that it is not applicable generally: it is accessible to only a few people" (Freud, 1961[1930:27]), contemporary work suggests that the concept is applicable even beyond Freud's narrow focus on libidinal drives (Ziegler 2016).

The content of the creative act that individuals adopt is significant, as negative emotions must be redirected towards positive ends, in order for sublimation to act as a defense mechanism. For preppers, who fixate on threat-detection, an act widely associated with fear, but deny feelings of fearfulness, acts of emergency preparedness replace fear, based on the cultural logic that individuals are responsible for themselves, and have nothing to fear if they are adequately prepared. This translates not only into one-time acts of preparing (i.e. buying some extra canned goods) but into prepping as a lifestyle, or, as preppers often refer to it, as "a mindset". This requires an embodied

investment of time, attention and energy to fully adopt a prepper mindset that allows one to be prepared:

Samuel: I have a belief that if we're put in a critical stress environment, we will default to the highest level of training for which we have mastered.

Allison: That's interesting, the idea of mastery of certain level of skills that you prepare for. It's not just something you do once and say, ok, I have some experience with this. It's something you have to do over and over again to really habituate to it. That's an interesting thought...

Samuel: You want me to say that again? I love it! I'm always saying it!

Allison: Sure!

Samuel: In a critical stress environment, you will default to the highest level of training for which you have mastered. Which is to say that the way you said, if I got trained on it once, yeah, I made a fire with a bow and drill! And that was 27 years ago. It doesn't really equate to what might happen today or a year ago I needed to implement that. But for me, if I went out and I pressed the trigger, I don't know, 300 times last week. And I practice a very specific drill. And I believe, that if that drill, cause it's one that I practice all the time, I believe that if it happens, that I will default to that, because I believe I have mastered that.

Mastery here is an important goal. Not only does it assure Samuel that he will indeed be ready for just about anything, but it redirects any distress that might come from considering the threat of disaster into a habitual, embodied practice that is engaging and oftentimes pleasurable.

### *Embodying Pleasure Instead of Fear*

I learned this firsthand during my field work when I took a pistol shooting class that Samuel led. I had never held, let alone shot a gun before, and I felt considerable anxiety about doing so. I felt relatively nervous throughout the first part of the class, which involved discussing rules, and introducing us to gun safety. But once we began the

exercise of shooting at targets—the part I had held considerable anxiety about—I felt my body relax into the present demands of the activity. My field notes of that class recount the embodied experience of holding the gun, positioning my body, and focusing my gaze on the target. I was hyper aware of my body throughout the class—both while shooting, and also in reference to other participants, as I kept my attention on who in my proximity held a loaded gun, and how safely they were handling it. When it was my turn to shoot, I tuned into my body, crouching at my knees to keep my weight centered, and focused on pulling my shoulders down my back to ensure a steady grasp of the gun in my hands. Doing so, I felt the sense of presence and calm that accompanies a yoga practice (a cultural practice I am far more familiar with) and I felt a surge of satisfaction when my shot was deemed steady after several rounds of practice.

Shooting was not the only embodied practice that I participated in during my time with preppers. I made similar note of the physical experience of other activities such as picking berries, chopping wood, building a fire, and canning jams and pickles with preppers. Many of these activities were communal and I had fun doing them. Even as individual skill and capability were often emphasized—the idea after all, was that we be able to take these skills back to our own, private prepping practices—the activities themselves put us in close social proximity, the quiet intimacy of performing a common task, shared with others, who instructed, cautioned, praised, and stood elbow to elbow with me over a hot stove, hand to hand in the dirt, or crouched alongside me in a berry patch. I could readily feel the appeal of channeling frustration with opaque, unjust bureaucratic institutions into something as tangible and sensory as having my hands in the dirt, putting my back into sawing through piles of bracken, or stirring jam over a hot

stove, breathing in the sweet floral scent of broken, caramelized fruit. Not only do the activities that make up prepping reaffirm cultural beliefs in individualism, autonomy, rationality responsibility and self-control, *they also feel good.*

They also felt contained, controlled, and precise. Many involved instructions, and the slow building of skill, which does involve strategy, thoughtfulness, and mindfulness. The activities that make up prepping differed greatly from the activities that make up social movement participation, which often require movement in the other direction, a letting go of daily life to gather with strangers to yell in the street, knock on doors not knowing what lies behind them, or write letters or emails that get sent into a void.

Unlike discrete, political acts, mastery of a skill requires repetition, and as such, it must be built into daily life, not attempted once and set aside until the zombies come. This is especially true of bodily skills such as shooting, cooking, canning, and gardening. In dealing with distressing emotions about risk society, is it really surprising that people would seek out activities that calm, soothe, and reassure them of their ability to navigate risk, exactly as they are? Accounting for the cultural attachments and bodily habits that are engendered by a habitus helps to explain how people respond when their sense of self, and the stability of their social world is threatened. This nexus between discourse and body is central to Bourdieu's theory of practice, and although he did not attend regularly to emotion, his understanding of the centrality of the body leaves us plenty of room to fill in this gap. Many of the activities we attest to preferring we justify because it "feels natural". Bourdieu argues that practice takes primacy over discourse: "the essential part of the modus operandi which defines practical mastery is transmitted in practice, in its practical state, without attaining the level of discourse" (1977:87).

Bodily hexis is the way in which dispositions are transmitted in practice: “Bodily hexis is political mythology realized, em-bodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of feeling and thinking.” (93). At the micro-level, preppers adapt a habitus whose principles of generation were constituted in a national culture of positivity structured by positive asymmetry (Cerulo 2006), the patterned neglect of risk, to the conditions of risk society, which get harder and harder to ignore. Within the cultural logic of abstract liberalism, individual preparedness, not collective action, appears to be not just a logical response to inescapable risk, but a pleasurable one.

### **Social Change and Emotion**

Despite the dramatic content of our conversation—zombies, world wars, economic collapse, the devaluation of currency, etc.—Bailey’s delivery remained calm, collected and flat. The only time I heard his composure break was when I turned the conversation to the possibility of social change. Preppers, in general, believe that the United States, and modernity more broadly, are in a downward spiral. Samuel told me he was a bit more optimistic about this than most, but he was an outlier. Most preppers thought things were bad, and getting worse, revealing a general pessimism that undergirds their desire to prepare for the worst.

Bailey told me, quite frankly, that “I think that we’re on a downward track.” By “we”, he appeared to mean the United States, as a political entity:

Historically I would say that America probably can be compared to ancient Rome.<sup>75</sup> And so, Rome had a pretty big rise with a bang, but they also had a

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<sup>75</sup> Recall Benjamin’s comparison of the United States to Ancient Rome, which I discussed in the Introduction. Preppers regularly make this comparison.

decline. And I think there's some parallels there. And I don't know exactly if it's going to play out the same way, but you know, Rome's not around anymore.

He concluded, "I don't know exactly how it comes down. And I don't know if it's going to be next year, or five." It seemed odd that Bailey was convinced that society as he knew it was likely to come to an end within the next five years, and that he didn't have any feelings about this. It was almost as if he was telling me about the plot of a book, or movie, that was mildly interesting, but unlikely to affect him personally. This level of detachment appeared concerted and effortful—like work. Bailey clearly had feelings about the pervasive level of risk he believed modern society exposed him to. It wasn't until I pressed him on the matter of social change that those feelings bubbled—briefly—to the surface.

Given Bailey's near certainty that America was on a downward tract, I wondered if he had made an effort to engage in any political efforts to change things. After I asked if he had ever participated in any social movements, he responded,

Bailey: Uh, I'm not an activist. I had a friend that moved to NY for the Occupy. And I did find that kind of fascinating. But I don't...I didn't actually believe in what they were doing...

Allison: What do you think they were doing? Or what didn't you believe in?

Bailey: Well, I do believe that...I will admit that the banks are corrupt and Wall St. is bad, all that...and yeah, that makes sense to me. But that's not the way you do it. I mean, you have to become a part of that system to change it. Although I don't know if you can change it because there's a lot of people who were doing it for a long time and they have a lot of money and influence.

Bailey equivocates between claiming not to believe in what the Occupy protesters were doing and acknowledging that he does indeed believe that banks and Wall St. are corrupt.

After admitting this, he switches gears to focusing not on the content of the protest

(distrust of and anger at the financial system) but it's methods— “that's not the way you do it”. When I ask him to clarify, he shifts gears to a generalized analysis that relates not to the specifics of the system being critiqued, but that puts the focus on individuals within the system, who he judges to be motivated by financial greed:

Allison: People who are trying to change it, or people who are just in the system?

Bailey: No, its, so, Wall St., the banks...you know, whenever there's money to be made, people will tend to gravitate towards the money. You know, as long as you're making profit, you know? The social aspect and the concept of community tends to take a back seat, typically.

Allison: So you said you think you have to work from within the system to change it.

Once again, Bailey waffles. This time, he focuses on the irrationality of the protestors:

Bailey: I don't know exactly what it would look like. But...I think a lot of the Occupy people, the movement was kind of more popular than you know, anything I can think of...[but] a lot of those people were nuts. I mean I think that's probably a purposeful way that the media portrayed them, but they just had...[recording becomes inaudible].

It seems at this point I am chasing Bailey in conversational circles! Every time I ask a specific question about how change might happen (while probing a point he has already made), he skillfully shifts the focus away from a clear articulation of the possibility of political change, pointing to the irrationality, greed, or the dishonesty of one of the many social actors involved—the protestors (who have adopted the wrong strategy), members of Wall St. itself (who are greedy), the protestors again (who are crazy), and the media (who probably misrepresent all parties involved). In doing so, Bailey offers a justification for prepping as the only logical response to the mess we're in. Even if social change is desirable (and it is), based on Bailey's assessment of the

situation, it feels just about impossible. Interestingly, Bailey displays his most visible show of emotion when I ask if he believes social change is possible, exclaiming, “I would like it to happen!” Like most preppers, Bailey has expressed a strong ethos of personal responsibility, however, in this matter, he quickly transfers attention away from himself, putting the onus onto the generalized other of “most people”:

Um, however I feel that most people don't want to do that. We don't even know how to do that. So from an early age, we're indoctrinated to believe certain things. So, um, the government has a lot of say in what we do and what we think. I guess like five years old or so, probably earlier, we are sent off to school. It's a long way of brainwashing certain beliefs that are handed down that your kids get up in their face every day. You know, I went to college. And I also feel that college is another vehicle for indoctrination. Um, here you're taught from an early age that you work hard you can get ahead in life, you work a good job, you pay your taxes on time, and really they just kind of plug you into the machine. So, I think ultimately what it is, is to have you not talk too much back, and to have you pay taxes.

Soon after this exchange, he noted “I'm not that interested in politics, but several months ago I think I discovered that I'm a libertarian.”

Despite his apparent lack of interest in politics, Bailey spent much of our conversation describing his frustration with what he called repeatedly “the system”—very much the domain of politics. He critiqued the education system (for brainwashing students with liberal propaganda), the media (who mis-represented the Occupy protestors), big banks and Wall St. (for disregarding non-economic social life and community), and the government (for its role in brainwashing citizens to be rote, unimaginative workers that don't ask too much and pay their taxes). Indeed, his concerns seemed very much aligned with the Occupy Wallstreet movement (which he brought up without my prompting). His discouragement with virtually all institutions recalls what psychologists Carly Smith and Jennifer Freyd describes as *institutional betrayal*, which

occurs when “common trusted and powerful institutions (schools, churches, military, government) acting in ways that visit harm upon those dependent on them for safety and well-being” (Smith and Freyd 2014:575). Although Smith and Freyd point to specific, acute instances of betrayal, such as the failure of colleges to handle sexual assault reports, resulting in harassment, insensitive investigations, and ultimately student suicides, I find that preppers report *feelings* of chronic, low-grade betrayal by institutions that fail to live up to their expectations for serving the public. This is especially interesting in the context of the libertarian basis of much of prepper discourse, as libertarians hold limited expectations for institutions, and are generally not big believers in the welfare state. Yet the sense that institutions such as education, government agencies, and churches ought to be providing needed services but are failing in this count is pervasive, even as it is logically at odds with stated beliefs.

I had a similar exchange with John, who above expressed strong feelings that the government was out of control, and that it only existed to continue accruing power. John’s political beliefs were aligned with far-right conservative ideology, and he made several derogatory comments about socialism and liberals, for example referring to unionized longshoremen as “a bunch of union commies” (see Chapter III). He liked and supported Trump because ...

He is pragmatic. He's like me. If the carpet starts peeling up out there, I'm not going to a hire commission to talk about it, and then find the best brother-in-law to do it. No, I will look at it, and go, "Call the carpet place up. Let's get this fixed right now." That's a pragmatist. Fixes things, handles things immediately without any political, sociological or emotional backlash, just does it. That's why I feel affinity for him. Not a lot of politicians do. [laughs] Because they're the establishment. He's a boat-rocker, and he's rocking your boats like crazy. They don't like that because they spent their whole life making money and having

power, playing this game, and it's ridiculous. It was never envisioned by the founding fathers in any way shape or form.

But he also told me that he thought government should pay for health care for all U.S. citizens, "100%. no ifs, ands or buts". Clearly, he had some expectations for government to serve the public, although he made certain to emphasize that this extended to citizens only, recalling a deep commitment to us vs. them logic, noting,

Citizens, not criminal aliens, not visitors, nothing like that. I think that if you're a citizen, then you've earned the right. I think the government should pay for it, and they very well can.

John was clearly interested in politics and had strong opinions about what government should and shouldn't be doing. But, despite his belief that government should provide public services like healthcare, he doubled down on the narrative that government functioned via uninhibited power. His reason for this boiled down to a pessimism about human nature that was rooted in uncontrolled emotionality:

Allison: Do you think individuals have the power to change institutions and structures?

John: Yes, and no. I do, myself, I can change things, but I'm not a normal person. Many people can't. They're powerless, literally powerless.

Allison: Why?

John: Well, the fear. That's how government rules, fear. You've heard it before "I don't want to get involved. I don't want to get involved. I don't want to stick my head out."

That kind of stuff and that's true.

The government can do anything from [garnering] your wages, to kill[ing] you, literally. We see it all the time [chuckles]. Remember, all the governments are made up of individuals, and individuals have faults and wants and needs and

goals, and it's not usually based on what the government hired them for, but they use their position as power.

John's logic only holds up by relying on claims to superiority (see Chapter V for a more detailed discussion of this trope) and the distinction between himself (and people like him, such as other preppers) and "most people" (see Chapter IV for discussion of this trope). The ability to be rational, controlled, strategic, and active-agentic (rather than passive—"I can change things") are the qualities that John emphasizes set him apart. In this passage, John reduces the complex, institutionalized structure of government to the whims of individuals who hold positions within it, diminishing the significance of structural awareness and the ways structure influences human action—a perspective that potentially minimized the power of the individual, and is thus anathema to those committed to individualism above all else. Liberal ideals of the individual are built around the belief in the ultimate freedom of the individual, but in this instance, John evokes an individual who is a slave to their passions, unable to overcome their faults, wants, needs and goals to effect change. This is left only to extraordinary individuals like John himself. Mastering emotions is a central skill that allows him to overcome his own wants, needs and desires.

#### *Cultural Attachment and The Renunciation of Social Movement Participation*

Most preppers told me that they believe social change is possible, but unlikely. Just as John is critical of "most people" for being unable to overcome their base desires, Bailey is also critical of protestors, not because he disagrees with their political position, but because he doubts their mental capacities, telling me, "a lot of those people were nuts". Even accounting for his distrust of the media, which he accuses of skewing his

perception of people and events, he still works to distance himself from the most visible, anti-establishment movement that has taken place in recent history, as well as activism more broadly (“I’m not an activist”). Why?

Collective risk is not inevitable, but socially produced (Beck 1992). But more and more Americans are adopting individual responses to protect themselves, rather than mitigate the risk. Andrew Szasz names the phenomena of individualized response to collective risk “inverted quarantine” (2010), finding it to be a pervasive American response to risks ranging from polluted water, toxicity in food, and nuclear threat, amongst others. While in a classic situation of quarantine, diseased or unhealthy individuals are kept separate from the presumably healthy collective, under inverted quarantine, individuals work to protect themselves from polluted, dangerous or unhealthy environments (4-5). Prepping is an act of inverted quarantine, in that preppers work to separate themselves from the context of risk, rather than attempt to correct or mitigate the risk.

Szasz provides a convincing analysis of the pervasiveness of inverted quarantine in shaping American response to collective, environmental problems. He is justifiably concerned about the political implications of inverted quarantine responses, which often include consumer measures of protection that leave wealthier, high status Americans with more options than their poorer compatriots. In addition to perpetuating environmental inequality, Szasz worries that inverted quarantine alters people’s perceptions of risk by providing a false sense of security, by way of diminished sense of urgency. Why try to solve a problem I have made myself safe from? Szasz calls this diminished sense of risk “political anesthesia” (195). In a complementary work assessing the viability of consumer

responses to climate change, Szasz argues that individually-scoped, consumer responses to social problems like climate change could trigger what psychologists call “single-action bias” and “finite pool of worry” mechanism—decision theory concepts that suggest that single, relatively simple actions alleviate individual worry about complex social problems, thus deflecting potential political concern away from social action. (Szasz 2011:604).

I share Szasz’s concern that individual actions are not commensurate with the scope of collective risk society currently faces; and find it feasible that inverted quarantine displace the will to generate social change—however, I find in my case a more complicated relationship between political inaction and the adoption of individualized response to collective risk. Indeed, I find that many preppers adopt a practice that could be considered an act of inverted quarantine not because they do not recognize the political nature of the situation, but because they feel politically powerless. This is not unrelated to the shift in American culture away from citizen-identity to consumer identity that Szasz documents, but Szasz assumes that political anesthesia follows inverted quarantine, without sufficiently considering that something akin to political anesthesia might cause, or at least contribute to the adoption of cultural practices that align with inverted quarantine.

Secondly, Szasz argues that for inverted quarantine to be successfully overcome, rationality must prevail. Inverted quarantine, he explains, is a cultural mentalité, “more of a preconscious, semiautomatic, unreflectively self-evident, seemingly “natural” way to respond to things” than a rational choice. The correction to this unreflective urge is the adoption of what environmentalists call “the precautionary principle”, a political

philosophy that advises keeping potential contaminants, and ostensibly other preventable risks, out of the environment until they are proven to be safe to ecological and public health. In short, non-environmentalists should stop reacting impulsively upon their unreflexive, fear-based urges, and adopt the “rational” (cultural) logic of environmentalism.

Szasz’s analysis is astute in many ways, and I am indebted to it for its role in calling my attention to the significance of analyzing seemingly non-environmental behavior in the context of environmental politics. But it leaves some important questions unanswered, namely why so many Americans turn to inverted quarantine in the face of collective environmental threat, and why the precautionary principle has failed miserably to move from the environmental movement into the mainstream, despite its apparent logic. What’s missing from this analysis is an understanding of the significance of emotion, and its role in human motivation in conjuncture. Sociologist Deborah Gould adopts the philosophical concept of affect to “preserve a space for human motivation that is nonconscious, noncognitive, nonlinguistic, noncoherent, nonrational, and predetermined—all qualities that I argue play a role in political action and inaction”. (2009:23). Emotion and affect, combined in the concept of emotional habitus, shape prepper’s attitudes, ideas about, and engagement with environmental risk.

We can see clues to this in the above exchange with Bailey, who, despite his claim to being almost entirely rational in his assessments of risk, adopts a number of diversionary tactics in order to avoid analysis of the question of collective risk and social change. Bailey clearly wishes social change was an option! He would like to live a life not inundated with risk! Yet when asked about the potential for social change, Bailey

responds in a way that is indicative of a feeling of powerlessness. For all the claims of self-control and individual empowerment, when I ask him about social change, Bailey takes himself out of the equation—he points to the inaction or duplicitousness of a number of social others, but fails to consider why he has not chosen to try to change the political problems he is clearly greatly affected by. Bailey’s identification as a libertarian, as well as some of his judgements of institutions and individuals, offers clues as to why Bailey is not joining his friend to camp out in Zuccotti Park. Bailey’s conservative politics are misaligned with the radical, anti-authority culture of Occupy, even if some of its critique appeals to him. And Bailey, like most of us, is emotionally attached to his culture. Prepping is an appealing solution to many Americans because it aligns with and validates cultural identities that they are emotionally attached to. I call this alignment between cultural ideals and emotional states “cultural attachment” and argue that is a central mechanism that explains why people adopt the cultural practices they do, given the wide range of options available.

Prepping, for Bailey and others like him, serves as a form of emotion management, in which individuals manage the discomfort that comes from living in risk society, by adopting practices that make them feel in control, autonomous, self-sufficient, and empowered. This practice is more appealing to them than, say, marching in a protest, standing on a street corner garnering signatures for a petition, phone canvassing, knocking on doors, or doing the hard, thankless, collective work of seeking political change. Emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency map onto pre-existing cultural values, ideals, and narratives, which makes adopting it emotionally more satisfying, comfortable, and pleasurable than adopting a practice that is less clearly aligned.

## Conclusion

In a culture that sees emotion and rationality as distinct and mutually exclusive, showing emotion is potentially a threat to status and power. This is especially true of emotions like fear, which belie vulnerability, a quality which is often portrayed as shameful. Yet risk society makes visible ever-present threats, and fear is a normal response to threat-detection. Prepping emerges as an emotion management strategy that allows preppers to maintain their sense of self via denial of fear, which is projected onto others, and then channeled into a productive, identity affirming activity such as being prepared. By claiming to be hyper-rational and strategic self, void of emotions that might undermine the security of a dignified self, preppers set themselves apart from both the perpetrators of the problems of risk society (greedy institutions and individuals who use them to amass power and wealth) and its victims (panicking, unprepared people who will give into the mob mentality of the marauding hordes).

As Margaret Somers writes, “ontological narratives are used to define who we are; this in turn can be a precondition for knowing what to do”. I document the ways that preppers use emotional management strategies as a form of defense mechanism, protecting their narrative identities which are tied into multiple, interlocking structures. The same cultural logics can be applied to different circumstances, as preppers make claims about themselves and their place in society in reference to (or in ignorance of) structures like settler-colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and racial hierarchies. All of these structures play a role in organizing information about what emotions can be felt and expressed, in what circumstances, by whom.

I argue that the threat posed to prepper subjectivity by risk society evokes what I call *cultural attachment*, a protective mechanism by which preppers work to minimize emotional threat to valued cultural schema. Culture may seem abstract or ephemeral, but its emotional power is derived from its symbolic ties to valued social bonds (Kahan et al. 2007). Joining in Norton's (Norton 2019) effort to synthesize micro-oriented cognitive models of culture and macro-oriented intersubjective systems models of culture (see also Patterson 2014), I propose integrating theories of emotion into cultural models on account of their utility in explaining *why* people adopt the cultural strategies that they do, within the context of the intersubjective cultural systems they move through.

By analyzing four key emotion management strategies that preppers rely on for identity confirmation and the solution to social problems that feel good, rather than threatening, I make the case that prepping is an emotion management strategy that reconciles ambivalence about modernity that preppers feel as a result of risk society. Prepping redirects emotional energy away from fear, which is socially costly for many preppers to express, and sublimates it into productive, positive, identity confirming activity. Sublimation of fear into prepping accompanies discursive rejection of fear, projection of difficult emotions like fear, panic, desire, and greed onto social others, and substantiates claims to rationality, a quality which is culturally held to be status boosting. This relationship between culture, emotion, identity and power helps explain why preppers renounce social movement participation despite potential alignment in social problem framing.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

Preppers perceive high levels of risk associated with modernity, even as they continue to embrace cultural schema whose historical roots derive from the modern social structures that produce the risk they anticipate. To better understand how prepping acts as an environmental practice, I posed the following research questions:

1. Why do preppers prep? And what is the significance of prepping to environmental politics, and citizen response to risk more broadly? I also address the following questions:
2. What are preppers' motivations and justifications for prepping? Why do they choose prepping instead of other practices?
3. How do preppers prep? What activities are people who "prep" doing?
4. Who preps?

To answer these questions, I turned to multi-sited ethnography, engaging in participant observation that covered both offline and online dimensions of prepper's social worlds, and conducted 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with preppers to learn more about their prepping practices. My study serves as an empirical investigation of the way a thought-community of contemporary Americans experience and navigate risk society. Beck (1992) argues that in risk society, industrialization produces unprecedented levels of risk, which societies are tasked with managing. Responding to risk becomes the focus of new forms of social organization, including new markets, new social movements, and new cultural practices, like prepping. Beck theorizes that new forms of movements would emerge but did not undertake empirical study of the phenomena.

By locating preppers in *risk society* (Beck 1992), a contemporary phase of the global, industrial capitalist economy and culture, I contribute to the empirical literature on risk society, documenting how one unique American sub-culture navigates their *risk*

*position* (ibid), a which develops in conjunction with their social structural locations, cultural attachments, and socio-emotional expectations for self and others. This study analyzes preppers in relation to environmental politics, one of several dimensions of risk that Beck identifies (Beck 2008). I locate preppers within an *environmental field*, a network of interconnected institutions, organizations, industries, agencies, and actors that shape the material organization of environmental goods and services of a society. Interlocking structures intersect to produce an environmental field marked by risk. I argue that, despite preppers' disidentification with environmentalist narratives, prepping is an environmental practice, one that emerges when preppers transpose the schema and resources of the past onto the imagined, apocalyptic future.

We might think of the scenarios that preppers weave as an act of imaginary world-building, in which they speculate about possible futures that differ markedly from the present. Science fiction writers and readers have long observed that the boundaries between science fictional worlds and reality are porous, as writers consider possible outcomes of present circumstances through story (Haran 2010; Haraway 1991, 2016; Lothian 2013; Wolf 2012). So too have sociologists documented the significance of stories to sociological plotlines, and the adoption of practices, as social actors use narrative to make sense of the actions of those around them, assess their situational circumstances, and respond in ways consistent with character identities and plots (Alexander and Smith 1993; Goffman 1959; Gould 2009; Hargreaves 2016; Norton 2014; Polletta 2009; Smith and Howe 2015; Somers 1994). For many preppers, the plot is a fundamentally tragic one, as they interpret the circumstances of risk society as outside of their control and power, even as they hold tightly to classic liberal ideals of personal

responsibility and freedom. Preppers situate themselves in a world of risk that they have no responsibility for creating, even as they claim ultimate responsibility for themselves, and demand that others do the same. The result is a catch-22. To acknowledge deep dependence on modern material and informational networks and flows, and the effects of structure on their lives, undermines their foundational belief in individual responsibility and thus power. To disavow that belief is to lose the guiding assumption upon which the whole story is built. Preppers deep commitment to cultural ideals of individualism, autonomy, responsibility for self, and psycho-emotional acts of control are embedded in their *ecological habitus*, the set of dispositions that structure the generation of their environmental practices (Bourdieu 1977; Kasper 2009).

Prepping emerges as the most culturally logical response to risk society in that it relies on ideals of self-interest and self-control that preppers are emotionally attached to. As research on identity protective cultural cognition shows, the way people make sense of risk is filtered through pre-existing cultural worldviews, that are significant not only for the internal consistency of their plotlines, but for the social attachments that they signify (Kahan 2012; Kahan et al. 2007; Kahan, Peters, et al. 2012). Worldviews do not emerge in a cultural vacuum, but tie people to a time, a place, and to other people; relationships they value. Information or ideas that challenge the schema that represent significant social bonds likely generates intense, negative emotions that must be managed in such a way that reconciles changing circumstances or new information with old ways of knowing and being in the world, without threatening valued relationships, including relationship with self. The stories we tell about social worlds include stories about who we are, and what it means to be a “good person” within this social world. These stories

are imbued with moral significance that may align with or challenge dominant moral codes that actors encounter from various institutions throughout social life.

### **The Double Bind**

Preppers are preparing to survive just about anything, but they feel caught in a double bind between dependence on institutions that make up the material networks of contemporary life, and distrust of the institutions that oversee the flow of goods and services that they rely on. Because of their distrust in institutions, they believe that in the event of an emergency, that emergency services are likely to fail, and that nobody will be help them. Preppers turn to individual practices of emergency preparedness and self-sufficiency in anticipation of this failure of public service.

Using scenarios as a form of storytelling to think through how they will survive disasters, preppers situate themselves in the role of the active, capable hero. They worry that most other people will fail to prepare, rendering them helpless victims who will either need rescuing, or who will turn violent and pose another layer of danger to preppers, who have taken personal responsibility to prepare. Preppers locate personal responsibility in the acts of emergency preparations and self-sufficiency, viewing continued reliance on institutions or other people as a mark of vulnerability and thus weakness. I document three typologies of prepping types, all of which orient towards different resolutions of the double bind. Emergency preppers focus exclusively on preparing for short-term emergencies, but generally expect that services will go back online after a short while. Survivalist or Doomsday preppers consider total societal collapse likely, and prepare to live completely off the grid, while also focusing heavily on emergency preparation, strategic defensive planning, and the possibility of violence.

Lastly, homesteader preppers focus most heavily on self-sufficiency, working to set up off-the-grid lifestyles in which they minimize reliance on institutions in the present, rather than just anticipating needing to do so in the future.

### **Landscapes of Risk**

Preppers' discomfort with modern life reveals their awareness of what I call landscapes of risk. Institutions that they are dependent on produce risk outside of preppers' control. This circumstance poses both an existential and a cultural threat. The existential threat is that of risk becoming reality, and thus harming or ending human life. This threat explains the focus on emergency preparedness, which revolves around storing goods that can sustain the body throughout injury, shock, illness, and loss of regular access to supplies. An imagined nuclear attack is fear-inducing because the reality of a nuclear attack is death, loss of loved ones, destruction of infrastructure and the disruption of supply chains that deliver necessities like food, water and energy. Preppers' concerns about future disaster begin to render visible facets of modern life that for many people remain invisible, such as the complex, finely tuned, bureaucratically managed supply chains, what Schlosberg and Coles call networks of material flows (Schlosberg and Coles 2015).

### **Dependence**

Dependence is made more uncomfortable by the recognition of difference within the networks that preppers rely on. This is made evident by John's reference to the striking, unionized longshoremen upon whom he depends for delivery of food goods in Idaho. Referring to these fellow citizens as "union commies" he expresses derision for people who, without prepping, he depends upon for food. This reveals a common prepper

concern over the qualities of interdependence that modern industrial society produces. Although preppers believe staunchly in individual freedom, they are uncomfortable with many of the choices he sees others make, such as the “choice” to continue depending on institutions, thus perpetuating the state of dependence that puts them at risk.

### **Ambivalence**

This tension reveals an ambivalence about modernity that preppers must reconcile. On the one hand, they believe strongly in the tenets of liberalism, the ideology that undergirds modern industrial development, and the precursor to neoliberalism, the basis of today’s dominant political economic policy. On the other hand, they dislike the levels of risk that modernity has produce and resent what they see as the decline in American exceptionalism, revealing a deep-rooted colonial sense of superiority underlying their beliefs. This is reflected in the navigation of invisible, everyday risks, such as toxics and chemicals embedded in their food, which cannot be protected against with guns, bunkers, or strategic defense plans. This reveals the difficulty of even knowing or assessing the full weight of risk faced without the mediating knowledge of institutions and experts that preppers distrust. My data suggests that preppers hold ambivalent positions about modernity that are not captured by environmental social movements. To understand how and why preppers respond to risk via prepping, I apply Bourdieusian theories of practice to their reflections of prepping as a practice.

### **The Environmental Field**

Habitus refers to embodied, durable, dispositions that dispose actors towards practices that align with the social structures in which they are embedded (Bourdieu 1977). Sewell intervenes to argue that Bourdieu’s theory of practice can be modified to

account for social change when actors transpose cultural schema onto new situations. I argue that preppers do this in response to risk society, modifying their ecological habitus to respond to risk without threatening their sense of self which is attune to the interlocking structures that shape their subjective experiences.

Preppers' environmental subjectivity is in a mid-range subject position, in the middle of intersecting status hierarchies—they are neither the power elite making the decisions that affect us, or the politically disenfranchised, poor or dispossessed—preppers draw from middle-class, white, settler-citizen, masculine dispositions (all contained in their ecological habitus) that inform the adoption of individual changes to their household arrangements, rather than exclusively internal work that brings their emotions into line with the social context. As an emotion management strategy, prepping alleviates difficult feelings about risk, replacing them with more pleasurable emotions such as calm, joy, and security, without requiring the adoption of additional risk (social + physical) that organizing for political change might bring. It is the relative privilege of preppers' intersecting statuses (whiteness, masculinity, citizenship, class-privilege) that provides preppers with what Bourdieu calls capital, and what I call resources (based on Sewell's extension of theories of practice into a theory of structure), that allow preppers to change their material circumstances in ways that leave them feeling safer, without any meaningful change to risk producing institutions.

### **Claims to Superiority**

Failing to realize dependence and adopt an alternative course (such as prepping) is perceived as a moral failing, shirking the responsibility to be independent. Those who fail to do so—the unprepared—are at fault, despite the structural circumstances that breed

dependence. Those who are unprepared are not only irresponsible, they are potentially dangerous. Preppers make use of a recurring narrative that I call the TEOTWAWKI narrative arc, which includes prediction of roving, panicking people, often led by criminals and bad-guys, who preppers believe will turn to violence after an initial disaster occurs and the SHTF (the Shit Hits the Fan). Soon after the SHTF, if people's needs are not met, preppers expect rioting, panicking and other calamities, which turns the disaster into The End of the World as We Know It (TEOTWAWKI). Embracing the cultural logic of neoliberalism that frames humans as inherently competitive, driven exclusively by self-interest, preppers believe that humans are "intrinsically self-centered" (Max). They invoke the logic of biological determinism to explain why communal social organization is physically impossible, justifying their decision to prioritize individual preparedness and to take care of themselves. This discourse is built on claims to superiority, which complement the narrative that "most people" are not aware of how bad contemporary circumstances have gotten and are not sufficiently prepared for disaster. While some preppers are subtle in their claims to superiority, others are explicit, making claims such as "I can change things, but I'm not a normal person. Many people can't. They're powerless" (John, see Chapter VI).

### **Cultural Attachment**

Preppers feel threatened by risk society but remain attached to cultural paradigms that are imbricated with the modern processes that produce it. Although preppers present themselves as hyper-rational, their practices are in fact informed equally by cognitive processing and emotion. In this chapter, I explore what I call *cultural attachment*, the emotional attachment that people have for certain cultural narratives and practices, and

the role cultural attachment plays as a structuring factor in the development of environmental practices. Emotions and affect are central to social and political life, shaping what Deborah Gould calls “political horizons”—attitudes within a collectivity about what is politically possible, desirable and necessary (2009:3). Preppers’ emotional habitus as marked by the over-valuation of rationality, disdain for excessive emotionality, and fear that others will not effectively “master” their emotions, thus increasing risk for those who have.

### **Emotional Management**

Prepping serves as an emotion management strategy that preppers adopt because it makes them feel better about the risk they can’t control by focusing their attention on things they can control—household level decisions and practices. Prepping is a habitual embodied practice that allows preppers to slowly modify their ecological habitus, their socially structured dispositions in relation to the environment, without effecting much change at the systematic level. Feeling discomfort about risk society, and its daily threats and potential major disasters, preppers adopt emotion management strategies that 1) alleviate distress, 2) maintain their social identities 3) minimize social risk. I identify four key strategies of emotional management that serve an identity confirmation role of preppers as rational, responsible, collected and in control. Those include denial of fear or emotionality more broadly, deflection of attention away from discussion of emotion, projection of difficult or negative emotions onto others, and sublimation, in which preppers redirect difficult emotions into a positive, pleasurable practice.

Because of preppers’ “narrative constitution of identity” as physically and emotionally independent, self-sufficient, rational, in control, and morally superior to

those who are not, emotions like fear are not easily expressed without threat to their understanding self, and their relationship to social others. Yet, steeped in a practice of identifying and anticipating threat, fear is a fundamental feature of preppers' affective ontology. Minimizing it, avoiding it, denying it, and preventing it from escalating into full blown emotion, thus threatening their identity as emotionally in control, preppers do cultural-emotional work to manage it instead. This work has environmental consequences, as it shapes the material practices that preppers adopt in response to risk. In managing their emotions in accordance with their cultural worldviews, they draw from familiar, and thus comfortable cultural logics that reinforce their understanding of the world and their position in it, a practice which they find calming, and reassuring. This protects them from feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, grief, or distress that arise when an attachment to a way of being is threatened.

### **Social Movement Renunciation and Individualized Response**

Finally, I took up the question of why preppers, who have concerns that align with various social movements with critiques of American political institutions, do not identify with or participate in social movements. I argue that their discouragement with institutions resembles what psychologists Carly Simons and Jennifer Freyd call institutional betrayal, which occurs when institutions that people depend on for safety and security fail to meet the needs of their dependents. Most preppers seemed to desire social change, but felt that it was impossible, or unlikely. While they saw themselves as agentic, they once again fell back on the narrative that “most people” did not want social change, were not willing to act, or just didn't know what it would take to get change done. This betrays a sense of political hopelessness that belies what Andrew Szasz calls “inverted

quarantine”—individualistic, mostly consumer based attempts made by citizens to protect themselves from social-environmental problems, rather than putting effort into procuring collective solutions that protect the public as a whole. While Szasz worries that inverted quarantine practices produce a sort of political anesthesia, I argue that feelings of political powerlessness precede inverted quarantine, and are one of its causes, not results. The problems of political apathy and social isolation is longstanding in American political culture (Eliasoph 1998) and is not limited to just citizen or consumer responses to environmental problems (Eliasoph 1997, 1999; Putnam 2000).

Self-sufficiency, individual responsibility, and thus the need to be prepared for all occasions emerge as the culturally logical response to risk that is generated by institutions that preppers distrust, but preppers, who occupy relatively privileged social statuses in intersecting hierarchical systems, also benefit in real ways from the structural status-quo. They carry this privilege into the cultural sphere of prepping, which has many hallmarks of what George Lipsitz calls the white spatial imaginary: “The white spatial imaginary idealizes “pure” and homogenous spaces, controlled environments and predictable patterns of design and behavior. It seeks to hide social problems rather than solve them...”(Lipsitz 2007)

Being individually prepared requires resources—despite preppers’ insistence that anyone can prepare, the bar for being truly “prepared” is high and costly, and ever shifting. Most preppers are privileged in ways that offer real material benefits—men earn more money than women, whites hold the majority of the nation’s wealth, and property owners own land that is considered theirs thanks to the legitimacy of the settler-colonial state’s violent attempted extirpation of Native Americans.

While preppers see themselves as independent, autonomous, and individualistic, their commitment to individualism is made possible by the erasure of structural differences that produce disparate life chances for people in varied social locations. Their commitment to individualism is made possible by the prominence of abstract liberalism, a key element to Bonilla-Silva's theory of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Abstract liberalism is a political philosophy that espouses equality for all while producing outcomes that favor white, property-owning, men. Individualism is one of the four key components of abstract liberalism that undergird dominant hierarchies by rendering them invisible.

Preppers are judgmental of "the unprepared", even as they insist that they are not racist, or uncaring. But there is a racial, classed element to the trope of the unprepared. The unprepared are more likely to be those on the margins. We know there are lots of people who are struggling to deal with disasters as they happen, or disasters that have already happened but have a long recovery time. Not because they are irresponsible, but because they are set up structurally to have less to start with. By ignoring structural imbalances that produce unequal opportunities and blaming (and sometimes shaming) the unprepared for their lack of preparedness, preppers invoke the privilege of turning away, focusing their attention not on the problems to be solved, but on the ways to personally weather the storm. In doing so, they reiterate and reinforce their commitment to individualism, self-sufficiency, and a limited sphere of personal responsibility that does not extend outward into the political.

## **Implications**

Traditional narratives of individualism are a “deep story” that Americans tell about themselves (Hochschild 2016). This story infuses our histories, our origin stories, and our contemporary understanding of political identity, on both sides of the aisle. It makes us feel powerful and in control, and maybe even a little righteous. It is a story that might not suit our current predicament though. Individualism is be falsely empowering. Even as it centers the autonomy of the individual, it also burdens the individual with ultimate responsibility, drawing attention away from institutional constraints and logics. In trying to make sense of risk society and the unparalleled risks that climate change and other forms of environmental degradation produce, individualism may leave us isolated and distressed, rather than politically empowered and connected.

The tension between individualism and collective well-being is a long-standing one that risk society, and climate change in particular, may be bringing to a breaking point. My works shows that preppers recognize their dependence on the environment and are concerned about problems that I categorize as environmental. In this way, preppers are challenging the status quo, and questioning some of the key tenets of modernity. The idea that humans are separate from, and better, than non-human nature, solidified as the dominant social paradigm during the Enlightenment, setting Europeans and Americans up to exploit the earth without shame.

There are many counter-cultural challenges to the dominant social paradigm—environmentalism being one of them. But most of them come from the radical left (Marxist and socialist movements, radical feminism, deep ecology and radical environmentalists, peace movements, etc.). Preppers by and large do not relate to any of

these movements. Activism and environmentalist frames do not make sense to them; they fall outside of the values and ideals that would incite cultural cognition, the alignment of new ideas with old in a way that is knowable and safe. The environmental practices we adopt must be somewhat consistent with our self-identities, which are rooted in our cultural worldviews. Because US environmentalism is rooted in liberal politics, it may be inaccessible to many people who do in fact care about the environment, but do not have culturally palatable language available to express it. Prepping allows people to act on their fears about institutional production of risk, without having to challenge the dominant culture, in which they are embedded.

But the problems that preppers are concerned about are largely social problems: climate change; nuclear disaster or war are politically avoidable; and instability in the economic system is not inevitable, but dependent on policy. Yet prepping is an individualistic practice that at best overlooks, and at worst disparages any hope for collective political solutions.

Although I am critical of prepping as a solution to risk, I also empathize with preppers themselves. As an environmental professional, I often feel frustration, anger, despair, and fear about the future. Being steeped in a culture of individualism makes it easy to default to isolation, and some of the solutions preppers turn to may feel appealing. But when prepping moves beyond basic emergency readiness into a mindset marked by an us vs. them mentality, it potentially serves to reproduce structural environmental inequality, which is generated by the very risk-producing institutions that preppers fear in the first place. Struggling to stay on the right side of a segregating process may initially be a self-protective strategy, but it ultimately plays into social processes that continue to

divide. Stark inequality leaves us all more vulnerable to risk, not less. If a critical mass of people turn to prepping, rather than processes of political and social change, prepping could easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy as increased stratification leads to instability that produces risks that then become reality.

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