
Liberal Prepping as Apocalyptic Eco-Religion

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Abstract: The term “prepper” or “survivalist” has long been associated with more conservative or politically right-leaning communities who have operated at the fringe of society for decades. Since the new millennium, this hobby of preparedness has increased and, most recently, shown a rise among liberal or left-leaning communities. This essay addresses the rise in liberal prepper culture not only as a political response to right-wing politics, but as a fear heightened by the realities of climate change and its impact on humanity, thus creating an eco-religion centred on ethical and moral responsibilities, with an overall apocalyptic hue.

Keywords: apocalypse, prepper, ecology, survivalist, climate change

The global pandemic of COVID-19 that swept the world in early 2020 thrust “prepping” a bit more into mainstream acceptability. Suddenly, stockpiling goods and sundries became everyone’s concern, along with a renewed interest in do-it-yourself projects, gardening, baking, homesteading, and crafts. The research in this paper precedes the COVID-19 crisis, and will resume after the worst of the pandemic has subsided (as one might expect, the discourse among prepping communities at time of writing this is presently focussed on the pandemic), but the timing reveals the precarious relationship between expected and unimagined apocalyptic eschatologies.

When people hear the term “prepper” or “survivalist,” they are likely to conjure images of home-grown militia men stockpiling water, food, and ammunition in their underground bunkers, women as homesteaders raising chickens and mixing herbal tinctures, or they might think of the fears popularized on survivalist sites. Many of the concerns behind these types of prepping stem from fear of a terrorist attack, a new civil war, the Second Coming of Christ, or other narratives that are consonant with American Conservative politics. Several researchers on these groups have underscored the white, male, Christian predominance of American prepper culture in particular (Michael F. Mills, Rachel Wagner, and Gwendolyn A. Foster to name a few).

There is another side to prepping culture, however—that of the “liberal prepper.”¹ While not completely out of sync with the concerns of their conservative counterparts, liberal prepper culture also strongly emphasizes climate change/disaster and agricultural collapse. This paper will address the rise in liberal prepper culture not only as a political response to right-wing politics, but as a fear heightened by the realities of climate change and its impact on humanity, thus creating an eschatological narrative that, while secular in nature, has hues of an eco-religion or spirituality centred on ethical and moral responsibilities—with an overall apocalyptic hue. I will begin with a broad introduction to the subject, followed by my survey data and analysis for a sociological approach, and conclude with an argument for why this can be seen as an apocalyptic eco-religion or movement. For this paper I am using preliminary analysis of data I collected via online surveys that ran Fall 2018 to Summer 2019 from over

140 respondents (supplemented by hundreds of posts across twelve different Facebook groups). This research will be part of a longer publication at a later date.²

What Is Prepping? A Brief Introduction

“Prepping” is the common term for what was formerly referred to as survivalist or doomsday preppers. The survivalist movement is characterized by self-reliance and preparation for disruptions in everyday existence—ranging from power loss and weather disasters, to societal collapse and food shortages. Survivalists typically stockpile food and supplies—and in recent times, weapons and ammunition—in preparation for a catastrophic event. Having knowledge of traditional or frontier crafts, such as finding water, growing and preserving food, or hunting are also valued. For many Americans who live in areas threatened by hurricanes, blizzards, or wildfires, the notion of having a generator, underground shelter, backup food and water, bug-out-bags, and so forth are just practical. While it could be argued that the lines are rather subjective between “practical preparation” and “doomsday prepping,” I am using the term “prepping” to refer to events that are closer to the “speculative” rather than “imminent.” This would include nuclear war, societal collapse, EMP, or extreme climate disaster. While one could make a strong argument for any of those occurrences as imminent, depending on the daily news frenzy, I will rely on statistical likelihood to distinguish such events from more commonplace scenarios such as preparing for seasonal weather disasters.

Modern day survivalist movements can be traced to the 1950s, when the threat of nuclear war was central to political discourse and civil defence drills were common. The Cold War prompted the building of fallout shelters and “duck and cover” drills in public spaces. This mindset continued into the 1960s and 1970s, with added fears about fuel and food shortages. The fear of hyperinflation and monetary collapse inspired many Americans to save silver coins and gold bullion.

In 1980 an ecologist named Bruce D. Clayton published *Life After Doomsday*, an influential booklet for the survivalist movement that once again highlighted the perils of nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Rachel Carson’s famous *Silent Spring* (1962) was reprinted and made a popular resurgence, as well as Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). And of course, the 1990s Clinton era brought the fears of Y2K, along with added threats of cyber-attacks and questions on how to deal with our increased reliance on Internet and digital technologies. More recently, 9/11 was a wakeup call for many people who saw the threat of terrorism as a real and likely possibility that could increase in frequency on US soil. Around this same time in 2001, the term “prepper” is thought to arise, when it became a search term on Google. Reportedly, it was not recorded as a common search term prior to that time ([History Cooperative 2019](#)).³

In the new millennium, we have indulged in fear on a commercial level. Even more than before, the newspaper motto of “if it bleeds, it leads” has become the foundation for sensationalist journalism, which relies on online views and likes, as well as sharing the most fantastic headlines on social media. Television shows on History Channel and National Geographic were eager to speculate about possible disasters that could end humanity’s reign on Earth. This created a perfect storm for a show like *Doomsday Preppers* (2012–2014), which capitalized on reality television sensationalism and our morbid fear of the end of the world as we know it. *Doomsday Preppers* was a reality show that showcased the extreme side of the movements in a rather sensationalist manner—although the show proved to be a ratings hit and further popularized prepper movements into mainstream view. As Gwendolyn Foster notes:



Watching *Doomsday Preppers*, one is inclined to notice certain formulaic tropes, including the section when the prepper family patriarch unveils the weapon arsenal. Who are they arming themselves against? Zombies, aliens, the government? No, they are arming themselves against other people. They are armed to the teeth against any intruder, and odds are that any intruder would be another American. In this way, we can see how the military-industrial complex has come home to roost right here in the USA. Preppers are armed against reason, armed against other American civilians. Prepping is demonstrably related to a lack of empathy for others as much as it is related to the pathology of ethnocentrism. It is by nature selfish, macho, reclusive and paranoid; the inverse of the hippie commune lifestyle. (Foster 2014, 27)

This “lack of empathy” is indicative of many prepping strategies visible on television shows like *Doomsday Preppers*, and is also something observed when combing social media communities with more traditional or conservative hues: “us” vs “them,” hoarding for one’s family rather than a community strategy, and a very “me and mine” agenda. (In fact, one of the conservative boards I belong to recently changed their Facebook banner to an image that says “Be You. Do You. For You.”) Among liberal communities, there appears to be more effort to create networks that could pull together in commune-like groups to share supplies and skills. While *Doomsday Preppers* might be entertaining and possibly informative, it exploits the fears of post-9/11 America: distrust in the government, fear of the Other, and perceived necessitation of vigilante law. Compassion and trust will likely get you killed; humans will always exploit the weak. Furthermore, like the Wild West of both historical and popular imagination, the idea that society needs no government other than local good guys with guns is problematic.

In the last decade in particular, more attention has been given to survivalist/prepping groups as social, cultural, and/or political phenomenon. The scholarship on prepping culture is a bit uneven, with focus ranging across topics such as masculinity in survivalism (Kelly 2016), US-specific (Foster 2014; Kabel and Chmidling 2014; Mills 2018, 2019), connections to white supremacy (Crockford 2018; Lamy 1996), marketing fear in the media (Foster 2016; Mills 2018), bunker building (Garrett 2020a), and recent articles on prepping during the pandemic (Bounds 2020). There is, however, little scholarship on the relationship between prepping and ecology/climate change (such as, Wuthnow 2010), although popular news media articles that highlight preppers within communities prone to weather disasters are becoming more frequent in light of increased wildfires and hurricanes.

One of the distinguishing features between liberal and conservative preppers that I found in my research was not the possession/use of firearms, as one would suspect, but that climate change or ecology should be considered at all as potential apocalyptic scenario. For this reason—and with the overarching emphasis of “living off the land” that is found across liberal prepper boards—I am focussing on this aspect of liberal prepping as an interesting detail that opens up potential for eschatological narratives that involve both the environment and the fear of its demise.

Who Is Prepping?

Although there have been few comprehensive surveys and ethnographies done on preppers, estimates are that approximately 160 million Americans (over 65%) have recently purchased or already own some kind of survival gear.⁴ Of two thousand people surveyed by global research firm Pureprofile in 2017, 37% always had survival items on hand in case of emergency, suggesting the more pragmatic approach for preparedness.⁵ Although Boomers and GenXers may have a more intimate lived history with the Cold War and recessions, it would

appear that Millennials are more keen to be prepared, more than twice as likely to spend up to US\$400 on survival gear than Boomers.

Prepping is also predominantly an American pastime,⁶ where interest in prepping is large enough to sustain an entire industry and network of prepping conventions (Mills 2018, 1). R. K. Prepper Shows, which feature firearms, hold ten to twelve shows per year around the country, Prepper Camps and Prepper Con offer annual events that span several days, and there are a number of survivalist expos in various states throughout the year that offer outdoor training and convention centres filled with supplies for purchase. Why the prepping phenomenon is a particularly American phenomenon is not certain, although one could speculate on the cultural emphasis we have on our mythic frontier narratives, cowboy culture, military prowess, and overall affluence to spend on such hobbies. Not surprisingly, demographics of preppers across the board have typically been male, white, upper-to-middle class, and Christian, but my research suggests this is changing to some extent—more women across both conservative and liberal groups that I observed, more religious diversity among the liberal groups (I will share those statistics later in this article), but still very white and middle class. As for reasons why Americans prep, Michael F. Mills states that the phenomenon is “underpinned by *broad, uncertain anxieties* towards numerous non-apocalyptic disaster risks (including terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and pandemic diseases)” (2018, 2; emphasis in original).

Mills notes, however, that it may be an oversimplification to equate survivalist movements to right-wing politics. While survivalist and prepper movements do have connections to some of America’s more extreme groups such as *posse comitatus*-themed militias⁷ or the Ku Klux Klan—as well as Tim McVeigh, David Koresh, and Randy Weaver, all of whom were advocates of survivalism—Mills argues that survivalist movements do appeal to anti-government and white supremacist ideologies. He further argues, however, that one can point to broader anxieties that are deep seated in the American psyche, for which the election of a liberal, Black president was merely a trigger (Mills 2019).

Mills’s fieldwork is an important contribution in a very under-researched area in which I too am working, and I generally concur with his analyses. I do feel, however, that the racial component must not be underrated. The general and vague language used by conservative preppers of fear that “America is taking a wrong turn” or desire to “make American great again”⁸ is absolutely connected to xenophobia and racism: anti-immigration, prioritization of (evangelical) Christian ideologies, and imagined racial purity of the Nation. At the time Mills did his research, Barack Obama was the president and we did not yet have Donald Trump for comparison. Thus, when one of his research subjects gives a general critique that then-President Obama is not up for the job requirements of Commander-in-Chief, it is given a fair hearing as a valid concern. The subject says: “We’ve got Obama golfing, not hitting his security briefings. That is a man with no class. That is a man who proves he is very narcissistic and doesn’t give a rat’s ass about this country or anybody in it, except for himself” (Mills 2019, 17). But since that same scrutiny has been entirely abandoned for President Trump, it highlights the lens of racial bias to which Obama was subjected.

On a more subtle and intersectional level, my ethnography reveals a predominance of white preppers—even among the liberal end of the spectrum—which may be connected to economics more than racial prejudices among prepper groups.⁹ However, both conservative and liberal preppers rank “economic collapse” among the highest fears and motivation for prepping—the difference may be in what they perceive as factors contributing to such an event: Migrants taking American jobs? Socialist policies? Greater divisions between the one-percenters and everyone else? Monopolies? Unions? Green energy? Thus, even the common

ground fears of a “downward economic spiral” may be sedimented in greater fears that engage other ideologies about nativism, race, privilege, and so on.

It is also worth noting the gender archetypes present in various prepping cultures. Easily another body of research entirely, two things can be briefly highlighted here. First, that “doomsday prepping” has an interesting relationship with ideas of masculinity: militant, protector (of family, of country), survivalism, and archetypal “male” qualities such as toughness and aggression. Casey Ryan Kelly’s work on apocalyptic manhood investigates this more thoroughly, noting that for doomsday preppers “the future is indefinite, but hegemonic masculinity—aggression, self-reliance, stoicism, competitiveness—remain necessary” (Kelly 2016, 95). Kelly further notes that the perceived loss of male privilege also contributes to this crisis of masculinity—something which has been prevalent in Trumpian political rhetoric as well.

The other observation about gender in prepping I would like to note is from personal observation of the dozen or so Facebook groups I belong to, which is the discourse across the various prepper communities about “homesteading” skills: soap making, gardening, sewing, herb lore for medicinal use, canning, baking, and other so-called frontier skills that traditionally belonged to women. These skills made a curious revival during the first few months of COVID-19 quarantine; in fact, baking bread and canning were so popular, there were reported shortages of both flour and of canning jars throughout 2020.¹⁰ Among the liberal communities these skills are celebrated more than firearm proficiency and bunker-building and, although traditionally female-dominated, male community members also discussed honing these talents. Among conservative communities, these areas seem more strictly relegated to women and are rarely discussed, although there are plenty of women on the conservative prepper boards. Again, these are fascinating and worthwhile explorations that I will expand on in my larger research project.

The Myth of the Liberal Prepper

One might ask why liberal preppers would even use the term “prepper” when it is so loaded with stereotypes that might be seen as negative: paranoid, militant, extreme. I would argue—from both my own self-identification with this term and from the sentiments expressed in the liberal prepping groups on Facebook—that there is a certain pleasure in defying the stereotype. Liberal preppers are subverting the typical *Doomsday Preppers* representation while at the same time bringing it into more mainstream discourse. The significant increase in community members on the prepper boards that I saw in 2020 reflected the COVID-19 crisis,¹¹ but also demonstrate an eagerness and willingness to learn these skills and belong to a like-minded community. Thanks to the pandemic and the run of severe hurricanes and wildfires in 2020, I would speculate that most people in the US see some merit in having Bug-Out-Bags, backup generators, stockpiles of food and sundries, medical knowledge, or other region-specific preparations. It is no longer quite as fringe as it was even few years ago.

Yet, *Business Insider* ran an article in 2019 titled “Doomsday Preppers are Thinning Out across the US, and It May Be Because President Trump Quiets their Fears” (Brueck 2019). According to this article, prepper-related businesses claim to have decreased sales in the Trump era, due in no small part to his ability to allay fears held by his ultra-conservative followers. No longer in the era of “Obamageddon,” traditional preppers who had increased expectations of apocalypse are calmer now with Trump in office. The article states “Data backs this up,” referring to the downturn in sales. Notably, the number of survivalist and prepper conventions has decreased annually.

My immediate response to this article is one of disagreement, and I think my position is backed by the simple fact that so-called “liberal preppers” operate on the fringes of the already-fringe community of traditional preppers. Aside from the persistent social stigma associated with prepping culture,¹² many liberal preppers—particularly those who have been interviewed by the press or are visible moderators of social media sites—have been harassed and even threatened by conservative preppers who see themselves as true “patriots” and liberal preppers as “snowflakes.” From the data I have gathered, and the increase of liberal prepper communities on Facebook, Trump inadvertently initiated a new wave of prepper culture—suggesting an increase—at least in certain demographics, contrary to what the *Business Insider* article suggests.

“Political fear of the left sells,” the article concludes. Certainly, gun and ammunition sales went up during the Obama era, and concealed handgun permit applications were at all-time highs after the 2008 election. Notably, Obama received an “F” from the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence for running away from gun control on every issue it scored: background checks, guns in public, the federal assault weapons ban, standing up to the gun lobby, and so forth (O’Brien 2010). Yet, Obama was seen as hostile towards gun owners, and the firearms industry enjoyed record breaking sales as a result. National Rifle Association (NRA) CEO Wayne LaPierre, made the following claims at Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington, D.C.:

Lip service to gun owners is just part of a massive Obama conspiracy to deceive voters and hide his true intentions to destroy the Second Amendment during his second term. We see the president’s strategy crystal clear: Get re-elected and, with no more elections to worry about, get busy dismantling and destroying our firearms’ freedom, erase the Second Amendment from the Bill of Rights and excise it from the U.S. Constitution (Fox, Levin, and Fridel 2018, 286).

Gun sales have gone down since Trump’s election, despite his blatant support of NRA and pro-gun-for-self-defence rhetoric (Mukherjee 2017). Therefore, if we mark firearm ownership as central to the prepping culture, then indeed an argument can be made for a decline.

Perhaps a better indicator of the increased prepper culture in the US can be found in the food industry that caters to it. “Since approximately 2007/8, preserved food companies have reported as much as 708% increase in revenue, while the personal preparedness industry’s annual worth has (more broadly) been estimated to have grown to half a billion dollars” (Mills 2018, 2; also see Murphy 2012; Martin 2012). Freeze dried food sales are expected to increase by US\$20 billion between 2019 and 2025, largely due to the increased longevity of storage and improved techniques in preservation (Pulidindi and Prakash 2021). There are other indicators that long-term storage foods have increased: My Patriot Food supply says sales tripled with the 2016 election, Legacy Foods said sales were up 300% at that time as well (Popken 2016). Freeze dried food and MRE type meals can be readily found in stores like Walmart and Costco. Amazon has a “prepper supplies” recommendation page now based upon the top fifteen rated products, as well as a list of top 100 books on prepping for those new to the culture.

A new study from the United Kingdom, however, finds that the ebb and flow of conservative versus liberal politics has less to do with the increase in American prepping than previously thought:

Researchers interviewed preppers from 18 U.S. states and asked about their motivations for stockpiling food and supplies. The results indicated that, although most did seem to be conservative and fear liberal policies, the main reason behind their motivations was the overall sense

of fear currently dominating U.S. culture across a variety of media channels. Most Americans can't seem to log online or turn on the television without being hit by a grim view of the future being reported or speculated on (Anderer 2019).

No longer do conservatives have the monopoly on fear, but Trump's policies instilled new fears among those who did not support him, particularly around his negligence to address the climate crisis, his engendering of hate speech and violence against non-white, non-Christian, and anti-Trump citizens, and his inability to shore up the defects already riddling social support infrastructures, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA, whose weaknesses were revealed during Hurricane Katrina), Medicare, and the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA, undercut repeatedly thereby increasing safety risks).

While one could make the argument that liberal preppers have always existed, and that social media has only made them more visible in recent years, there is strong evidence that they have *increased* in the last few years—coinciding with the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Many of the Facebook groups dedicated to liberal preppers were formed around this time, which I suggest was due to anticipation of or in the wake of the election:

- (a) *Liberal Preppers—Everyone Welcome, No Religious Talk!* (749 members) created on 10 February 10 2016;
- (b) *Liberal Preppers* (789 members) created on 29 October 29 2016;
- (c) *Liberal Prepping and Homesteading Survival* (481 members) created 12 November 12 2016;
- (d) *The Liberal Prepper* (4,084 members) created on 1 December 1 2016;
- (e) *Prepping for Liberals* (1493 members) created on 27 February 27 2017.¹³

The assessment that there has been an increase in liberal prepping, and not merely a coincidental rise in virtual community organization, is backed up by many of the respondents of my survey (methodology noted in next section) who noted political anxieties as one of the reasons they got into prepping (Note: quotes are exactly as typed in survey, including grammatical errors):

- (a) Fear. The election of Trump. Threats of uprisings or war. Disgust. Wanting to be ready for whatever;
- (b) General decline of the United States and its infrastructure. Waiting on the next global pandemic;
- (c) General distrust of government. The decline in civility among Americans. The general acceptance of racist behaviours and words of government officials, thus emboldening the general populace that was inclined towards this mindset;
- (d) Always concerned about if things go bad. Then Trump got elected and that really concerned me. We live in a hurricane zone so prep for that;
- (e) The fact that Trump was elected PO(TU)S;
- (f) The weather sucks. The government sucks. People suck. 'nuff said;
- (g) Having children, the election of an inept and immoral president (trump), and learning about the Cascadia subduction zone (I live east of the Cascades in Oregon);

- (h) Being in the military; seeing how quickly society can deteriorate. No faith in current administration to be able to handle a seriously catastrophic event;
- (i) The world and currently, the USA;
- (j) Donald Trump, climate change;
- (k) Trump presidency. Poor economic predictions. Having two very small children to care for. Localized weather events (tornados, winter storms, flash flooding). Frequent power outages (high wind area);
- (l) The “election” of Trump as President. We have no faith in that he understands average people or that he will make decisions to make our lives better. He does not know how to govern. So we are concerned that he will not staff or fund safety net programs;
- (m) Trump’s election;
- (n) Trump, global warming;
- (o) Started as response to 2016 election, a way to cope with hopelessness. As our climate changes more and more, it seems practical to have a minimum of things around to prepare for water shortages, leaving a disaster, etc.

While not the dominant reason for starting to prep, the 2016 presidential election was one of the motivators, just as Obama’s election served as a motivator and contributed to the boost in conservative peppers and an increase in gun sales in 2008 and 2012 ([Minitier 2016](#)). Interestingly, for liberal preppers the political anxieties were often paired with increased concerns about climate change, which could be seen as a parallel threat or as intimately connected with government policies.

Data and Methodology

Projects like this are now possible with the high visibility of online communities and public forums, such as Twitter, as well as digital surveys. Digital ethnography was warily regarded in the first decade of the World Wide Web, but has come to be accepted as not only viable, but as a necessary part of studying any community, phenomenon, or discourse in the humanities. I would strongly argue that digital methodologies are especially crucial for any scholarship on contemporary issues, politics, or popular culture. As Christine Hine has observed, one of the critiques of ethnography in general has been how the presence of the researcher affects the subject being researched—something digital ethnography largely is able to avoid ([Hine 2015](#)).

Of course, there are discursive challenges to digital ethnography, largely because of the highly curated self-presentation, anonymity, and potential for rhizomic effects of multi-site posting and quoting ([Markham 2005](#)). Even as an observer in a digital space such as a Facebook group, which is more curated and private than Twitter, for instance, the issue of neutrality or presence of the ethnographer is not resolved simply because there is a degree of anonymity. As I discuss in a moment, my mere presence on one conservative board was not welcome, and my views deduced quickly merely by looking at my public profile, which reveals pages I have “liked” or follow and groups to which I belong. This necessitated the subterfuge of creating an alternate identity, which raises ethical question about representation. As an observer only, it could be argued that this was necessary ethnographer’s camouflage, whereas posing as a particular identity and then interacting with subjects might be more disingenuous.

But it also raises a question about the impulse to roleplay and performative identity online, and if this affects something like posted opinions within a closed group or even survey taking.

Surveys are effective for both quantitative (such as demographics) and qualitative (descriptive, for example) data gathering, and have been discussed as important tools for scholars to employ today (see [Campbell and Altenhofen 2016](#); [Hooley and Weller 2016](#)). The ethics of using a semi-public forum, depending on privacy settings, like Facebook have been discussed by [Sally Baker \(2013\)](#) and [Roxana Willis \(2019\)](#). Facebook in particular is the most ubiquitous social media platform in the world,¹⁴ making it appealing across generations and social strata. The ability to control privacy settings to some degree—for those who know how to use filters—makes it more appealing for group organization than no-restraints public platforms like Twitter, Tumblr, or Reddit.

My data is coming from two sources: 1) an online survey given through a call for respondents across a number of social media platforms, and 2) data I have gathered in social media prepper groups. Much of the data is gleaned from Facebook in particular, but this is not because I was limited in my social media outreach. As a platform, Facebook appears to have the most organized and robust network for liberal preppers, compared to other popular social media message boards like Reddit. By contrast, when looking at Reddit's various subreddit groups for prepping/prepper related topics, the subreddit *r/prepping* had 8, 500 members, *r/preppers* 121,000 members, *r/collapse* 160,000 members—and it is fair to assume that not every member of these groups are “conservative”—but the *r/liberalpreppers* subreddit group had merely sixteen members. I concluded that if there were liberal preppers who favoured Reddit as an information-sharing and community-building platform, that they would be in that group or they would be silent about being liberal. Therefore, Reddit was not considered to be a site for liberal prepper community-building.

In fact, there was evidence of open hostility on Reddit even to the idea of liberal prepping. One thread on the *r/preppers* subreddit posted October 2019 asks, “Any liberal preppers out there? And if so, do they tend to see prepping as a communal activity instead of something done by lone individuals?” A good question, I might note.¹⁵ The thread was locked by moderators soon afterwards because of high troll activity, many of which included racist or threatening comments. Most of the comments were deleted by the time I got to the post, suggesting they were particularly nasty.¹⁶ There were a few notable observations; in particular, I liked one person's comment, “There's a lot of overlap in walking the walk between all three communities, but the talk is different,” that is to say, what conservative preppers, liberal preppers, survivalists, eco-communes, and so forth are doing shares quite a bit in common, but the discourse within these groups—and the motivations/expectations—are quite different.

I made a sincere effort to get into more politically diverse prepper groups on Facebook, including a few very conservative ones—not to be a voyeur so much as to get a balanced perspective. Two conservative leaning, but overall middle of the road (that is, the moderator banned political discussions) accepted me and I still belong to them. Two more overtly radical groups accepted my request to join, only booting me within forty-eight hours of joining and before doing any participation other than “like” a few posts—presumably because moderators looked at my Facebook page, saw I belonged to a number of liberal prepping groups, and decided I was there as an outsider lurking (not entirely wrong). This sort of gatekeeping, however, reveals a sort of us-versus-them mentality, where those who do not identify as having the same ideals as the other members of the group are excluded from the conversation. I should note that the same goes for many of the liberal boards, which have been set up as a safe space to discuss prepping as a liberal (especially due to the virulence they receive from the other side of the political spectrum) and therefore will not admit people who have obvious devotion to

Trumpian politics and Make America Great Again rhetoric. Based on observations thus far, it seems that the threat of a liberal lurking on conservative boards is that they may write or report on it; the threat of a conservative on a liberal board is a fear of trolling, or incendiary/threatening language may be directed at a user.

From Fall 2018 through Summer 2019, I ran an open survey that was linked across a number of Liberal Prepper communities (using Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter) and had 143 respondents (all in the US, except five UK respondents). Not surprisingly, the respondents were predominantly white (89%), from a multi-person household (only 20% reported living alone), and between ages 35–54 (80%). Among the Liberal Prepper respondents, however, women respondents dominated men (76%), and two respondents identified as non-binary.

One of the first open ended questions was, “What got you into ‘prepping?’” Survey respondents were able to give free written responses of any length; answers below are primary reasons as identified through these responses (Table 1):

It is worth noting that “general post-disaster preparedness” (second highest) was almost always about personally surviving/witnessing something like an ice storm that took our power for days, a severe hurricane, flooding, earthquake, for example. While there was a separate category called “climate change anxieties” which emphasized a more explicit eco-based fear, these responses to the general post-disaster preparedness can also be understood as “climate concern.”

The acronym used for an event that causes one to shift from merely preparing for disaster to actual survival mode is SHTF—Shit Hits the Fan. The likelihood of climate concern related SHTF scenarios was not top of the list for liberals (like conservatives, a general fear of societal collapse reigns supreme), but it was a much higher concern than their political opposites.

Table 1 “What got you into prepping?” Qualtrics survey, Gittinger 2019

41	General pragmatism (“we wanted to make sure we could take care of our family”)
24	General post-disaster preparedness
14	Trump’s election, or “current administration”
12	Political anxieties (infrastructure, economic, global)
10	Family/spouse are preppers
10	Scifi/speculative fiction or apocalypse show inspired them
9	Climate change anxieties
6	Farm/ranch/homestead background
5	Religious/Church encouraged
2	Obama
2	Y2K
2	Desire to limit carbon footprint, care for nature (i.e. off grid living)
1	Health concerns/access to medicine
1	Parallels current events with biblical end times
1	Works in prepping field/industry
1	pandemic
1	Can’t remember why started prepping

Across more conservative Facebook groups, climate change and extreme weather scenarios were not mentioned once out of the 166 topic starters/posts sampled here. Comparatively, climate concerns were the topic of no less than 18 posts out of 214 across the liberal prepping boards, accounting for 8% (Table 2):

Looking at a number of Prepper Facebook pages, one can see a sample of the kinds of posts found on each site. This data was collected from a four-month period (October

Table 2 Identifying and categorizing posts/thread starters by topic across eleven different Facebook pages between January 2020, going back as far as October 2019 (depending on frequency of posting—some boards have 20 posts a day, others have 2). COVID-19 had not quite hit the news yet when this tally was done, which would have skewed the numbers towards “medical” for certain.

FB Topic starter/ Discussion post	Self-proclaimed “Liberal Prepper” FB groups (4)	Neutral, with mix of right and left (4)	Conservative FB prepper groups (3)
General strategies and survival tips	52	34	34
Product reviews and gear questions*except guns	34	34	23
Medical Q’s or information	32	28	14
Climate change/weather disasters	23	7	0
How-to or building (cabin, well, fire starters)	13	15	21
Gardening or growing	14	2	5
Politics and news *most boards prohibit, but vague political views tolerated	15	15	18
YouTube videos and podcasts	11	1	6
Humour (jokes, memes)	10	19	9
Food (storage, preservation)	7	27	1
Prep for violence or civil unrest specifically	0	14	20
Mental health	3	1	0
Guns (about laws, recommendations, reviews, and so on)	1	5	37
Other (personal introduction or pictures of bug out bags, skill sharing, questions about pets)	45	43	32
For sale *note this is prohibited on most boards	2	1	1

2019–January 2020). One can see certain trends in posting, although the politics of any given moment might inspire a wave of one type of post or another (for example, new gun legislation, a natural disaster, or terrorist attack). There are, however, identifiable broad strokes that can be deduced from this data.

Gun discussions are largely absent from liberal prepper boards, although there are entire boards for “liberal gun owners.” Perhaps the owning of a gun and discussing it is seen as political on the liberal boards, and therefore banned, while not as controversial on a conservative board. Thus, it would be misleading to conclude that many liberal preppers do not possess firearms; rather, they either do not feel the need to show it off, or they may actively participate in discussions in separate boards dedicated solely for that topic, acknowledging firearm ownership as highly politicized.

Stories about climate change, or discussions about extreme-weather preparedness were talked about much more frequently on liberal boards. The mere suggestion that climate change should be a consideration in disaster planning and “bugging out” was met with hostility on the conservative boards. I have seen similar responses when people have posted links to scientific articles that discuss climate change as well—even in response to the California or Australia wild fires—and they are often met with abusive language or accusations of “fake news” from those who come from the more right-wing perspectives.

The “neutral” boards were not expressly liberal or conservative in their brand, due in large part to having very strict policies about posting anything political. Analysis of the rhetoric and looking at members’ avatars, however, it was apparent that a majority of the participants on those boards fell into conservative camps.

All three groupings shared the highest post topic/theme of offering general advice, from building fires or shelters, trapping animals, to “survival hacks” and plant identification. All three groupings also had a lot of product reviews and discussion about various items one could purchase for their prepping needs. The “Other” category included pictures of one’s Bug-Out-Bags, storage systems, or property. People also often posted asking where other prepper were in order to find a community. Skill-sharing (canning, knitting, tool sharpening, for example) was also often a topic.

Returning to the survey given to the liberal preppers, the speculation of most likely disaster was also revealing. Again, this is prior to the COVID-19 outbreak (Table 3):

As noted earlier, economic and societal collapse is the dominant concern among liberal preppers, just as it does among their conservative counterparts. However, environmental disasters and climate change related disasters ranked fourth, fifth, and eighth. I argue that this reveals a heightened awareness of our environment and the health of the planet—as revealed by weather patterns, pollution, and potential disruptions in food chain—that is largely absent, if not hostilely challenged, throughout conservative prepper communities. This suggests an apocalyptic eschatology that includes environmental considerations.

Eschatology, Eco-Religion, and Prepper Culture

By its very nature, prepping culture is eschatological. The entire point of prepping is to prepare for an event that qualifies as TEOTWAWKI—The End Of The World As We Know It. Prepping in the US participates in the apocalyptic mythos of White American history, which has been present from the landing of the first Europeans through contemporary popular culture.¹⁷ The apocalyptic American mythos was formed from Christian understandings of the Second Coming of Christ. While still at play in contemporary culture (for example, Harold Camping predicting the Second Coming back in 2011), much of the apocalypticism we now

Table 3 Multiple choice answers from 143 respondents to the question: “At your most serious consideration, what do you think is the most likely TEOTWAWKI (The End Of The World As We Know It) scenario?”

29	Collapse of society, political unrest, civil war
29	Collapse of economic infrastructure
26	EMP or electrical grid down
19	Environmental/Climate disaster
11	Major natural disaster (that destroys part of food supply, caldera event, and so on)
8	Nuclear war
7	Pandemic
5	Series of events or natural disasters
4	Attack from foreign power (cyber terrorism, e.g.)
4	I don't foresee a SHTF scenario (though two noted it was ordained in the Bible)
1	Asteroid

see is more secular in nature, and is usually found in popular culture. However, as Shayna Sheinfeld has argued (2020), even much of the secular apocalyptic content in American culture derives from an originally protestant Christian (and white) base.

The majority of the survey respondents (41 respondents, 30.8%) identified as some form of Christian (including Jehovah's Witness and Mormon). Marking a departure from the “conservative” preppers, these self-identified liberal respondents also drew from less mainstream religious identities such as “Spiritual, New Age, or Pantheist” (7.5%) and 53 respondents (39.8%) identified as either Atheist, Agnostic, or “not religious.” In the “other” category, some self-identified with diverse spiritual combinations such as “Buddhist-Wiccan” or “Humanist Atheist.” Although living in a “culturally Christian” country like America, liberal preppers had a much broader religious self-identification than conservatives, and several of the boards explicitly discouraged religious talk.

How might we consider liberal prepping culture as exhibiting characteristics of a sort of apocalyptic religion? As anyone in the field of religious studies can attest to, there are numerous definitions of “religion.” From Durkheim's “social phenomenon” to Geertz's “system of symbols,” religion has been considered through a number of lenses and theoretical models. There are a few in particular I felt that resonated with the present topic at hand. First, Paul Tillich says, “Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life” (1963, 4). This broad definition posits that any concern or driving interest that seems central to our very existence can be understood as “sacred,” perhaps allowing for models of religion that engage secular, pragmatic, or primal matters. Ecology would certainly fall into this category for many people, who see our relationship to the planet as the “ultimate concern.”

The second quote I would like to point to is perhaps more critical, made by a contemporary of Freud, psychoanalyst Otto Rank. He stated that, “All religion springs, in the last analysis, not so much from fear of natural death as of final destruction” (1941, 208). That is to say, it is not merely our own cessation that terrifies us, but the possible cessation of all things.

As a final point, I would like to point to Sarah Ertelt who asks and argues:

Why haven't we seen significant progress toward mitigating climate change in the last twenty years? My answer to this question comes from a Religious Studies perspective: the apocalyptic fears surrounding nuclear winter influenced emerging discourse about anthropogenic climate change, causing climate change to be seen as apocalyptic as well; climate change fatalism, born out of the secular apocalyptic, continues to function in American society today as a secular apocalyptic religion. (Ertelt 2018, 6)

Therefore, prepping is motivated in part by an eschatological fear, and the culture that emerges from these fears begins to resemble a sort of apocalyptic religion. Based on the data collected among liberal preppers so far, I would like to tentatively propose a new definition, a conflation of, Tillich's and Rank's definition of religion, that has potential for defining the apocalyptic eco-religion that is emerging: *An apocalyptic eco-religion sees as its ultimate concern the end of all life—a destruction of the world that is not natural, but rather a result of ecological disasters which are the product of a disregard for the planet and its inhabitants.* That is to say, ecological and climate change anxieties are concerns that are *glocal*—an inter-relation of the immediate, local region with the wider global impacts that connect in ways that impact us as human beings in our lifetimes.

Despite the religious eschatological hues that the prepping communities may reveal, these can also be argued to be secular apocalyptic movements. Robert Joustra and Alissa Wilkinson have described the “politics of apocalypse” as revelations about who we are, our relationships to people, and how we might perceive our lives to end. These revelations, they argue, are secular:

Whether they involve an actual apocalypse (*Walking Dead*-style) or more of an existential one, they're in a universe where there is nothing up there beyond ourselves, and therefore no moral order that transcends whatever we decide on. [. . .] . . . that there's some shred of humanity worth saving. But only we can make meaning out of suffering. There's no God or universal cosmos that will do so for us. (2016, 30–31).

A secular apocalypse, therefore, is one in which meaning is optional and such meaning is determined by the people. It is not ascribed to a higher power or given sacred meaning, but rather is interpreted in the apocalyptic moment as a reflection of the human condition. If liberal preppers could be seen as engendering a form an apocalyptic eco-religion, my definition as given above still works within the secular apocalyptic framework: it is a human-centred crisis in which our existence is in peril, and it is up to us to interpret the crisis.

It should be further clarified that preppers are in no way “death cults,” and both conservative and liberal ends of the spectrum expect to survive—perhaps a rather hopeful outlook, given the apocalyptic nature of prepper culture. Joustra and Wilkinson note that our apocalypses always presume that life will eventually continue, much as it has before (2016, 32). There is an observable difference, however, from the imagined post-apocalyptic between these two groups.

It is fair to speculate that much of the imagination is fuelled by movies and other popular culture media that feature dystopic, lawless wastelands (some respondents even noted that such movies or television first inspired them to prep). But the reality is that preppers seem to be prepping for a world that looks much like ours does today, just with added obstacles like civil unrest or loss of electrical power. It is worth considering what a prepper community imagines itself to be, ideally. With the emphasis on homesteading skills, ecological awareness, and living in harmony with nature, it would appear that liberal preppers have an ideal that aligns

with a romantic frontier narrative of self-sufficiency. While self-sufficiency is a theme across the political spectrum of preppers, the discourse among the liberal prepper communities is more focussed on carbon footprints, sustainability, and balance with the natural world. This suggests an eco-consciousness, or at least an acknowledgement of our impact on our environment and farmlands.

On the other end of the spectrum, the majority of conservative preppers in the social media communities I studied indicated they were most concerned with the survival of their small circle—that is to say, self-protection and isolation against a world that seeks to do them, or their families, harm. “I take care of my family first and foremost. Cant [sic] help it if everyone else is not motivated to b [sic] prepared. Might sound cruel but that is just how it is with me,”¹⁸ one person stated in a thread about this very question. Another noted, “I think if it becomes necessary to use your survival skills, society as we know it is probably already gone. I owe no allegiance to a society or Government that no longer exists.” The confidence that they would endure TEOTWAWKI was supported by their thoroughness in key prepping areas including food, water, shelter, and armed protection.

I did see some people on the conservative boards that sounded more like the liberal preppers, who imagined commune-like or community organization post-SHTF, but I have not observed any discussion of environmental impact or fallout among those communities—other than possible food shortages, which is more of an anthropocentric concern than ecological one. Liberal preppers also prioritized family safety and security, but many expressed a moral imperative to care for others as well (I will share examples in the conclusion). I have recently seen discussions on liberal boards criticizing conservative or traditional preppers for exactly this lack of empathy and community, which I think reflects a political polarization of compassion versus self-interest that was amplified in 2020 due to COVID-19 and Trumpism. Also, optimistic they would emerge from a SHTF scenario safely due to general prepper skills, there was a sentiment that we would learn from such disasters and hopefully make changes in energy consumption, health/diet, and networking that would make humanity stronger in the long run.

As Foster rightly critiques, “One of the interesting things about our fascination with our own demise is our relative lack of interest in the demise of the Earth or the other animal species that live on the Earth. It is not that we are not interested in the end of the Earth, the environment and other species is primarily in relation to their usefulness to humanity” (2014, 46).¹⁹ That is to say, apocalyptic narratives tend to focus on humanity’s end as the final chapter when in truth, we are a small part of the natural world. This myopia is typical of our anthropocentric natures, and is particularly visible among the more conservative prepper discourses.

Conclusion

To conclude this essay, let me provide a few poignant examples to further fill out how this definition works with the collected data. In response to a question on one of the Liberal Prepper pages, members were asked if they saw prepping as having any sort of moral or ethical responsibility. These are a few of the answers:

“Prepping’ to me is inextricably entwined with how I live my life in general—as a community organizer, homesteader, homeschooling my children, decolonizing my lifestyle, and steeling ourselves against the processes of collapse and chaos that are ensuing and only beginning, and being interdependent with real people rather than dependent on institutions.”

“I have been working on a research project for the last several years involving letting go of deep internal pain and with that becoming more self-reliant. So for me emotionally, mentally and physically I see prepping/self-reliance as part of my religion.”

“. . . I do feel responsibility to those I will leave behind, and in giving them a chance to survive the hard times that they will be living in. My husband and I had such easy lives, ones I now know were privileged. I do feel like our generation was blissfully unaware of what was coming, and have an obligation to do what we can to set things right before we leave this ‘mortal plane’.”

“I’m not sure if I should be saddened by this epiphany, but I’m pretty sure prepping and the mentality that it has been born from are more my religion than anything else. It is a part of the every day that I can control, and it brings me a peace in my soul that nothing else really does.”

Many of the comments highlighted a responsibility to care for family and children first, but also to care for the community, which was a radical departure from the general attitude of “me and mine, screw the others” that I have found in conversations on conservative boards. One person noted that they were highly aware that they were a lone liberal in a neighbourhood of “crypto-fascists” who would likely turn on him/her in an instant, but that they “still feel a moral obligation to do my best to provide for their basic needs when the grid goes down.” It is apparent that there are different worldviews coming from conservative versus liberal ends of prepper culture, and that the liberal preppers have a more holistic view which not only informs a loose social ethic, but also connects them to broader considerations of ecology and climate change.

In summary, my initial research suggests that 1) liberal prepping is *not* a myth, as has been suggested in numerous sources, usually conservative in nature, 2) regardless of the demographics of the liberal prepper, there is a strong concern about localized ecological disasters as well as climate change on a global scale, and 3) for some, an apocalyptic eco-religion may be one of the major driving forces behind why these folks are preppers. Indeed, the climate crisis may be argued to be a secular eschatology, although I concede that the so-called “secular” often contains religious hues. Liberal preppers are positioning themselves in response to the climate crisis from a pragmatic worldview, but I suggest that given their generally progressive or even non-traditional religious identifications—along with an attentiveness to the moral and ethical responsibilities of care for our environment, disdain for unethical government policies, and the idea that survival should be a concern for everyone—that liberal preppers are practicing a sort of apocalyptic eco-religion that operates on the fringe of the broader prepper culture. This “religion” emerges from an eschatological narrative that, while secular in nature, is centred on ethical and moral responsibilities with an overall apocalyptic hue.

Notes

1. I acknowledge that terms such as “liberal” and “conservative” are problematic, as they lack nuance and tend to be catch-all terms in political discourse, but for the purpose of this essay, I will consider them terms of self-identification used by preppers I am studying—as well as the broader categorizations embedded in them at the time of writing, such as being pro- or anti-Trump.
2. I would like to acknowledge [name removed] who worked with me in the early stages of this project and for her critical expertise in apocalyptic theology.
3. To double check this unsourced claim I used Google’s date/search function and did a search for “prepper” before 2000, a mere 827 sites mentioned the term, thus confirming it was not exactly mainstream (as opposed to 24,900,000 sites in 2020).
4. Survival gear may be very similar to what we call “camping gear,” so again I make a distinction on what the intention is for purchase. If one is a regular camper, then a fire starter kit and water

- purification tablets may be normal supplies to have on hand. Same with having a generator for those who live in hurricane zones. For those who live in urban areas or apartments (and do not camp regularly, for instance), these are more speculative items to have on hand—with the expectation they will be useable in some unforeseen disaster or collapse. Survival gear is, in other words, what I would say are supplies for use “in case of extreme emergency.”
5. Millennials accounted for 38.49% of recent survival gear purchases, followed by GenXers at 31.4% and Baby Boomers at 17.31% (generations defined according to Pew Research Center’s generational guidelines).
 6. Though anecdotally, I have seen increased articles and discussions on prepping from UK residents in the wake of Brexit.
 7. *Posse comitatus* refers to a loosely organized militia group put together by local law enforcement to enforce the law. The popular culture representation is often found in westerns, when the sheriff puts together a “posse” to track down a notorious bandit. The posse comitatus power still exists in many states, however. For example, in Georgia it is stated that law enforcement officers may summon citizens to assist in the execution of penal warrants and such citizens are protected in the same way as the officers once deputized (OCGA 17-4-24). Many militia groups, although not recognized by their local agencies as officially deputized, see themselves as fulfilling this ongoing need to assist in law enforcement.
 8. These are concerns I see repeatedly on conservative prepper boards, particularly those who have been aligned with Trumpian politics.
 9. Although my survey asked questions about age, gender, religion, and political views, I (regrettably) did not include a household income question and can only speculate from my interaction with fellow preppers. Many of them have “bug out” locations (that is, rustic vacation home) or spend hundreds of dollars on long-term food supplies and have some secondary education, so I estimate most to be middle- to upper-middle class.
 10. See [Mull \(2020\)](#) and [Gray \(2020\)](#), for example.
 11. In 2020, one liberal prepper group went from 4,084 members in February, to 5,910 by September. Another group doubled from 789 members to 1,400 in the same span of time. The self-sufficiency/homesteading theme Facebook prepping group (politically neutral/moderate) went from 57,609 members to 100,058, indicating an enthusiasm for reviving the “traditional” skills such as gardening and canning.
 12. This has changed a bit since COVID-19 struck. Several articles appeared in 2020 in defence of prepping culture, including “They Prepared for the Worst. Now Everyone is a Prepper” ([Yuhas 2020](#)), “We mocked preppers and survivalists—until the pandemic hit.” ([Conroy 2020](#)), and “We Should All Be Preppers” ([Garrett 2020b](#)). While the Doomsday Prepper stereotype exists (and many preppers fit that bill), increased climate disasters and the pandemic have highlighted the need for basic preparedness.
 13. These numbers were pulled from the Facebook pages in February 2020. Checking again in May 2020, they have increased significantly, and I noticed several people saying they had joined in light of COVID-19. For example, Liberal Preppers went from 789 to 1022 members; Prepping 4 Survival, one of the more conservative groups I belong to, went from 79,000 members in February to 113,000 by May.
 14. Facebook has 169 million monthly users as of September 2019 and 2.4 billion active users globally as of April 2020 (see [Statista 2021a](#) and [2021b](#)).
 15. Incidentally, the majority of responders, many identifying themselves as “liberal” or “progressive,” said they saw it as community-based, planning on sharing or pooling resources with like-minded people, forming alliances with neighbours, helping out those in need, and overall believing in the philosophy of “strength in numbers.”
 16. Because the responses to the trolling posts were still up, it was easy to deduce what was deleted. People mentioned language that was racist, or calls to kill all liberals, as being offensive and having no place in the thread.

17. For an excellent analysis of America's love affair with guns, the frontier/cowboy mythos, and its racist roots, see Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment* (City Lights Books 2018).
18. Spelling as typed in original.
19. This, I would observe, is the opposite of Deep Ecology—a movement that encourages humans to look at nature as existing for itself and having the right to thrive, rather than thinking in terms of how it serves us. Most environmental movements focus on the latter, noting that cutting down trees deprives us of oxygen, pollution ruins our drinking water, and so forth. While an effective strategy to promote ecology to an ego-centric species, Deep Ecology hopes to cultivate a deeper respect for life in all forms and the balance of nature—which we are part of, not above.

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