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Prepping as implicit activism: risk, danger, and post-capitalist imaginaries in prepper literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the increasingly widespread practice of *prepping*, and examines how it differs from conventional forms of activism, which generally involve explicit and purposeful efforts to instigate collective social change. Drawing on Luhmann's sociological theory of risk and the narrative concept of foreshadowing, the paper explores how preppers understand the future and their own responsibility in shaping it, as well as the ways in which their visions of the future show up in the present. The paper argues that while the practice of prepping may appear apolitical and perhaps even asocial at a first glance, its political potential lies in the implicit and largely unintended performative consequences that arise from popularizing and proliferating the idea of a potential alternative to capitalism. Consequently, the paper demonstrates how 'taking the future seriously', much like conventional activist movements, albeit within the context of viewing the future as dangerous as opposed to risky, can have performative effects that may ultimately function as a form of 'implicit activism'. This implicit activism could potentially prove as, if not more, effective in terms of challenging the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. Considering this, we argue that social movement scholars and activists could benefit from a more profound engagement with the practice of prepping. Empirically, the paper draws on a selection of popular self-help books on prepping.

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Introduction

We seemingly live in a time of permanent crisis. Since the turn of the Millennium, an increasing number of severe crises have emerged at an unprecedented frequency and seriously affected living conditions for people in most corners of the world. From economic recessions and imperial wars to climate catastrophes and zoonotic pandemics, intersecting disruptions with incalculable ripple effects have installed in many Western observers an awareness that the time is somehow out of joint, and that state institutions may no longer be able to guarantee our safety and protect us from disaster (Gerbaudo, 2021). This widespread alertness has been further intensified by disaster-fixated news coverage and an upsurge in apocalypse-themed popular culture, leading large segments

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of the population to believe they are indeed ‘living in the end times’ (Diamant, 2022). There are myriad ways of coping with the chaos and uncertainty spawned by this crisis-ridden perception of our current predicament. While many prefer to either accept or ignore it (and carry on living at a cynical distance), others choose to react in a bid to change the state of affairs.

There are, crudely put, two general ways of actively responding to the prospect of looming disaster. One is to engage in what might be called ‘conventional’ forms of activism: Joining social movements, running for public office, establishing new political parties, participating in rallies and marches, going on strikes, signing petitions, engaging in social media commentary, etc. What characterizes this approach to activism is that it explicitly seeks to instigate social or political change, thereby potentially affecting the *collective* condition for people in a particular social space (Millward & Takhar, 2019). The other approach is to reject conventional forms of activism by disengaging from the public sphere and instead focus exclusively on improving one’s own *individual* circumstances. This can obviously be done in multiple ways, but one such activist practice is proliferating rapidly and has recently gained unprecedented attention globally, namely prepping¹ (Husted et al., 2023).

Understood as the act of ‘storing food, water and weapons as well as developing self-sufficiency skills for the purpose of independently surviving disasters’ (Campbell et al., 2019, p. 799), prepping is becoming an increasingly popular activity in Europe and North America. A few years ago, experts estimated that more than 20 million people worldwide identified as preppers, and that half of these were Americans (Foroudi, 2020). Today, approximately 10% of all American households are actively preparing for disaster (Wertheim, 2022). Furthermore, a wide range of Hollywood-celebrities have lately added legitimacy to the phenomenon by coming out as preppers themselves (Gold, 2024), just as there has been a recent rise in prepping among liberal (Sedacca, 2017) and left-leaning communities (Gittinger, 2023). Huddleston (2018, np) has accordingly suggested that the negative pop-cultural stereotype of preppers as ‘doomsday-obsessed, right-wing, anti-government extremists, who want nothing more than to wade into an apocalypse with guns blazing’ has distorted the public view of preppers, who, for the most part, are normal people with ‘full-time employment, kids who play sports on the weekends, and social media accounts; none are living in secret bunkers in the forest’. Hence, as the BBC recently reported, prepping should no longer be considered a right-wing fringe phenomenon, but a mainstream activity for ‘serious and rational’ people (Saragosa, 2020).

Despite an uptick of research interest in recent years, existing studies on prepping remain limited and scattered. In-depth studies of topics ranging from gender-dynamics and notions of motherhood among preppers (Kerrane et al., 2021) to awakening narratives and their association with detachment and denial in the Anthropocene (Barker, 2022) complement new quantitative survey-studies of apocalyptic beliefs among preppers (Fetterman et al., 2019; Smith & Thomas, 2021). Most existing studies tend to emphasize the intersection of prepping with broader cultural and political dynamics around disaster-based speculation, particularly on the political Right in the United States (McKenzie, 2021; Mills, 2019, 2021), with some also linking it to ‘hegemonic whiteness’ and ‘settler-colonialism’ (Ford, 2021). However, a few studies have noted how prepping can be interpreted as a profound critique of contemporary industrial society (Mitchell,

2002) or as an anticipatory mode of practicing for a post-capitalist society (Campbell et al., 2019). Perhaps related to this political ambivalence, a couple of studies have furthermore explored the co-existence in prepping of a utilitarian individualist ethos and a strong sense of community (Parkkinen, 2021), with Husted et al. (2023) coining the term ‘atomization’ (as opposed to organization) as a way of conceptualizing this unconventional community of lone wolves.

Building on insights from these latter studies in particular, this paper seeks to explore prepping as a particular kind of *implicit activism*, which mirrors more established and explicit forms of activism in certain respects. Based on the observation that meaningful discussions about the dangers and possibilities of the future often seem to exist at the fringes of mainstream political discourse (Byrne, 2021), several studies have found similarities between prepping and conventional activism. For instance, McKenzie (2021, p. 1) points to the fact that both prepping and left-wing activism ‘take the future seriously’ and share similar diagnoses concerning the present (lack of) economic and environmental sustainability. Moreover, Mills (2021) finds important overlaps between extreme right-wing preppers, who emerged *en masse* during the Obama presidency, and conventional Tea Party activists in terms of their ideological purview, just like similar links exist between leftist preppers and progressive social movements. Nonetheless, it is still somewhat controversial to classify prepping as activism, since preppers typically portray themselves as decidedly apolitical (some online prepper forums even prohibit ‘political’ commentary), but we propose that such a classification is both valid and productive.

First, the classification is valid in the sense that the practice of prepping typically emerges as a response or reaction to troubling societal developments; it is a way of pushing back against negative changes in living conditions and a way of actively refusing subjection to a particular social, political, or environmental paradigm. As Garrett (2020, np) notes: ‘Prepping is, at its heart, a kind of activism, a bulwark against the false promises of capitalism, of the idea of endless growth and the perpetual availability of resources’. In that sense, prepping is a mode of resistance not so different from approaches to activism that center on the establishment of so-called ‘autonomous zones’ (e.g., the Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities or the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest). The main difference is that preppers typically build communities that consist of discrete individuals or family units rather than large gatherings of otherwise unrelated people. This is perhaps why some preppers refer to their own engagement as ‘personal activism’ (e.g., Backdoor Survival, 2023), which is in line with feminist conceptualizations of political action as ‘a form of human behavior that involves the negotiation, alteration, or entrenchment of social values and resources’ (Abrahams, 1992, p. 329).

Second, we see the classification of prepping as activism as productive because it allows us to make a comparison that we find particularly useful. By contrasting prepping with conventional forms of activism, we are able to show that prepping can be understood as a practice that may appear apolitical and perhaps even asocial at a first glance, but which implicitly shares important features with practices that are explicitly political. Hence, our overall aim with this paper is to conceptualize prepping as a unique type of *implicit activism* and compare it to more conventional forms of activism, in an attempt to show that there is much to learn from taking prepping seriously as an interesting and relevant study object for social movement scholars. Not only can prepping be seen as

a rational and perhaps even more realistic response to present political and environmental developments, it also represents a novel approach to activism that could prove equally if not more effective in terms of challenging the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism.

To establish a foundation for comparing prepping to conventional forms of activism, we draw on Niklas Luhmann's (1993b) sociological theory of risk, which differs from popular theories of the 'risk society' (e.g., Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992) by focusing specifically on the concept of risk instead of trying to specify what it is that makes modernity particularly risky compared to previous eras. Whereas most scholars differentiate risk from safety (taking a risk represents a momentary departure from safety), Luhmann rejects the idea that the notion of safety makes sense as an analytical term in an uncertain world. Instead, he distinguishes *risk* from *danger*, thereby claiming risk to be a way of reducing the otherwise paralyzing complexity that follows from the recognition that the world is a dangerous place. Hence, risk is an observation that reintroduces agency to a situation perceived as dangerous; it is a type of observation that allows people to act in circumstances beyond their control and to take responsibility for potential rewards or losses triggered by the decision to act in a particular manner. As such, the main difference between observations of risk and danger is that the former can lead to what Luhmann calls 'post-decisional regret' (i.e., that one regrets engaging in a particular course of action), whereas the latter frees the observer from responsibility.

In a nutshell, our argument is that conventional forms of activism are *risk-based activities*, whereas prepping is more accurately understood as a *danger-based activity*, the main difference being that risk-based activities rest on the conviction that the collective future can be changed for the better, whereas the danger-based activities reject that notion. When joining a social movement or running for public office, one intentionally attempts to influence the course of history and thereby assumes some degree of responsibility for the consequences of one's engagement (both positive and negative). Contrarily, when prepping, one abandons the ambition of influencing the collective future by accepting disaster as a more or less inevitable outcome. As such, preppers cannot be held accountable for the consequences of their engagement, and this is essentially what makes prepping appear apolitical or even asocial.

To illustrate our argument, we analyze a selection of 10 popular self-help books on prepping. We do so in order to tease out the common assumptions that guide such books and to explore how the authors observe problems facing contemporary society. By charting core assumptions in popular prepping literature, we are furthermore able to show that prepping may appear apolitical at a first glance, but that visions of a post-capitalist society underlie descriptions of what comes after the apocalypse. This leads us to the argument that social movement scholars have much to learn from taking prepping seriously as an implicitly political activist practice. In conclusion, we therefore call for more research on this emerging phenomenon.

Risk, danger, and prevention

Risk is usually understood as an ontological condition that can be identified and described empirically: A situation is characterized as risky if it somehow increases the likelihood of loss or damage. For instance, the Oxford English Dictionary (2023) defines

risk as ‘(exposure to) the probability of loss, injury, or other adverse or unwelcome circumstance’. Similarly, in his celebrated diagnostic of the present, Beck (1992) describes the ‘risk society’ as a systemic response to man-made hazards caused by widespread modernization. In this view, risk is the opposite of safety: The more risk, the less safety.

Luhmann (1993b) begins his conceptualization of risk by distinguishing it from danger instead of safety. In short, Luhmann’s argument is that the notion of safety makes little sense in a society characterized by overwhelming complexity and uncertainty. In a world where the future is inherently unknowable, danger becomes the default condition. Hence, for Luhmann, embarking on a risky course of action does not represent a momentary departure from safety or security, but a move away from an unmanageable state of danger and toward a condition where oneself is perceived as in control of things. For instance, realizing that prosperity in contemporary society is closely linked to education, one might decide to take matters into own hands and enroll in a university program. However, if one remains unemployed and/or miserable after graduating, blame is easily attributed to oneself (‘perhaps I should have chosen another university program or pursued an entirely different career?’). This means that risk can be understood as the willingness to make a decision in an ‘undecidable’ terrain and accept responsibility for potential loss or damage (King & Thornhill, 2003). As Luhmann notes:

Risk can be defined as the possibility of future damage, exceeding all reasonable costs, that is attributed to a decision. Risk is the hopefully avoidable causal link between decision and damage. In other words, it is the prospect of post-decisional regret. (...) Danger, on the other hand, is the possibility of future damage which is attributed to external events. Risk is an attribute of decision making, while danger is a condition of life in general that cannot be avoided. (Luhmann, 1990, p. 225)

This conceptual framing, afforded by Luhmann’s poststructuralist commitment to ‘second-order observations’ (see Luhmann, 1993a), represents a radical change in perspective. Instead of providing an essentialist take on risk – *what actions are truly risky?* – Luhmann conceptualizes risk as an observation. Risk is an observation that actors make about their own decisions, and that observation retrospectively forces them to accept responsibility for the consequences of their own decision-making. This alternative framing allows us to view the world as determined by human decisions rather than by environmental factors, which ultimately means that the real hazards of contemporary society are rarely perceived as driven by external events such as natural disasters or pandemics, but decisions made by other people (e.g., governments or neighbors). Following this line of reasoning, we quickly reach the conclusion that *‘there is no risk-free behaviour’* (Luhmann, 1993b, p. 28). Even the choice *not* to act must be seen as a risky decision.

Prevention

A natural consequence of contemporary society’s risk-saturated condition is that we often prepare for the unexpected in a bid to avoid loss or minimize damage. This leads us to the notion of ‘prevention’ and, by implication, preparation. In his book on risk, Luhmann (1993b, p. 29) briefly addresses the notion of ‘prevention’, which for him signifies the act of ‘preparing for uncertain future losses by seeking to reduce either the

probability of occurrence of losses or their extent'. As inhabitants of an uncertain and complex world, we may prepare for both dangers and risks. When preparing for dangers, we seek to minimize damage, perceived as caused by events that are beyond our control; when preparing for risks, we brace ourselves for damage, perceived as a product of our own decisions. In the end, both types of preparation involve risks. However, since risk is a decision to act in the absence of certainty, preparation should also be regarded as a risk-based activity.

The distinction between 'risk prevention' and 'danger prevention' is important for our purposes, as it points to the distribution of post-decisional responsibility. If we decide to prepare for certain factors that are deemed risky (i.e., caused by our own decisions), we tend to blame ourselves for potentially negative outcomes. In that situation, we are thus faced with a type of double-risk that requires a great deal of responsibility absorption (both the original risk and the decision to prepare for it are risky). On the other hand, if we decide to prepare for factors that are regarded as outright dangerous (i.e., beyond our control), we remain non-responsible. As we will see in the analysis and subsequent discussion, self-help literature on prepping tends to emphasize danger prevention as its *modus operandi*, which contrasts with conventional accounts of activism that tend to be based on risk-oriented observations. As such, conventional activism might be understood as 'risk prevention' in the Luhmannian sense, where actors assume some sense of responsibility for potentially affecting the collective future, while prepping seems closer to 'danger prevention', since the future is here viewed as independent of the involved actor's decision-making.

Foreshadowing

For preppers, the bleak future for which they are preparing seems more or less inevitable. In fact, the justification for investing considerable time and resources in preparation corresponds precisely to the level of certainty with which we foresee a future catastrophic event happening. Otherwise, the potential benefits would not match the total cost of our preparation. To better understand how preppers tend to 'see today in the light of tomorrow' (Morson, 1994, p. 57), our analysis also draws on Gary Morson's concept of the 'foreshadow' or 'foreshadowing':

Foreshadow is a spatial metaphor for a temporal phenomenon, it is a shadow cast in front of an object; the temporal analogue is an event that indicates (is the 'shadow' of) another event to come. An object in our path may cast a shadow backward, so that we reach the shadow before reaching the object casting it; and from experience, we may know to expect the object when we encounter the shadow. (ibid, p. 48)

Originally a term used by literary scholars, foreshadowing points to anticipations of the future that have reverse implications for the present. In that sense, the notion of foreshadowing is closely related to that of *omens*. 'Both foreshadowing and omens entail backward causation: The earlier event – omen or foreshadow – does not cause, but is caused by, the catastrophe to come' (Morson, 1994, p. 365). Hence, the future catastrophe must somehow already exist, otherwise it would not be able to determine the present: 'Foreshadowing demands inevitability', as Morson puts it (ibid). And that perceived inevitability is, essentially, what makes prepping appear apolitical. For the prepper,

conventional activism is pointless, as the future has already cast its fatal shadow onto the present. In the analysis, we unfold this concept in greater detail and explore how the certainty of future disasters is expressed through their foreshadowing in prepping literature. In the following section, we detail our methodology and analytical strategy before proceeding with the analysis and discussion.

Methodology and analytical strategy

Data collection

The empirical point of departure for this investigation is popular self-help books on prepping, which we understand as a rapidly emerging genre of books that provide guidance on how to prepare for future societal collapses of varying degrees. At the time of writing, several thousand books on this topic are available on Amazon.com. While the lack of publicly available sales-numbers makes it difficult to gauge the proliferation of the genre, its most reviewed books have around 8.000 reviews on Amazon. While lower than top-selling self-help books such as Steven Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Successful People* (12.000) or Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* (42.000), this number suggests that the market for prepper books is significant (see du Plessis, 2021).

However, while it appears to be expanding rapidly, the 'prepper' self-help genre is not clearly delineated and overlaps considerably with books on self-sufficiency and outdoor bushcraft. For our purposes, we have chosen to focus on books that are explicitly concerned with assisting the reader in preparing for doomsday scenarios. In addition to this explicit concern with societal collapses, the 10 books included in this study have been selected based on the degree to which they engage in general reflections about the nature of and justification for prepping as opposed to only giving specific practical advice. This implies that titles such as *The prepper's water survival guide* or *Build the perfect bug-out bag* have not been included in the study. Furthermore, we have selected the books with the highest amounts of reviews on Amazon.com, which we interpret as a sign of circulation and cultural resonance, just as we have prioritized books published at well-known publishers in order to filter out the most idiosyncratic representations.

We accordingly understand these books as being indicative of wider cultural dynamics, which they themselves also contribute to shaping and sustaining. As such, these books are an interesting object of study because they can be viewed as condensed socio-cultural manifestations of the particular problematizations, subjectivities, and worldviews that inform prepping (see du Plessis, 2021, 2022). The suggestion that self-help books are reflective of broader developments is not a novel idea. Such claims date back at least to Max Weber who, in his descriptions of the Spirit of Capitalism, drew on several of Benjamin Franklin's self-help books (Weber, 1995, p. 27). The proliferation and enduring popularity of self-help can thus, among other things, be attested to the fact that it offers individual solutions to structural challenges. Today, individuals appear to be seeking help in navigating the increasingly complex and potentially anxiety-provoking conditions surrounding life in late-modernity. Here, self-help in its various guises, including the prepper sub-genre, offers itself as an 'answer factory' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 7), supplying the individual with clarity in terms of how to acquire security, well-being, and/or success under the current structural conditions (see also

Garsten & Grey, 1997; McGee, 2005). In addition, these answers, in their most culturally resonant versions, arguably also function as interpellations that call upon subjects and 'hail' them into being (Althusser, 2014). As such, with Butler (1997a, p. 160), we might understand the prepper books as examples of 'social performatives' that utter subjects into being 'from diffuse social quarters, inaugurated into sociality by a variety of diffuse and powerful interpellations'. Such interpellations, according to Butler, do not need to take an official, or even explicit form, to be socially efficacious in the formation of subjects (*ibid.*).

Following this line of thinking, prepper self-help books might not only be seen as socially performative, but also as a reflection of the place in the *zeitgeist* occupied by contemporary notions of prepping. Whether the books are indicative of a 'prepper movement' as such – and how one could delineate such a movement – is however still an open empirical and conceptual question (see Husted et al., 2023). Nonetheless, since the books are written for preppers and recommended on prepping-websites (see *theprepared.com*), they arguably represent the dominant or 'official' version of the most prevalent techniques, justifications, and worldviews in the field of prepping. In relation to this study, then, we understand the prepper books as reflecting the worldview of what might be labelled 'mainstream prepping'; the books are arguably some of the most circulated and read texts in the community, and even in our relatively small sample, we quickly observed significant saturation in themes and argumentation, as well as a certain amount of implicit paraphrasing between the books. Compared to data derived from an ethnographic study of preppers or a netnography of internet prepper-forums (e.g., Campbell et al., 2019; Husted et al., 2023), the literature in question is thus arguably more condensed, generalized and thought through, while less spontaneous, idiosyncratic, and situated.

Coding

Our reading of the books began with a curious first-order reading, in which we sought to apply a 'witting ignorance' (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 21) and put ourselves in the position of the typical reader. This involved taking the books seriously and not writing them off as paranoid right-wing drivel (or, whatever stereotype we might have about prepping), which proved easier than anticipated, as some of the books are rather convincing in their arguments. In fact, one of the authors seriously considered heeding some the advice such as storing a little water and food in the basement. As such, taking the books seriously in this way also gave us a more direct experiential sense of the affective tone accompanying this kind of preparation, which proved helpful in guiding the subsequent analysis.

After this initial reading, we conducted a 'first order analysis' (*ibid.*), in which the books were coded using 'data-centric' terms found in the books themselves. This coding was guided by our initial research interest, which revolved around what kind of worldview and subjectivities these books promote as well as the potentially 'alternative' nature of prepping in and through its imaginings of post-capitalist futures. This resulted in the emergence of a large number of data-centric terms, concepts, and codes, ranging from 'self-defense' over 'bartering' and 'relating to neighbors' to different categories of collapse-scenarios, which we initially made little attempt to distill (*ibid.*: 20). At a certain point, however, we sought to condense these codes into a more manageable number,

which was done by seeking similarities and differences among the many categories and grouping them together under broader, aggregate (but still data-centric) terms such as ‘mindset’, ‘skills and techniques’, and ‘the future’.

During this process, we also began consulting theories and research literature and, at this point, the analytical process transitioned from an inductive approach toward a more abductive approach (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Luhmann’s theory of risk was introduced here, as it seemed to capture some of the differences between prepping and more established types of activism. Morson’s concept of foreshadowing was found useful to expand on this. The theories were then used to distill our first order data-centric categories into second order theoretical, ‘researcher-centric’ concepts (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 18), namely ‘dangerous future’, ‘(lack of) post-decisional regret’, ‘rational foreshadowing’, and ‘post-capitalism’. These were then employed in a second round of coding or ‘second order analysis’ (ibid), which, through an iterative back-and-forth process between theory and prepping literature, led to the final analysis. By way of these entry-points, our aim is to provide an account of the preparative, (a)political invocation of post-capitalist futures of prepping as an implicit form of activism, and subsequently discuss its performativity in relation to the more established forms of explicit activism. As we have noted elsewhere (du Plessis & Husted, 2022), contemporary social movement studies tend to focus almost exclusively on the latter, and there are thus potential insights to be gained from studying the envisionings and enactments of post-capitalist futures in more implicit types of activism. Hopefully, this paper can contribute to such a development.

Analysis

The following analysis of prepping literature is structured around the four abovementioned entry-points, and it is followed by a discussion, in which the results are used to contrast prepping with conventional forms of activism.

The future as danger

The analyzed prepping literature repeatedly emphasizes how the fundamental justification for engaging in prepping activities stems from the realization that the world and, by extension, the future is riddled with *danger* in the Luhmannian sense of the word. While risk is attributed to a decision and understood as the ‘hopefully avoidable link between decision and damage’, danger is attributed to external events and seen as ‘a condition of life in general that cannot be avoided’ (Luhmann, 1990, p. 225). It is, accordingly, this sense of unavoidable danger that informs observations of the future in the selected prepping books:

But know with certainty that the world is a dangerous place. Storms rage, fires burn, and enemies attack. No one is ever completely safe. Not you. Not your children. Not the richest man alive. We all live as part of a very complex ecosystem that at its core, is unpredictable and willing to kill us without pause or remorse. (Bradley, 2011, p. 7)

As such, prepping is based on the observation of an overwhelming probability of future damage, caused by external events that are beyond the prepper’s control. This chilling

realization is in the prepping books often linked to an inability to sleep at night. The books thus tend to portray their target-audience as people who lose sleep worrying about future danger:

If you've picked up this book, you've probably lost sleep worrying about how you and your loved ones will fare in the face of a true worst-case scenario. You're painfully aware of the precipice on which our nation sits and just how close we are to the tipping point. Scenarios that were once found only in the realm of science fiction (...) are now plausible, and even imminent, threats. (Cobb, 2014, p. xii)

While mainstream self-help books would likely interpret this kind of sleeplessness as the workings of an overly anxious mind and make it an object of self-improvement to learn how to stop worrying about things that are outside of one's control, self-help books on prepping are different. Here, the worry is viewed as entirely natural, even rational, given the 'plausible, and even imminent threats' (Cobb, 2014, p. xii) that loom on the horizon. Instead of minimizing our anxiety through cognitive techniques of the self such as meditation or mindfulness (du Plessis & Just, 2022), the prepper books accordingly suggest that we prepare for these dangers; and that this, in turn, will minimize our worry:

I prepare because it makes me sleep much better at night. Because it gives me a sense of fulfillment to know I'm doing everything in my power to protect myself and my family from whatever life may throw in our direction. (Aguirre, 2009, p. 26)

But once you've prepared, you can sleep well, knowing that you've done your best to protect and provide for your family, regardless of what the future brings. (Rawles, 2009, p. 289)

Luhmann (1993b, p. 29) seems to have the same intuition as authors of prepper books when discussing 'danger prevention' as a specific mode of 'preparing for uncertain future losses'. He notes how this type of prevention often takes place through various 'security strategies':

We may train in the use of weapons, make certain financial provisions for emergencies or cultivate friends we can turn to if we need help. However, such security strategies are a side-show. The general motivation behind them is the realization that life in this world is fraught with uncertainty. (ibid, p. 29)

Accordingly, Luhmann understands this kind of preparation as a 'side-show' that may distract from, or at least take the edge of, the realization that the future is full of danger, and hence minimize our worry. Prepping thus becomes a way of introducing agency into a situation that is observed as uncertain and beyond our control. The concomitant reduction of worry, of course, hinges on the observation of the collective future as *dangerous* (independent of our decision-making) as opposed to *risky* (something we can affect to a certain degree through our decisions). Notably, there is no discussion in the prepping books of decisions, collective or otherwise, that could be taken in order to reduce the likelihood of future disasters such as reducing one's Co2-emissions or tempering political polarization, thus casting prepping as an individualized and rather apolitical practice (Husted et al., 2023). As Luhmann (1993b, p. 31) notes: 'It is apparently easier to distance oneself politically from dangers than from risks'. Crucially, as we will explore in the following section, observing something as risky, and thus linking potential future damage to one's own decisions, also introduces the prospect of 'post-decisional

regret' (Luhmann, 1990, p. 225), whereas viewing something as dangerous and outside of one's control does not carry such implications.

Post-decisional regret and the longing for disaster

Conventional forms of activism generally tend to imply post-decisional responsibility as to whether the chosen course of action will, in fact, alter the future in the desired way. For instance, the student sit-in movement in the 1960s, where young African American students sat at segregated lunch counters and refused to leave after being denied service (Gladwell, 2010), has accordingly been described as 'high-risk activism' (McAdam, 1986). In this example, we could thus imagine how the movement would prepare for – but also hold itself at least partly responsible in the event of – future damages resulting from their choices, as well as assume responsibility for the broader societal impact of the protests. As such, the movement would consider the sit-ins a risk worth taking.

Preppers, on the other hand, observe the future through the register of danger and consequently perceive the future as beyond their control. While they may prepare themselves for a future nuclear catastrophe or massive earthquake, they will not hold themselves responsible for the occurrence of these events, nor for the damages they end up producing. As such, preppers are generally absolved from post-decisional regret. As stated in one of the prepper books: 'If nothing happens then just great, but if something does occur, [preppers] are better prepared than 99% of the people' (Aguirre, 2009, p. 28).

Preppers have presumably 'done their best' or 'are doing everything in their power' to prevent or minimize suffering stemming from future events beyond their control. Danger-prevention in the form of prepping thus provides peace of mind for those involved, who can no longer be blamed for any harm befalling themselves or their families in future scenarios. From the point of view of the prepper then, risk is actually associated with *not* being prepared, as this is a decision that can be attributed to future damages if and when a catastrophe occurs. As Luhmann puts it: 'Even if it is only a question of danger in the sense of natural disaster, the omission of prevention becomes a risk' (Luhmann, 1993b, p. 31).

In this view, people who are not preppers assume post-decisional responsibility in case of a future catastrophe – or when *SHTF* (prepper-abbreviation for *Shit Hits The Fan*). These non-preppers are thus seen as running the risk – however deliberately – that future catastrophic events either will not occur or have an insignificant negative impact. Engaging in prepping, on the other hand, makes one exempt from post-SHTF responsibility, as one refuses to run the risk. From the point of view of the prepper, taking this risk is accordingly cast as an unwise and 'irresponsible' (Harrison, 2008, p. 10) decision:

During good times people can afford to be spoiled, lazy, and let others handle issues that they should solve themselves. (...) 'those things' just don't happen where you live. It doesn't happen to people like you, or those around you. But one day that changes and it does happen. (...). You didn't have the foresight to prepare for it financially and with proper medical coverage and insurance. (...) But once you realize that our society is based on rather complex and fragile structures that can fail, or when you see how life just enjoys throwing you a hard fold every now and then, then you see the wisdom in preparing. (Aguirre, 2009, p. 25)

While the preppers, relieved of post-decisional responsibility, may be able to sleep at night, they are not necessarily free from worries. Despite being cast as beyond one's control, the impending collapse still causes trouble. But now in a different way. Embarking on prepping as danger prevention thus immediately raises the question about *how much* future damage one can prevent:

...the primary goal is to minimize the impact of the crisis – whether it's a house fire, earthquake, or flood. At an absolute minimum, this means that you want to survive, but in most cases you also expect to maintain a reasonable quality of life. (Bradley, 2011, p. 25)

Once one has decided to prepare for future catastrophes, the 'absolute minimum' in terms of danger-prevention hardly seems like a preferable option. As such, the distinction between the non-prepping subject who assumes post-decisional responsibility by not preparing for future catastrophes and the prepping subject who refuses this responsibility by preparing, makes a re-appearance. This time, however, the distinction is between varying degrees of preparation. In a sense, the preppers who only prepare lightly must assume post-decisional responsibility for any excess damages that they could have prevented but did not, as they opted for the minimal version of preparation. In practice, this distinction may, for instance, amount to the choice between storing three days and three years' worth of food supplies. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the prepper never quite achieves the coveted exemption from post-decisional responsibility, as one could always have been *more* prepared. There is an infinite amount of potential future damages that can be prevented through preparation, and to not prepare for them is a decision for which one must assume responsibility. Despite observing the future as *dangerous* (as opposed to *risky*), prepping as danger-prevention thus ultimately still involves risk, as it cannot avoid establishing a link between decisions and future damage.

However, the risks involved in prepping do not only center on future damages, but also, paradoxically, on their absence. In addition to the recurring question of 'have I prepared enough?', another, perhaps more fundamental, problem seems to haunt the preppers; namely 'what if it is all for nothing?'. As such, the abovementioned insomniatic disquiet is not the only emotion associated with (not) prepping. Several of the books analyzed for this study thus note how a certain *desire* or *longing* for a disaster to occur is quite normal among preppers:

It is not at all uncommon for someone who's been prepping for years and years to start to actually long for a disaster to hit. Not in a tragic sense – not wanting to see mass death and destruction. But, rather, you desire sort of a real life test. You want to see that all your prepping wasn't for naught. This is normal. You're not weird. Well, maybe you are weird, but this is not a symptom of being so. (.) On top of that is the very human desire to be able to truthfully say 'I told you so!'. A major disaster, and successfully overcoming it, would be validation for all our efforts in planning. (Cobb, 2014, p. 167)

This paradoxical longing for danger, which prepping is ostensibly all about preventing, can be seen as another re-entry of the Luhmannian distinction between risk and danger. As such, it can be understood as a recognition of the risk involved in devoting one's life to prepare for danger. For Luhmann, this constitutes 'prevention-risk'; that is, the risk of. . .

...our preventive measures proving to be quite unnecessary: we toil day after day round the lake to keep fit only to meet our end in a plane crash. Our prevention proves to be causally ineffective. Or it is merely a supportive fiction. The risk-elimination remains a risk. (Luhmann, 1993b, p. 30)

The possibility that 'all your prepping [will be] for naught' is thus potentially also a risk of post-decisional regret in the case that the anticipated disaster does not materialize. In a sense, the prepper thus moves from the problem of anxious sleepless nights of dreading future catastrophes to longing for these very catastrophes. Luhmann also notes, however, that we may be more willing to accept prevention-risks, in which our preparations turn out to be redundant, exactly because they serve as security against so-called 'primary' risks (or dangers) (Luhmann, 1993b, p. 30). As such, this is parallel to the logic of insurance, which is indicative of the largely instrumental and rational ethos of prepping, which we discuss in the following section on its foreshadowing of the future.

Rational foreshadowing of catastrophe

In his work on the concept of foreshadowing, Morson (1994, p. 50) notes how the belief that history 'tends towards a fated end' and that 'the end may be known not only to God, but also to those people who have discovered God's plan, the eternal archetypes or history's laws' is rather common and has been held by Soviet Marxists, religious communities, and other groups with a fixed vision of the future. Similarly, Pedersen (2009, p. 393) emphasizes how one consequence of such beliefs is that 'the present becomes a preparation for a hypothetical future', which accurately captures the logic of prepping. Furthermore, the term foreshadowing indicates a peculiar backward causality. Morson gives the example of a storm foreshadowing a catastrophe; the storm is there because the catastrophe follows – it is a visible effect of that future catastrophe. In a sense, the future is already here and is substantial enough to cause earlier events and send omens backward:

Foreshadowing makes the future not just an inevitability but a substantial actuality. It is invisible but there, both virtually (in its effect) and actually. In a sense, it has already happened and we are in its shadow. (Morson, 1994, p. 49)

Prepping may in this way be seen as a practice carried out in the shadows cast by the future. But as opposed to both the mystical connotations easily inferred by this conceptualization, as well as the pop-cultural narrative of the prepper as a crazy, paranoid, gun-nut, the foreshadowing that occurs in the prepper books are often permeated by purported common-sense, rationality, and science. As such, the books typically portray prepping as fundamentally sensible and as a mere logical extension of principles and practices that most would consider to be common sense:

Everyone with a savings account and a first aid kit is preparing for an emergency. Each family with a woodpile or backyard garden is exercising a degree of independence. Even a smoke detector, a flashlight, and health insurance signal that you are aware that the unexpected can (and probably will) happen and that it would be irresponsible to be without some form of backup. (Harrison, 2008, p. 10)

Furthermore, the arguments made in favor of prepping tend to be framed in quite rational/scientific terms, and they often come with a fairly detailed and (quasi-)socio-logical diagnosis of present society as ‘extremely fragile’:

We live in a time of relative prosperity. Our healthcare is excellent, our grocery store shelves bulge with a huge assortment of fresh foods, and our telecommunication systems are lightning fast. (...) The average American comes home from work each day to find that his refrigerator is well stocked with food, his lights come on reliably, this telephone works, his tap gushes pure water, his toilet flushes, his paycheck has been automatically deposited to his bank, his garbage has been collected, his house is a comfortable 70°, and his Internet connection is rock solid. We’ve built a very Big Machine that up until now has worked remarkably well, with just a few glitches. But that may not always be the case. (...) Someday the Big Machine may grind to a halt. (Rawles, 2009, p. x)

These developments, the books claim, ‘force [us] to ask ourselves: how much stress can a society take before it begins to unravel? How safe will our cities be in another year, or in five years?’ (Rawles, 2009, p. xiii). Here, we encounter the foreshadowing afforded by the rational logic of prepping, not as a mystical concept, but more like a common-sense argument: Given our fragile and interconnected society and the observation of various ominous events such as increasing debt, climate change, and civil unrest, it seems logical and almost inevitable that a major catastrophe will occur at some point in the future. For instance, an earthquake around the New Madrid fault in the American Midwest is seen to be foreshadowed by tremors and seismic instability:

With so many tremors happening every year, this is obviously an area with a lot of seismic instability. Should the fault finally decide to give way, the damage and loss of life could be staggering. Some experts believe a major quake along the New Madrid fault is inevitable, perhaps within the next few decades. (Cobb, 2014, p. 15)

Similarly, it is stated that ‘scientists say we are entirely overdue for’ a volcanic eruption in the Yellow Stone Caldera, which could be ‘a true end of life as we know it scenario’ (Cobb 2014, p. 14). Against this backdrop of science and common-sense, the prepping literature can interpret certain current events such as ‘all of the recent bad economic news, and the advent of the H1N1 flu’ (Rawles, 2009, p. xiii) as particularly significant foreshadowings of larger catastrophes. This logic of can be somewhat implicit, ranging from formulations like ‘the looming specter of global warming and climate change, pandemics, terrorism and food insecurity’ (Harrison, 2008, p. 10), to more direct suggestions of foreshadowing:

The world as of late has been in upheaval: earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, terrorist strikes, pandemics ... the deadly list grows with each passing day. It is as if we are being given a warning about things to come. (...) Time may be short!. (Bradley, 2011, p. 1)

In the following section we explore what, if anything, lies on the other side of the foreshadowed catastrophe, as well as hint at the *implicit activism* of these imaginings of the end of the world as we know it (or TEOTWAWKI, as the event is commonly acronymized in prepper parlance).

The end of capitalism as we know it?

Life after the collapse is rarely detailed at much length in the literature. It is clear, however, that most of the books prepare the reader for some form of post-capitalist society (see also Campbell et al., 2019), in which the economic system has broken down (e.g., Cobb, 2014, p. 136). In the prepper books, the post-capitalist future is often foreshadowed through interpretations of the current economic situation:

The debt-merry-go-round can't go on forever. When the average consumer runs out of credit, when the U.S. treasury itself is no longer considered credit-worthy, and when the U.S. dollar is recognized for what it really is (nicely printed toilet paper) then things will get ugly. (...) Be prepared. (Rawles, 2009, p. 263)

Accordingly, most books have sections on bartering (e.g., Aguirre, 2009, p. 204; Cobb, 2014, p. 137–40; Rawles, 2009, p. 276–286) that detail what goods to stock up on, along with various techniques and strategies for getting the best trade. Many also have sections on investing in gold (e.g., Aguirre, 2009, p. 215; Bradley, 2011, p. 403). Aside from such hints, however, the society that emerges in the wake of the disaster is scarcely touched upon in the literature. There are many vague passages about 'being part of the solution (...) if and when challenging times do arrive' (Rawles, 2009, p. 290). In this telling passage, the post-apocalyptic society is thus described as a 'New World':

Should an EMP [electromagnetic pulse] take down the grid, should the Yellow Stone Caldera finally blow, I have little doubt that a significant percentage of the population will survive. They will then become the forebears of the New World, a new society, maybe not created from whole cloth but certainly unlike what we've seen before. By planning ahead, you can be there to see what comes next. (Cobb 2014, p. 170)

Another book ends with a related appeal to the reader:

Without folks like you and me, the lights of civilization may go out for a very long time. Are you up to the challenge? I pray that you are. (Rawles, 2009, p. 290)

What these glimpses of life beyond the foreshadowed catastrophe suggest, is that it would be insufficient to understand prepping as an apolitical activity merely because it perceives the future as dangerous and thus something we must prepare for individually instead of change collectively. Prepping, then, despite its barren instrumentality and avoidance of post-decisional responsibility, possibly still constitutes a form of implicit activism in terms of its performative effects. As we will argue below, even the very act of imaging a future (however fatalistic and dystopian) without capitalism constitutes a radical break from mainstream thought.

While the depictions of a post-apocalyptic and post-capitalist future share many similarities with leftist visions such as replacing the alienation of late-modern society with a stronger sense of connection and community (e.g., Rosa, 2019), there are also differences. In the prepper-narratives, hierarchical and patriarchal structures generally still prevail. For instance, Cobb (2014, p. 165) provides a small vignette on life a year after 'the lights went out'. In this scenario, he imagines a small community that 'has settled into a routine that is almost comfortable' and describes a celebration in which four 'community leaders' and 'Father Mulcahy' give speeches and everyone brings food (fried

rabbit, deer, fingerling potatoes) for a pot-luck (ibid). The passage also contains reflections on how much life has changed since the collapse:

I think one of the biggest changes in the last year has been how close we now are to one another. We actually talk to our neighbors, those next door and down the road. We aren't afraid to ask for a lending hand to mend a fence, knowing that tomorrow we'll repay the favor by helping them bring down a dying tree. Our kids have adapted well to life without Facebook and video chats. Children are indeed resilient. Perhaps the thing I noticed most at the celebration was something that had been missing for a long time but has finally come back to our little corner of the world – Hope. (Cobb, 2014, p. 166)

Here, we are presented with sketches of a wholesome, tight-knit community in which the isolation and alienation of late-modern capitalism have been dispelled. Furthermore, the passage ends with affirming the potential for hope, which is both a somewhat surprising word in such a dystopian context and an interesting parallel to more conventional forms of activism, which we will discuss in the following section.

Discussion

In this discussion, we contextualize the findings around how the future is understood and foreshadowed in the prepper books, as well as the responsibilities and performativities this entails, by contrasting these with conventional forms of activism. This further allows us to unfold the proposition that prepping can be understood as a form of implicit activism. This is followed by a conclusion summing up the overall argument of the paper, as well as a closing reflection on what conventional activists might learn from prepping.

The malleability of the future

As mentioned, traditional activism generally involves some kind of commitment to affecting the future. Whether through establishing an intentional community around principles of prefigurative organizing (Clarence-Smith & Monticelli, 2022), or participating in a school strike with *Fridays for Future* (Cologna et al., 2021), the aim is exactly this – to improve the future in some way. It follows that activism generally relies on the assumption that our collective future can be affected directly through decisions in the present. Activism can accordingly be described as risky business: It is a decision to organize strategically in a certain way and seek to positively influence the future. This implies accepting responsibility for the success or failure of the movement in bringing about the desired future, which is generally one in which damages associated with late capitalism (oppression, exploitation, environmental degradation, etc.) are prevented. For instance, the strategies of Extinction Rebellion, which include various forms of civil disobedience such as blocking roads and gluing oneself to buildings (De Moor et al., 2021; Stammen & Meissner, 2022) thus carry with them a significant amount of risk. Not only may the decisions made by the movement result in future damages to the activists themselves (arrests, injuries, etc.) but also to the collective future, should the chosen tactics end up alienating the general public from the cause (Spicer, 2019). This risk of post-decisional regret, then, is a risk that one must be willing to take if one wants to engage in conventional activism. Preppers, as we have seen, are not willing to take this

risk. They view the collective future as dangerous, as opposed to risky, and therefore entirely unrelated to their own decisions.

The preppers consequently seek to avoid responsibility for potential losses caused by these dangerous circumstances. While the driving emotion behind this preparative avoidance seems to be a sense of fear and worry about impending disaster, conventional activism tends to be less gloomy, as positive emotions of hope are often actively cultivated (Halperin, 2022), so that fears about the future may be ‘mediated by hope’ (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017, p. 507). Any such hope of mitigating future catastrophes has been completely abandoned by the preppers, who instead commit themselves to the strategy of adaptation, which allows them to act in conditions of radical uncertainty, while freeing themselves from the type of post-decisional responsibility that falls on conventional activists. While conventional activists accordingly long for various forms of utopia (Chrostowska & Ingram, 2017) or at least societies characterized by equality, sustainability, justice, happiness, and so on, the preppers – to the extent that their worry and dread allows for it – long for disaster to strike.

The shadows of the future

Given the predominance of hopeful emotions in activism, the way in which the future is foreshadowed in conventional activism differs markedly from the purportedly rational preppers and their quasi-scientific foreshadowing. In contrast to the common-sensical forecasts of the prepper books, which purport to face the harsh reality the future head on, contemporary activist movements such as *Fridays For Future* put great emphasis on the notion of hope, even in the context of vulnerability and climate emergency (Soler-I-Martí et al., 2022). Prefigurative social movements have even been described as relying on a hopeful and quasi-mystical idea of fulfillment (du Plessis & Husted, 2022), in which certain activities somehow seem to forebode the future. As such, it has been argued that labelling a specific practice as ‘prefigurative’ carries with it a sense of quasi-reassurance and ‘almost magical power’ (ibid.) in terms of anticipating the future. Part of this may be due to the Christian origins of the term, as prefiguration has been used in the exegetical tradition as a temporal framing ‘in which events at one time are interpreted as a figure pointing to its fulfillment in later events’ (Gordon, 2018, p. 525). Compared to conventional activism such as prefigurative movements, then, prepping is ostensibly more ‘rational’ – or perhaps even ‘realistic’ – in its foreshadowings of the future. On the other hand, prepping arguably also carries with it a certain Christian heritage in the form of the eschatological figure of *the Rapture*, although the books analyzed in this paper never make this connection explicit.

Hence, what these common religious undertones reflect is that prepping and activism with prefigurative elements can both be seen as examples of what Morson describes as ‘closed time’. Closed time is the opposite of ‘open time’, where the future can take many paths, and where ‘possibilities exceed actualities’ (Morson, 1994, pp. 9–10). The role of the religious themes is thus to close time off and provide a sense of certainty about the future. Arguably, however, time is still somewhat more open in contemporary activism, which has been described as the organization of ‘alternative futures’ to the current trajectory (Monticelli, 2022; Yates, 2015), thereby implying a plurality of possible futures (Beckett et al., 2017). Since alternative or non-dystopian futures are completely absent in

prepper rhetoric, time is significantly more closed here. In a sense, the foreclosure of the potential for a non-catastrophic future can be seen as the pre-condition for prepper identity as such.² As shown in the analysis, a non-catastrophic future could thus be taken to imply that all the preparation had been for nothing, and longing for catastrophe might accordingly be interpreted as the libidinal investments of a potentially threatened identity. This certainty, with which our catastrophic future is foretold in prepper narratives, is perhaps part of the explanation for the relatively broad cultural appeal they have gained in recent years. And this appeal, and the concomitant wide circulation of post-capitalist imaginings, is the reason we propose understanding prepping as a form of *implicit* activism, which we will discuss in the following section.

Post-capitalist performativities

The understanding of prepping as *implicit activism*, advanced in this paper, hinges on the performative effects associated with the preparative enactment of a dystopian crack in the mainstream conception of capitalist hegemony. We use the term performativity here in the sense of ability to cause effect (e.g., Austin, 1962; Butler, 1990; Cabantous et al., 2016). As such, the term can point to the relationship between theory (e.g., prepper books) and practice, and be used to inquire into how the proliferation of prepper imaginaries effect the world.

Such questions are interesting because the preppers, as mentioned, generally imagine a post-capitalist society on the other side of the apocalypse. These post-capitalist imaginaries are circulated online on prepper forums (Husted et al., 2023) and through books like the ones analyzed for this paper, just as they have begun to resonate in wider popular culture. From popular TV-shows like *The Last of Us* to tech-billionaires buying luxury shelters in the New Zealand mountains and getting laser eye-surgery as preparation for a post-apocalyptic society where glasses and lenses are no longer in production (Bowerman, 2017), post-capitalist imaginaries are increasingly part of the Zeitgeist. The implicit activism thus lies in the often unintended performative effects associated with the proliferation of the notion that we could (one day) live in a society without capitalism.

Countless scholars have pointed to the seeming impossibility of imagining an outside to capitalism as part of the explanation for its remarkable resilience, with leftist thinkers from Jameson (2003, p. 74) to Žižek (2012, p. 1) noting how ‘it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism’. And yet it seems that the prepper books, despite their apparent non-activist nature, are able to do both. While prepping, with its avoidance of post-decisional responsibility for the future and quasi-rational adaption, thus *prima facie* may appear as an apolitical activity, even the very act of imaging a future (however fatalistic and dystopian) without capitalism may potentially constitute a fissure in mainstream thought and the ‘pervasive atmosphere’ (Fisher, 2009, p. 16) of capitalism. One might accordingly construe the depiction of such a dystopian crack in the capitalist hegemony as a ‘line of flight’ (Jameson, 2005, p. 14) from dominant mainstream imaginaries and a potential sign of the ‘the [...] stirrings of a different state of things’ (Jameson, 2009, p. 416). As such, prepping, despite its dystopian outlook and apparent apolitical nature, could arguably be seen as perhaps the most impactful proliferator of

post-capitalist imaginaries in contemporary society, with performative effects that rival many conventional activist movements.

However, as we have noted elsewhere (du Plessis & Husted, 2022), social movement studies tend to focus exclusively on the latter, while the implicit activism of alternative movements such as prepping have gone largely unnoticed. The post-capitalist society envisioned by the preppers, characterized by small autonomous communities, bartering, and non-reliance on state and market is however not that different from the futures envisioned in many forms of leftist activism (Athanasiou & Bottici, 2022; Parker et al., 2014). The crucial difference is, of course, the tenacious insistence among the activists on our collective capacity to change the world for the better, as opposed to the dystopic-adaptive defeatism of prepping. Another difference is that prepping is a largely individualized practice. As Husted et al. (2023, p. 377) note:

... prepping is by definition an individualized act of readying oneself for that which other people have not realized, understood, or accepted: Because collective action has already failed (or never stood a chance), we can no longer (or could never) hope to ward off earth-shattering crises, but should prepare ourselves to live through them.

This kind of ‘atomization’ (ibid) can be understood as the quintessential neoliberal crisis response, where individual responsabilization tends to eclipse the potential for collective solutions. As such, whatever performative visions of an ‘outside’ to capitalism that are entailed through prepping, they would arguably still entail certain neoliberal notions of individual responsabilization and resilience in the face of danger (Chandler & Reid, 2016; Evans & Reid, 2014), while most conventional activists, on the other hand, tend to seek out collective solutions (see du Plessis, 2023 for an exception to this).

Conclusion

In table 1, we have summarized the discussion and outlined the main differences between prepping as a form of implicit activism and more conventional forms of activism. As shown, prepping represents a departure from conventional forms of activist organizing, in which participants accept the risks involved in seeking to alter the future. For preppers, the *modus operandi* is accordingly one of danger-prevention in the form of minimizing damage from unavoidable future disasters that are perceived as fundamentally outside of the preppers’ control. As such, most conventional social movements accept responsibility for damage that may befall them, both in the future and in the present as a result of their

Table 1. Contrasting prepping with conventional activism.

| | Conventional activism | Prepping |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| Type of prevention | Risk-prevention | Danger-prevention |
| Responsibility absorption | Yes: I/we are responsible | No: I/we are <i>not</i> responsible |
| Post-decisional regret | Yes: I/we may regret this | No: I/we will <i>not</i> regret this |
| Foreshadowing style | Quasi-magical, hopeful | Quasi-rational, defeatist |
| Relationship to politics | Political: The future can be impacted | Apolitical: The future <i>cannot</i> be impacted |
| Activism | Explicit: Deliberate change-seeking | Implicit: Unintended performative effects |

activism, whereas preppers avoid taking responsibility for future damages, because they are construed as outside of their control. This also allows preppers to avoid post-decisional regret, as they have ‘done everything they can’, whereas conventional activists may very well come to regret their decisions if a link can be drawn between these decisions and future damage. While preppers generally seek to avoid making this link, our analysis has shown how it re-appears in the form of worrying that one has either not prepared enough, or that one has prepared in vain. Preparing in vain would thus imply the non-occurrence of any catastrophic future events, which in the prepper literature is generally considered an unlikely possibility.

Accordingly, the prepper literature is riddled with common-sensical foreshadowing of future catastrophes that rely on ‘rational’ and even ‘scientific’ forms of argumentation. On the other hand, much conventional activism relies on a kind of hope-infused performativity, even in the midst of climate emergency, in which the foreshadowing of the utopian future at times takes on almost magical qualities. Furthermore, prepping can be viewed as an apolitical (not non-political) practice, which operates without any discernable political goals and accepts the future with a kind of cynical defeatism, which is contrasted by the stubborn hopeful insistence on the possibility of creating a better future, which defines conventional types of activism.

Finally, we propose that prepping should be viewed as a form of *implicit activism*, which, in contrast to the explicit and deliberate change-seeking mode of conventional activism, works through the largely unintended performative effects of popularizing the notion of an outside to capitalism. While both forms of activism envision post-capitalist futures, prepping constitutes an individualized and unhopeful stance that accepts the current catastrophic trajectory of society and thereby deprives/frees its proponents from the (respons)ability to act politically in the face of paralyzing danger.

Prepper-lessons for conventional activists

The true courage is not to imagine an alternative, but to accept the consequences of the fact that there is no clearly discernible alternative: the dream of an alternative is a sign of theoretical cowardice, it functions as a fetish which prevents us thinking to the end the deadlock of our predicament. In short, the true courage is to admit that the light at the end of the tunnel is most likely the headlight of another train approaching us from the opposite direction. (Zizek, 2017, np)

Finally, it is perhaps worth considering what, if anything, conventional activism might learn from prepping and vice versa. Inspired by an emerging strand of thought, sometimes referred to as ‘post-apocalyptic environmentalism’ (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018), one could accordingly argue that prepping represents an appropriate diagnosis of the future, but an inappropriate response, while the inverse is the case for many forms of conventional activism, particularly those centered around notions of hope and optimism. Cassegård and Thörn (2018, p. 574) have thus argued that ‘we need to drop the premise that all mobilization needs hope in the sense of upbeat, optimistic messages’. Similar arguments have been made by scholars associated with the notion of ‘deep adaptation’ (Bendell & Read, 2021) and by novelist Jonathan Franzen (2021) in the essay entitled ‘What if we stopped pretending?’ The subtitle succinctly sums up the argument: ‘The

climate apocalypse is coming. To prepare for it, we need to admit that we can't prevent it'. In this view, seeking to cultivate hope, or to 'prefigure' the future, would be seen as a form of 'pretending' that blinds us to the severity of our predicament and how 'the global community should prepare for drastic changes' (Franzen, 2018, p. 16).

As such, one version of post-apocalyptic environmentalism could involve taking a 'palliative' approach to the end of world (Demore, 2019). Such a stance 'hides nothing' and 'does not believe in magic' – again in contrast to the insistence on, and cultivation of, 'hope' in conventional activism (ibid.). In sum, many conventional forms of activism could arguably learn something from the 'courage of hopelessness' (Žižek, 2012) with which the preppers interpret the future – or, in Luhmanian terms, from the *danger* they perceive. Because, to a certain extent, future climate catastrophes *are* unavoidable and irreversible – and, as such, out of our control. This leads to the question of whether it is possible for activists to acknowledge this unavoidable danger and still maintain a sense of hope for the future to mobilize around? Or, in other words, do post-apocalyptic visions necessarily always induce passivity or, at best, the atomized and individualized preparation (Husted et al., 2023) outlined in the prepper books? Perhaps the rejection of hope, and embracement of inevitable SHTF scenarios, might paradoxically give us the freedom to view ourselves in new light and thereby constitute the soil from which new ideas can grow.

Notes

1. We use the term 'prepper' in this paper and not the term 'survivalist' as the latter was largely abandoned during the 1990s due to its racist, religious, anti-communist, and anti-government connotations. The term 'prepper' was accordingly adopted around the 2000s by survivalists who were not so explicitly political (Huddleston, 2018).
2. For a similar point on foreclosure as a precondition for identity, see du Plessis (2022).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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