

Emily Ray Minding the Gap
Between Worlds:
Extinction, Climate
Change, and Doomsday
Prepping

The prospect of extinction driven by climate change often leads people to try and forestall the end of their world through doomsday prepping. I draw from Mantilla's work on intersubjectivity and extinction alongside the institutional: What happens when the drive to extinguish all life on the planet meets our drive to survive any conditions on this planet? I engage institutional analysis alongside scholars of nuclear subjectivities to better understand the confounding condition of living in a neoliberal order that requires suffering and death to maximize its efficiency. This work discusses doomsday prepping in a world radiating with nuclear energy. I define prepping as more than a set of habits or behaviors but as a political institution, including the relationships between prepping and facing the prospects of our own extinction as people living in a postnuclear world.

Prepping is seemingly simple to define: It is merely preparing for anticipated disruptions to the flow of everyday life. In this sense, prepping is a normal activity of well-regulated adults who anticipate some variation in the predictable flow of social and environmental stasis for which having a surplus of life's necessities would be useful, even if the specific disrupting event is not yet known. Prepping also denotes stockpiling supplies for weeks, months, or years of living in isolation apart from other people and in a world that is so severely ruptured there is no guarantee of a stable state, society, or economy. Prepping is as a manifestation of consumer society that, against the backdrop of skepticism of the state to provide meaningful social support, and its attendant anxiety about disintegrating social life, compels individuals to accumulate, hoard, and stockpile con-

sumer goods in such quantities and in such places as to ‘ride out’ events that disrupt, destroy, or derail the status quo of their everyday lives.

What does it mean for humanity to live between the world as we know it and the world that is unwinding in the age of climate change and extinction? What does it mean to live on the edge of a crisis unfolded? How do we live ‘where the veil is thin’ between two worlds? The veil partitions the material world from the spiritual, or the living from the dead. I think about the veil as a partition between the world we live in and the postapocalyptic one we cross into. In some traditions, the veil is thinner at certain times of the year during seasonal cycles, when contact between worlds is easier. The movement between worlds is reminiscent of literature addressing the world before and after the advent of nuclear technology. Gabriele Schwab moves between past, present, and future in a nuclear world, or what she terms the postnuclear world as one that is still marked by the “necropolitical violence” of the atomic age but is no longer part of the Cold War period (Schwab 2020). Living in the postnuclear world in a post-nuclear subjectivity means living with a time-shifting spectral presence. Nuclear residue in everything that comes from the past is part of our present and will outlive us, making radioactivity an “undead materiality” and a “haunting from the future” (Schwab 2020, 45). The thinned veil is permeable between the living and dead worlds, the worlds of the present and the future, such that it is impossible to imagine living where the veil is thick, where we have more space between existence and non-existence. Perhaps being nuclear subjects means we will become those who haunt instead of those who are haunted. Schwab issues a warning about the double-bind of imagining extinction:

[T]he refusal to imagine extinction would amount to buying in to the politics and epistemology of denial and (self-)deception; succumbing to the apocalyptic imaginary, on the other hand, would amount to buying in to the ecology of fear and annihilation that enables nuclear necropolitics in the first place. The challenge therefore consists in imagining extinction while at the same time avoiding the secondary gratifications of sensationalizing apocalypticism (48).

This quote confounds our typical orientation towards apocalyptic conditions associated with climate change. Climate change is often approached as if it will eventually unfurl into its final form. Waiting for its arrival, even if it is already here, leaves humanity to live a ghostly or spectral existence between worlds. Are extinction and climate change denialism a way to reassert ourselves in a world that is impermanent? Prepping for end times

is a way to establish life on one side of the crisis even as we anticipate living on the other side of it, as though we will pass through the space between worlds. We keep waiting for climate change to become Climate Change, for extinction to become Extinction. Prepping serves as an attempt by some members of humanity to anchor themselves to the world as it is in order to survive the passage into the post-apocalyptic world. But what if world-ending is not an event but a process, and a process that loops rather than concludes decisively?

Sabu Kohso writes about the horror of nuclear technology unleashed in commercial and military uses and the ways in which this creates new apocalyptic formations. He argues that one way Fukushima alters our perspective of world ending and world beginning is by seeing a world ending crisis folded back into the world as it is:

If the Fukushima event itself is interpreted as an eschatological sign, it does not seem to indicate the immediate end/rebirth of the world[...] Fukushima materializes the inaccessibility of a singular moment of end/rebirth, as the catastrophe of this event is absorbed into an endless process of radioactive contamination and its management [...] Here apocalypse is perceived as an unending process toward the pre-determined future (or return) of a radioactive planet (Kohso 2020, 8).

These apocalyptic moments, like the Fukushima disaster, are not the final rupture with reality and the official transition into the end of the world. Each event that irradiates, pollutes, and makes the world harder to live in challenges the perception that we are all atomised individuals waiting for the end/new world but instead we become a “new crowd,” in Kohso’s words, living in the same world that is even harder to manage. Instead of looking for opportunities to secure our individual survival; to avoid the suffering and challenges of living in the world as it is, he embraces life as a struggle, a way to continue living on without anticipating the final break. We live with the world as part of our actions rather than looking for the better world coming out of the rupture.

Some consider extinction and climate change to be hyperobjects, Timothy Morton’s term for an object that exists across so many scales and temporal dimensions it defies containment and overawes us. Climate change manifests as a storm or drought, but we cannot put our minds, hands, or solutions around climate change as such. An interesting challenge to the hyperobject is the masterless object:

Once [radionucleotides are] unleashed these become an anticommodity, or (*mushubutsu*, masterless object), in the term circulated in post-Fukushima Japan [...] [...] To survive, the capitalist economy must create a mechanism to commodify the masterless object. In an alternate view, however, it would be more accurate to say that by creating the endless necessity of aftercare, nuclear industry guarantees capitalism its zombie life of permanent stop-gap operation (Kohso 2020, 88).

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The masterless object is related to Kohso's later description of the global nuclear regime as driven by power contestations within it rather than acting as if it were attached to particular global actors, or that it had a body and a conscious experience itself. The masterless object was used as a defense by the Tokyo energy company, TEPCO, responsible for the Fukushima disaster, by claiming that the radioactivity unleashed by the accident was out of their control. Radionucleotides simply merged with ecosystems and became unmanageable, no longer ownable. Yet capitalism drives these same companies to find ways to profit from the escape of masterless objects. "As the concept of masterless object, uttered by TEPCO for self-exemption, revealed unwittingly, radiation is less an object than a mode of existence or event, wherein split atoms of uranium are merging with the environment in nano dimension, following the complexity of planetary flows" (Kohso 2020, 110). The hyperobject, on the other hand, may defy containment as a single object and instead function as a category that contains objects into which it manifests. I contend hyperobjects are not really objects but rather processes that have manifestations through objects in the world. The masterless object provides a way to see what are often termed hyperobjects, instead, as processes that permeate the whole of living, that are part of the Earth itself and the way we live in it. These processes defy ownership and mechanisms of control, yet they still manage to prompt capitalist responses through profit-seeking containment and adaptation commodities. The masterless object confronts us, with our commitments to rational planning, containment, and control, with objects that simply do not comply. Even a post-apocalyptic world would be irradiated with the reactor water from Fukushima.

Kohso concludes by recommending nothing short of doomsday prepping:

In a strict sense, we can do nothing if the end of the World/Earth comes as a singular event. As long as we are not transcendent and can do nothing about such an occasion, the End is not our problem. We will have to live on by nurturing and sharing techniques for survival in local

purgatories, in order to turn them into microparadises. We are neither ruler nor savior of the planet. We are just trying to live in a way comfortable for us and to die in a way suitable for us, with a mobility with which we can live where we want to live. We want to achieve a future that is undetermined, a future that we can create (165).

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American-style prepping is bound up with a leftist project of liberating world history from the fatalism of capitalism, from the apocalyptic fate that we are all bound to as nuclear subjects. The better future is one that is open and under our care, but this is only possible to achieve by preparing to survive the world as it currently manifests. Prepping fits into this formulation. Life as struggle may entail preparing to live in a life that requires great effort to survive. Japan has experienced what the US prepped against experiencing in the Cold War: The radioactivity of everyday life after an event that becomes part of a world-changing process but not a sudden world-ending event. Fukushima upended the distinction between the good world and the polluted condemned world, making it even more difficult to distinguish between the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic:

Here things were inverted. Adjectives like green, natural, or organic that figure motherly resources could no longer embrace us with their good intentions, but internalized the invisible threat of radiation. On the other hand, artificial constructions and foods—cold, ugly, distasteful, and unhealthy as they could be—came to give us the minimum sense of security (Kohso 2020, 29).

This loss of a sense of security can be recaptured through the institution of prepping, and, as such, find a way to assert control and certainty where both seem sucked into a vacuum of world-ending technologies and their attendant politics.

Prepping is part of the embrace of the artificial with life support systems that mechanically mimic the biosystems upon which life on Earth depends. Bunkers have filtration systems, pumps, inflows and outflows, stockpiled shelf-stable goods that are anything but fresh, green, and perishable. Prepping requires taking on the qualities of a fully managed life as a defense against precarity and chance. Amongst the neoliberal and committed to rugged individualism of the US, preparing and bunkering is meant to be exclusive to family units and made available through the marketplace of survival. Capitalism continues to fold disaster and catastrophe into the next iteration of consumer society. Rather than facing a crisis of

existence, capitalism creates markets to tend to the after-effects of nuclear disaster. Capitalism forces us to continue living between worlds, the one that is always decomposing and the one that comes next, but it continues dragging us along in the political, economic, and social infrastructure of the world that produces the crises we understand as apocalyptic. We live in an in-between world as members of a species that is undergoing an extinction crisis; between a world that is favorable to human life and a world that is no longer. We are not fully spectral or ghostly, but living in a liminal space of climate change has ghostly aspects. The liminal space is one that assumes climate change has yet to touchdown, it is sending out warnings through storms and changing ocean currents, but we do not think that it is here. Climate change as always projected into the future from the Western perspective likewise entraps us in a liminal space.

Schwab talks about this space between worlds discussing the “as if” in *Radioactive Ghosts* in the “psychic splitting” between the reality of living in the plutonium economy and living as if there is a world that is not yet radioactive, and we can still live in that one. This splitting allows us to not just deny climate change or extinction events as having already arrived, but it allows us to deny the nuclear world as one that is complete; there is no daylight between the world we live in and the one that is glowing with radioactivity. “[B]y confronting human beings with the possibility that they might become the agents of the ultimate death of planetary life, nuclear politics transforms the human species itself. As the only species that arrogates nuclear power, human beings are turned into nuclear subjects” (Schwab 2020, 21). The species-power the human holds allows for us to not just bring the death of individuals of our species but of other species, too. Schwab argues the advent of nuclear power is also the advent of the power to cause extinction (Schwab 2020, 27).

Prepping is not irrational; it is a rational response to an irrational world. The intellectual commitments of the Enlightenment period, as the Frankfurt critical theorists have told us, have put us in the position of rationally managing nuclear atoms and its distribution across species and ecosystems. This is an irrational project but one we undertake, even though radiation as a masterless object will continue rejecting comprehensive management. Prepping is not just a set of behaviors in the matrix of subconscious and conscious existence, prepping as a socio-political institution is a coping mechanism that adapts for all kinds of subjectivities in the new extinguishing world. One of the ways in which people prepare to survive annihilation or extinction is to bunker down and ride out conditions as they consume everyone else. In the US, the bunker is usually an underground domicile for personal use, not public, and buried in a backyard or

property away from the family home. Yet the bunker is not required for the acts of bunkering; The bunker is one material manifestation of what it means to bunker as a way of life.

The bunker itself promotes imaginary doomsday scenarios and acting out preparation in anticipation of some post-disaster world that is radically changed. “The bunker fantasy promises shelter from the apocalyptic forces of nuclear war. But it also affords an opportunity to reorganize the world as it *could be* rather than as it is: the act of sheltering requires stripping one’s life down to the bare essentials to rebuild from scratch and it provides a space for reckoning with everyone and everything sacrificed or left outside the bunker” (Pike 2019, 16). In Virilio’s tour of the Atlantic Wall, he described being inside one of the abandoned bunkers as “being in the grips of that cadaveric rigidity from which the shelter was designed to protect him” (Virilio 1994, 16). The modern doomsday shelter, as it developed out of the fortress, must attend to the changes in weaponry and threat. “Today the technological conjunction of the vehicle and the projectile concentrates both movements of reduction: with the supersonic jet with a nuclear payload, for example, the whole planet becomes ‘a defensive redoubt’ [...] [...] The conquest of the earth thus appears above all the conquest of energy’s violence” (Virilio 1994, 20). The superpowers of the mid-century urgently engaged the race to conquer energy’s violence while taking the need to fortify their populations in anticipation of the use of such harnessed violence seriously. The bunker as a refuge for those who wish to repopulate a stripped Earth fits alongside existing millenarian beliefs about nuclear war as apocalyptic. The world that seems to be always coming to an end is a world in turmoil. Climate change is both unavoidable and underway. Far-right leaders continue to gain footholds across the globe, and the American empire is waning. The context in which people prepare for violence, instability, and disaster is severely hemmed in by neoliberalization, the preeminence of capitalism, democracy skepticism, and the legacies and current activities of colonialism, and racial, class, and gender hierarchies. In this environment, rational irrationality is an expected approach to making a life. Focusing on the self as a survivalist makes it difficult to imagine confronting and surviving collectively experienced harms together and to account for others across the differentiated impacts they may experience.

Preppers often account for ‘the end of the world as we know it’ (TEOTWAWKI). “As we know it” is an important qualification. The end may not be the end of all existence in the present and future, but the end of what is known and familiar. What comes at the end of the world as we know it? Only those who are prepared will know. The new world might be salvation

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through Jesus Christ and unification with God; it might be a wasteland in which those who were smart enough to prepare can rebuild the world. However dismal the outlook is here, the upshot is the unknowability of the future. The end of what we know may be the beginning of a world liberated from oppressive systems. The end may also be one that has no clear path forward, just a break from the past. The prepper imaginary is not fated, and TEOTWAWKI remains open, unscripted, and hard to prepare for. Perhaps as Kosho suggests, the end of the world culminates into nothing, or loops back on itself. The futility of American-style prepping comes into relief. Aside from ensuring bare survival, prepping does not actually prepare people to live in a radically changed or new world. Prepping limits the vision of entering a new world to one of fortification, outliving others, and looking for a future of competition over scarce resources. At the edge of what anyone or any algorithm can predict is the edge of what prepping can do discursively and materially.

The prepping subject lives in the postnuclear world. Prepping is incomplete and requires maintaining conflicting postures about the world we live in, the world we will pass into, and the passage itself. Prepping reveals the tense orientation towards potential species extinction: ‘extinction for thee but not for me.’ Those who prepare and bunker may dodge the extinction event, in which case extinction would be a mass die-off, but not a permanent end to a species. Prepping is foiled by the masterless object. Radioactive particles move through the perceived barriers between apocalyptic worlds. The porous boundaries in spacetime allow for a flow between an apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic world, one that may filter out humans but filter in what we have made. The porous boundaries apply to climate change too, if climate change is understood as something we do and we live with, rather than something we are waiting for. We may be waiting on a post-climate change world for as long as we have been waiting for the United States’ 9/11 to conclude and reveal something else, which is to say, we live in a world now always marked by this punctuation in many unfolding processes. Prepping as an institution cannot prepare people to rethink how we live and organize ourselves, and therefore move into a future quite different from our current trajectory.

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