Dossier
Apocalyptica
No 2 / 2023
DOI: 10.17885/heiup.apoc.2023.2.25040

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Doomsday Prepping as Prophecy, Predestination, and Media Spectacle

Introduction

This essay concerns the visual culture of cosmologies and apocalypses as Adolfo F. Mantilla Osornio's work frames them, specifically the shift from natural to technological catastrophe, and how the visual culture of Western narratives displaces, dominates, or subsumes other stories of catastrophe, renewal, or other kinds of cosmological cycles. I will use the framing to politically analyze the idea of prophecy, predestination, and media spectacle through the lens of the contemporary politics of doomsday prepping. Using political frames to take on eschatological or theological ideas is a short bridge to cross; as Benjamin notes, political concepts are secularized theological ideas (Benjamin 1986).

The shared research project between Emily Ray and myself studies the politics of doomsday 'prepping' in the United States. Although the 'doomsday' that people are prepping for can take several shapes, Mantilla's work can be taken as a starting point to make sense of how doomsday prepping came to be understood in the imaginary of the United States as part of the broader development of what Marcuse called technological rationality (Marcuse 1968). This prepping imaginary is mobilized to induce responsibilized citizens to respond to natural, social, and technological catastrophes, as well as become integrated into discourses of political predestination, as well as fodder for consumption in an ecology of social media influence. By prepping, we mean a constellation of behaviors that can look like stockpiling, hoarding, extreme camping, or millenarian yearnings for the end of the world. Our goal has never been to give a complete

taxonomy of the behavior and assess which is 'good' prepping or 'real' prepping. Nor has it been to determine what is rational or deluded behavior. That work is important, of course, but our project is focused on the political conditions that make prepping a sensible response as individualized consumer behavior. Such behavior runs from storing shelf-stable goods at home, building a bunker in the backyard, a panic room in the condominium, or squatting in a decommissioned nuclear missile silo in the vast expanse of the Midwest United States. Additionally, when we talk about 'doomsday' we are not referring to a specific religious eschatological frame, and while it may be useful to distinguish between 'doomsday,' 'apocalypse,' 'armageddon,' 'catastrophe,' and the like, preppers use these terms interchangeably or treat them as a jumble. Finally, bunkerization is a term we deploy to describe the process, politics, and everyday life of preppers; as a way they both articulate the world and also how they relate to it. Bunkerization is thus a process of managing risk and vulnerability, fortifying the home, and withstanding catastrophic conditions—be they social, ecological, or technological. To sum up our approach: preppers, using a variety of approaches and methods, are getting ready for the 'Bad Thing' to happen, whatever that happens to be, in the hopes they can predict, prepare, and persevere through to the other side; whatever happens to be there.

I use bunkerization in the United States to tell the social science story that complements Mantilla's cultural, anthropological, and historical one to think about prepping as an ideological project and how it connects to its pre-modern antecedents. Mantilla's work lays out how visual culture shifted from a human-nature dialectic at the end of the 19th century into a nature-society dialectic in the twentieth century. This shift is important because it shaped how people conceived of and related to apocalyptic events. Namely, as we move from the human-nature dialectic, where the apocalypse is something that is beheld, witnessed, or otherwise a kind of passive experience, in the modern conception of apocalypse in the nature-society dialectic, humans do not merely behold the unfolding of the end as a passive experience, but are active participants in the unfolding, resisting, or enacting of an apocalypse. This active role calls into question notions of liberal subjectivity, and political responsibility, but, as I will focus on here, an active, participatory apocalypse raises political questions of how old eschatological concepts find new expressions in a secular, modern, technologically-driven apocalypse.

To make my case I will consider prophecy, predestination, and media spectacle in their modern, secular modes, to build toward a political theory of bunkerization. These will not necessarily look like their premodern

antecedents, but they will loop back to said antecedents and, hopefully, the relationship will nevertheless be clear. For Prophecy, I want to extend Weber's sociological theory of 'disenchantment' and what it means to act without guardrails. I will further investigate what the political stakes of disenchantment are, and how this disenchantment changes the cosmological surety of eschatological thought. I will also discuss how the neoliberal subject makes for a curious prophet in the context of technological annihilation. These are prophets without followers; pastors without flocks—fully neoliberalized autonomous individual units—whose individual fortification and preparation is a matter of individuated volition and consumer purchasing power. Finally, I will discuss the time horizon of modern eschatology, noting that rather than a long-term, cyclical, or renewal kind of apocalypse, modern apocalyptic thinking is compelled to predict the time and the place of annihilation as yet another data point in the consumer model for rational behavior. This makes the apocalypse an everyday event: ever-present, and always already about to happen. Then I will discuss predestination, which I will give a modern analog of prefiguration. Here, I want to underscore how bunkerization makes itself inevitable in the totality of a one-dimensional neoliberalized society. While this might echo a kind of Calvinist predestination, I want to argue how this seeming technological lock-in both in weaponry and domestic fortification produces a bunkerized subject, but unlike the predestination of a Western religious variety, there is no actual destination for the bunkerized subject. In other words, the bunker is a tomb, and there is no imagination for what happens if and when the time comes to leave the bunker. I thus argue that the political challenge is one of prefiguration, or as I will lay out in political theory terms, the attempt to think how we might end up somewhere else, the ability to get there, and why it is more desirable than the seemingly inevitable. Finally, I will lay out bunkerizing as a kind of media spectacle. Here I will link the political theorizing back to visual culture in a way that shows the material politics of doomsday prepping. Preppers are an increasingly mainstream population of people engaging in increasingly mainstream behavior. While it may be comforting, funny, or disturbing to gawk at these people, I argue that the modern visual culture of prepping is a de-politicization of the real needs of preparedness and precludes collective action responses to shared threats. Here, we again see that much like the pre-modern, pre-western conceptions of the apolitical apocalypse, there is little possibility for political responses. But the modern version shifts from apolitical to depoliticized and results in a barren kind of bearing witness. We are not asked to behold the awe, splendor, or violence of the rupture, but to consume prepping behavior itself as a spectacle.

In other words, never to actually consume the hoarded goods—because that would mean that things have gone very, very wrong— but to consume the behavior and visual spectacle of prepping.

Prophets Without People, Pastors Without Flocks

When Max Weber wrote his seminal essay "Politics as a Vocation" he lamented, even as far back as the turn of the twentieth century, the extent to which social and political possibilities were effectively reduced to the technocratic tinkerings of bureaucrats, leaving little room for the transformational possibilities of authentic politicians (Weber 2004). He foresaw a "polar night of icy darkness" that would envelop society as it became rationalized to the point of inertia; no more political questions, no more alternatives, just technocrats administering the bureaucracy. He refers to this project of modernity as disenchantment (Weber 2004, 93). I suspect this can mean a lot of things to a lot of people, but I will deploy the term as Hannah Arendt said, to mean "thinking without a banister" (2018, 497). In other words, the old guardrails that provided orientation of humans to nature and to the world, and the surety of the cosmological order, have fallen away. This leaves humans to their own devices, responsible for their actions, and without a meaningful metaphysics to shape action (Strong 2013). Setting aside the question of whether disenchantment or reenchantment is a desirable thing, the theological concept of prophecy changes in a disenchanted world.

Mantilla analyzes the visual culture of the apocalypse at the turn of the twentieth century, and shows how apocalyptic representation is based on natural cataclysms, the overcoming of the social in the human-nature dialectic. This has important implications for at least these two reasons: 1) it establishes how this kind of apocalyptic rationality is one of apolitical passive witnessing, and 2) prophecy is less a matter of chronological guesswork but rather cosmological surety. The first point firmly establishes that in a pre-modern sense, apocalypse is something that can be borne witness to, but it is not an opportunity for political action. Somehow, through some divine plan, nature has overtaken the human, and this may be an opportunity for a second coming, a heavenly Jerusalem, or in non-western, non-Christian religions, a renewal, rebirth, or new cycle. Saying this kind of prophecy about the apocalypse is apolitical is not a critique; it is simply out of our hands and the role of prophecy is to try to persuade people to orient themselves toward the cosmological good such

that if/when things end they will have some kind of salvation, purpose, or fulfillment. It is not necessarily about predicting the time or the place of an event, but a kind of Foucauldian pastoral care for the souls of oneself and others, techniques of truth for aligning oneself with the good (Foucault 1982). The second point comes into stark clarity in mid-twentieth-century technical modernity, because the idea of prophecy has not gone away but rather becomes chronotechnological rather than cosmological, and the normative orientation of cosmology falls away. As opposed to the more cosmological, divine will approach to the apocalypse which suggests that humans cannot know the time and the place, technological rationality simply cannot abide this. The positivist approach to knowledge with its attendant quantification of everything seeks surety through empirical demonstration (Horkheimer 1975). In the nature-society dialectic, this means a total rationalization and domination of nature through technological sophistication. Taken to its logical conclusion, complete knowledge about the world itself much therefore also include knowledge about its end. We can see how many degrees Celsius the earth is warming over time, and what projected thresholds lead to corresponding ecological scenarios. We can know, in meteorological real-time, the spread patterns of nuclear fallout and the timeframe of uninhabitability of nuclear detonations. We can track tsunamis and other extreme 'natural' disasters and marshal resources, capital, and public health cadres to limit displacement, rebuild infrastructure, and know how long and how intensely the resulting misery will be given levels of investment. This kind of scientific prophecy, which seemingly contradicts Weber, might be a politicization of the apocalypse because of the disenchantment brought about by technological modernity because responsibility as participants falls on us. Whereas prophets in a pre-modern sense could warn about ordering one's soul toward the good, prophets in this technological modernity sense try to sway public opinion, shape public policy, and serve as both prophets of doomsday as well as katechons to try to prevent it. The new prophets say that greenhouse emissions will have apocalyptic consequences unless we adopt a plan of action, or rogue objects in space have a non-zero statistical likelihood of impact. We have moved from a passive apocalypse of revelation and cosmological fulfillment, into a realm of an active apocalypse that implicates responsibility and participation in its unfolding or prevention.

This chronological approach matters because, in the modern technological conception of an apocalypse, there is no 'after,' at least politically. This results from the disenchantment of technological rationality and the loss of cosmological guardrails. If there is a distinct after; a renewal, a

heavenly Jerusalem, then perhaps orienting toward that will gain a heavenly reward, or perhaps a front-row seat to the destruction of the earthly world. But if there is no cosmological surety or cyclical certainty, then what is left except to know when the party is over through empirical observation? If there is no conception of an after then all that is left is to know when and get ready for it to see what remains on the other side, if anything. Rebirths, renewals, or new cycles are not guaranteed, so a passive apolitical apocalypse will not do. However, just because an apocalypse is no longer apolitical does not mean it must necessarily be politicized. It is entirely possible to go from apolitical to depoliticized modes of apocalypse, and doomsday prepping can do just that. Preppers are thus Weber's revenge. Given the obvious lack of remaking social relations on the technocratic advice of scientists/prophets, preppers want neither to accept social and political responsibility for making things otherwise, but nor can they simply apolitically witness it. They must prepare to withstand and survive the horror of annihilation. This approach drains preparation of its collective action or political importance and depoliticizes the apocalyptic event. This more individuated version can only be done through, adequately prepared through, a bunkerized life to survive the apocalyptic rupture, everyone else be damned (perhaps literally in the case of the rapture). This is what prophets without people and pastors without flocks mean. The prepper is a prophet who is not concerned about orienting others to the cosmological order, nor are they interested in saving peoples' souls. The prepper is a prophet only concerned about the time of the apocalyptic rupture such that they can make use of their stockpiled goods and bunkerized homes to survive the moment.

This may sound irrational, and prompted some to ask: is the point for preppers simply to survive two more weeks than everybody else? The answer to that question may be even bleaker. It is not about surviving but being right. The bunker is the modern prophet's Patmos where they can account, even if only to themselves, how they saw the apocalypse coming, lived through it, and can tell the tale, even if it is to nobody else. In that sense, the concept of bunkerization carries with it this modern prophecy of self-preservation. Why buy a supply of goods that will last ten years if the person doing so does not think, at least in some kind of probabilistic risk management, that there is a non-zero chance of needing that self-stable supply of goods? This is how bunkerization flattens the end of the world into mere chronology.

Predestination or Prefiguration?

The neoliberal order insists on a retreating state and seeks to funnel all choice into consumer options, producing what Marcuse calls a one-dimensional society. This is a society without opposition, and operates with a "smooth, democratic unfreedom" (Marcuse 1968, 1). This social order invades everyday life and short-circuits the chances for alternatives in the realm of politics, culture, and even language itself. Politics becomes a disenchanted matter of rational choice, culture becomes commodity consumption, and discourse reinforces the existing order. It is against this one-dimensional backdrop that I argue bunkers are predestined, or what policy experts might call an example of 'path dependency.' I am not saying that the bunker or panic room is a common lived reality, but rather that bunkerization becomes a commonsense mode of everyday life. Consider things like home surveillance systems, in the United States where plenty of people hoard guns, or being 'energy independent' in case the power goes out. These are rational responses in a one-dimensional society where there are no collective action alternatives to shared threats.

This predestination of the bunker is problematic, however, for a number of reasons. First, it highlights the limits of bunkerization. Hardened homes with stockpiled goods as a matter of consumer choice might be able to mitigate personal risks, but cannot rise to the level of the kinds of catastrophic changes the prepper is supposedly getting ready to confront. This is a problem because recognizing shared vulnerability might produce another kind of relation to the world and each other, but the predestined, one-dimensional bunker can only insist on its own logic and the solution to any problem. Second, the predestination of the bunker is on a very short horizon. That is, prepping prophecy, as described above, is constantly surveying the landscape and assessing whether the conditions are sufficiently degraded such that it is time to enter the bunker. This sheer imminence of total catastrophe thus makes everyday life a constant awareness of the end, or if not the end, that things may degrade such that it may as well be the end. This precludes a meaningful conceptualization of the future, and the future becomes an agonizing present where preppers decide when to enter the bunker and foreclose on the future for good.

An alternative to the predestination of the bunker is a prefigurative, anticipatory politics that envisions and tries to enact new ways of orientating ourselves to the world. Prefigurative politics would be an anticipatory politics that focuses on, "(re) making life tensed on the verge of catastrophe in ways that protect, save, and care for certain valued lives, and damage, destroy, and abandon other lives" (Anderson 2010, 782).

That is to say, undoing the damage of individualized neoliberal subjectivity that cannot fathom collective action and shared vulnerability. We should be cautious to assume that undoing the individualized neoliberal version of preparedness does not mean that the state apparatus as currently constructed is necessarily the alternative. Statecraft is part of a one-dimensional society, and the ability of states to shape the future in a technological/spatial/temporal way that limits the vectors for opportunities for change in the present and funnels human action in ways that reinforce the "spatio-social production of the future" that looks like the status quo (Jeffrey and Dyson 2021, 642). An interesting dialectical tension seems to emerge here. On the one side, prefigurative movements offer alternative versions of social life that are qualitatively different than the existing order; on the other side is a governing apparatus, in anticipation not only of the techno-social determinants to keep tomorrow like today but also to contain the prefigurative movements that can challenge them, so that they can be short-circuited or otherwise neutralized. Thus, in a one-dimensional society, the state can only be anticipatory in its dominating way inasmuch as its need to dominate is anticipated by those being dominated. In other words, prefiguration in a one-dimensional society can only happen in response to domination. A managed prefiguration that is enveloped in already existing statecraft does not present a different vision for the future; it is simply more of the same. State-sanctioned bunkerization is still bunkerization.

I do not pretend to know how to overcome this dilemma of how even anticipatory politics can feed into the neoliberal, one-dimensional condition of bunkerization, but I only want to highlight that these are the stakes; an eternal (and eternally anxious) present of scanning the horizon for the catastrophe that cancels the future. Getting bogged down in assessing which is 'good' prepping or 'bad' prepping, or in any case whether someone is prepping for the right reasons does not break out of this bind of managing prefigurative politics. After all, many states in the United States offer tax rebates for installing solar panels and many cities offer free classes on how to raise chickens and install garden beds. This should give pause to wonder whether these things have any radical content in themselves or if they serve to reify the given order. In the United States, plenty of intentional communities and savvy consumers have gone 'off-grid' but so have many white nationalist groups (Makuch and Lamoureux 2018). It would be a mistake to assume intention or prefiguration on a given behavior or technology itself is able to formulate alternative futures. Prepping with a cheerful attitude can still be a kind of bunkerization.

Bunkerization as Media Spectacle

Even though bunkerization is increasingly mainstream in the United States, that does not mean that all prepping behavior is ubiquitous or is done at the same level. People who store shelf-stable food in case the power goes out are certainly different from people who build condominiums in abandoned nuclear missile silos in the middle of the United States (Perlin 2021). For those who do neither of those things, a whole media ecology has been built up around gawking at preppers, however this section focuses on a very particular aspect of the current visual culture of prepping through social media influencers. This focus puts a fine point on the idea of preppers as prophets who lack anticipatory or prefigurative politics. An example of this phenomenon is an Instagram account called "preppingforeverything." In a November 19th video post they insist:

> We are not crazy conspiracy people, nor 'doomsday preppers,' who are overreacting.
> But what we are, is paying attention to what is happening in the world and preparing our homes and hearts for what's to come.
> Learn the skills.
> Prepare your homes.
> Grow and preserve your food.
> Find your people.
> Create food storage.
> Build YOUR ark.
> Are you with us?

There are many fascinating things happening in this video. First is a disavowal and then confirmation of being preppers. It asks the audience to not identify them as 'crazy conspiracy people' because the viewer also probably would not consider themselves a crazy conspiracy person. Of course they do not identify which 'crazy' conspiracies, though this implies reasonable non-crazy conspiracy theories worth entertaining. That reasonability gets inferred when they say that they are looking at what is "happening in the world." What is happening in the world? They do not say, but this is an intentional appeal to the savviness of their target audience; smart consumers do not need to be told. They are presumably already in the know. This is a sly wink and a nod as if to say "we all know there is 'A Very Bad Thing' on the horizon, and we must get ready for it." We see the mode of prophecy when they speak of what is to come and that the home

must be fortified, but so must the heart. We also see that the horizon of the prophecy is stuck at the moment of catastrophe itself, where they are oriented toward "what is to come." There is no discourse of what comes after, but this just highlights the always-already everyday life of apocalyptic thinking. It is therefore no surprise that they then launch into their eschatological frame: preserve food, find your people (we might pause here to wonder what exactly *that* means), and build your ark for a little biblical flourish. These social media prophets give us a glimpse of a visual culture of modern prepping. The video sets a tone of bucolic foreboding. In typical socail media fashion there are smash cuts to 'a day in the life' of their prepping practices. They start with some relatable everyday things like chopping wood, fishing, and dying fruit. But then other practices start being interspersed, like vacuum sealing meals, filling fuel cannisters, and posting with multiple high-caliber firearms. The video then cuts back to harvesting eggs, raising sheep, and churning butter. All of this is presented in the undifferentiated way of quick social media videos. They say they are not doomsday preppers, but we all know everything is falling apart so maybe fortify your home and heart! And perhaps to make a final non-crazy point they ask, "Are you with us?" Who is "us?" This video has detailed the things that individuals or families should do, so what does it mean to be with them? This final bit of incoherence shows the lack of a prefigurative horizon or anticipatory politics. For social media preppers, doomsday has become a 'vibe,' yet another vector of consumer culture.

This kind of media spectacle approach to prepping, which insists that the activity is not weird because of a vague sense of dread about what is going on in the world that perhaps we know or at least feel, and that prepping is a reasonable response, is less about recruitment of preppers than an invitation to identify with and consume a prepping ethos. Social media influencing is not the only vector of course. In the United States evangelical groups, right wing quasi-militias who sell tactical gear with breathless warnings about intrusive governments, or 'off-grid' communities are all prepping, too. What they are prepping for may look different in the details, but remains symptomatic of this modern notion of apocalypse. These are prophets who have (perhaps scientifically) deduced one or myriad cataclysms that will wipe out civilization. And while they cannot offer a future where that does not happen, or a future after the apocalyptic rupture, prepping remains one-dimensional, and reifies the neoliberal dictates of wise individuals exercising their responsibility to themselves through consumer choices. Consuming a prepping ethos may be consuming the media spectacle rather than the thing itself, but even that still highlights the lack of alternatives that are not prepping.

Conclusion

Mantilla's work provides a historical and anthropological pivot point that invites us to think about the politics of apocalypse in the move from natural to technological devastation. The idea that an apocalypse from a cosmological order as being out of our hands would mean that the apocalypse is an apolitical event, and is instead an opportunity to orient ourselves toward the cosmological or metaphysical truths and bear witness to things that come to pass. In a modern age of technologically induced apocalypse, bearing witness is not enough. Scientific rationality will quantify the end, and individuals are compelled to take responsibility for withstanding the event, not merely behold it. Yet in this modern conception where bunkerization has taken hold, prophecy and prefiguration produce a vision of the apocalypse that cannot see a post-apocalypse; there is no future beyond the eternal present of vigilantly preparing for the calamity. This intensifies the neoliberal dictates of individual action, consumer choice, and a hollowing out of public life. In other words, the modern apocalypse, whatever shape it takes, funneled through this lens of bunkerization, produces not *apolitical*, but *depoliticized* subjects. The future cannot be different than today because there is no future, and, after all, the point of eternal everyday vigilance is just to figure out when to hit the panic button and go into the bunker.

A way out is to try to build a prefigurative politics to get out of the bunker, but the challenges are many. The logic of a one-dimensional neoliberal society seeks to absorb countermovements or present its own false alternatives. Even beyond that, the consumer culture surrounding a prepping ethos is engrained at the level of individual consumption too. In other words, and to finally conclude, the hope here is for a prefigurative politics that does not ignore shared risk, existential or otherwise, and ways of collectively confronting it. That means resisting the logic of the bunker and the logic of prophets, predestination, and a visual culture that railroads everyday life through a bunkerized logic that is always already prefiguring the end. Are you with us?

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