Bracing for the Apocalypse: An Ethnographic Study of New York's 'Prepper' Subculture

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Anna Maria Bounds offers an engaging and, at times, personal account of the particularities of urban disaster preparation. Bounds' book extends and overturns the common assumptions about preppers. Her study is centred on New York City and records an extended ethnographic study of independent preppers and members of the New York City Preppers' Network (NYCPN). The urban setting transforms the range of available resources and challenges; it also changes the characteristics of the people drawn to preparing for disaster. As one of her participants, a former gang member, commented, "We are about showing people how New Yorkers prep. That this isn't about rednecks and monster trucks" (Bounds, 2020: 8). It should be said quite clearly that rednecks and monster trucks are not a useful way of characterising rural or suburban preppers. What it is useful for, though, is clarifying how an awareness of the urban environment is productive of a reflexively urban prepping.

Bounds' guiding questions are, in part, shaped by this. She asks:

> What defines Doomsday for these urban dwellers? What skill sets and supplies constitute being "prepared" for disaster in the city? How are preppers' expectations of government and individuals defined by class, race and gender? (*Ibid.*)

Many other studies of preppers are concerned with the rurality of prepping activities, individuals, and groups. In these, prepping is seen as an activity associated with rurality, in distinction from urbanism and an outgrowth of survivalism and the militias of the U.S. Midwest. Ford, for instance, makes these links and characterises the back-to-the-land rhetoric of preppers as being 'rooted in […] American exceptionalism, settler-colonial frontier

mythology, and an individualism borne of white supremacy and patriarchy' (Ford, 2021: 488), which frames 'rural lands as uncontestably white' (471).

Bounds is aware of this as being a dominant strand within prepper cultures but does not allow her study to be limited by this caricature. Certainly, racist and masculinist discourses have left defining traces in survivalism, militias, and their accelerationist outgrowths and variations, but Bounds suggests that the preppers she spent time with are not driven by the same apocalyptic stories. Her study reveals the urban preppers to be reflective of a range of urban identities and not bounded by class, ethnicity, or gender; the majority of those in Bounds' book are people of colour. Rather than an imaginary dominated by rugged individualism, among urban preppers an awareness of shared needs and responsibilities is evident. As one, Inshirah, has it:

> That cowboy idea doesn't apply to everyone in prepping. Preppers aren't necessarily those white guys in the backwoods or the guys wearing tactical gear. This isn't about being an individual, the lone wolf. This involves mothers and families. This is about the city. That's not who we are and what we are about. (Bounds, 2020: 12)

If the 'who' of urban prepping disrupts assumptions, then the 'where' also does; it is not simply a case of the distinction between the urban and the rural and the reduced opportunities for self-sufficiency that the latter suggests but also the organisation of space. The specific environment of Bounds' urban preppers informs their organisational practice and underlines the spatial aspect of prepping. We might, typically, think of prepping as a temporal exercise (pre-emptively claiming agency prior to the advent of an anticipated futural event), but it also necessitates an anticipation of spatial reorientation to a transformed world. As noted, prepping tends to be associated with a rural retreatism, but *Bracing for the Apocalypse* makes clear that urban environments require an innovative response. In a detailed study of the development of Survival Condo, an underground apartment block housed in a repurposed missile silo, Garrett details some of those 'actively constructing new architectures for disaster' (Garrett, 2021: 402) during the 'second doom boom' (404). This is also discernible in Bounds' study, and she provides useful insight into the development of public and private buildings as part of disaster planning.

What is notable in urban prepping for 'bugging in' (typically, sheltering in one's home) is the class divide between the lead-lined, survival-specific disaster rooms of the

wealthy and the makeshift adaptations of existing space for the rest of us. Bounds situates this in a continuum that replicates the class-based divisions in nuclear war planning: specifically designed fall-out shelters for the wealthy and connected in contrast to advice to the wider population to, in one instance, shelter in a hole dug beneath the family car. Upper class preppers are able to take advantage of Garrett's 'architectures for disaster' where everyday preppers adapt closet space or section off parts of their rooms for disaster supplies.

A similar divide characterises 'bug out' preparations. High net worth preppers and everyday preppers' bug out bags – portable, streamlined survival packs – may have similar functions but their preparation is distinct. Wealthy preppers can invest in readymade, luxury packs or have a bug out bag curated for them. For working class preppers, the bug out bag requires an investment of time and the careful management of limited financial resources, balanced between daily life and the anticipated future. Also distinct are the goals of bugging out: second homes vs tents and 'a plan'.

Not only is there a distinction in the use of space, but Bounds also makes clear the distinction between wealth protection and resource sharing that occurs on either side of the class divide. Her working-class urban preppers were more likely to stock their prepper closets with an awareness of the likelihood that members of their extended networks, friends and family, may require assistance. As such, the preppers are aware of the value of their expertise and anticipatory disaster capital. Their prepper status is confirmed through engagement with supply management, skills development, and potentially group membership, as in the case of the NYCPN. Bounds describes the importance of the performance of these markers of prepper identity in interactions between preppers; they become a means of assessing commitment and potential resilience and act as signifiers of in-group status.

At the heart of Bounds' book is a reminder of the value of symbolic interactionism as a means of understanding the meaning making processes that come to characterise group membership. In the case of the preppers this is achieved through a visible and engaged commitment to the process of learning skills that, it is imagined, will be of value to individuals and nascent communities in the event of societal collapse. Bounds is an engaging champion of symbolic interactionism but is fairly eclectic in her approach. For instance, Raymond Williams' concept 'structures of feeling' is cited as a way of understanding the subculture. I think she might have made more of the concept; as Williams makes clear in *Marxism and Literature* (1977), a structure of feeling is often an indicator of an otherwise

inexpressible shift in social and cultural experiences. Kezia Barker's 2019 study of UK preppers is also useful in this context.

Regardless of the class, ethnic, or gender identities of preppers, it is clear that a deep unease permeates American society; the American nightmare is prefigured by the implosion of certainty in the wake of 9/11 and the sight of a government unable or unwilling to help the survivors of Hurricane Katrina. Societal collapse is an anticipated reality for preppers; it is well within their horizon of possibility. Bounds' book is testament to the complexity of social forms that humans are capable of developing. Urban preppers inhabit and respond to city risks prefigured in and derived from the immediate and anticipated realities of urban life. They are thus compelled by urban consciousness and yet simultaneously 'supplement their knowledge of city life with learning about homesteading and bushcraft skills that seem to harken back to the sense of the rural that Simmel feared was lost' (Ibid, 176). The proximate end confirms and extends their urban subjectivities. But the city is somewhere that will be left behind as the NYC preppers begin a long walk into a rural future.

Works Cited

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