Quo Vadis USA – Der Podcast des Heidelberg Center for American Studies

Worst Case Scenario: The Politics of Prepping in America

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Anja Schüler: Hello, and welcome to a new edition of the HCA podcast coming to you from Heidelberg University. My name is Anja Schüler. With a pandemic behind us, an increasing number of natural disasters, and an ongoing war in Europe, many of us have probably asked ourselves whether and how we can prepare for a worst-case scenario. Lately, we have been hearing more about preparedness from our governments – about stocking up on water, food, and flashlight batteries. My guests on the show today study the way the American government has encouraged citizens to prepare for doomsday, mainly looking into the Cold War era. They also explore the historical rules of doomsday prepping and apply their research to current contexts. So let me introduce you to today's guests: Emily Ray, who is a professor of political science at Sonoma State University, and Robert Kirsch, who is also a political scientist and a professor in the Faculty of Leadership and Integrative Studies at Arizona State University. They are both in Heidelberg at the moment as fellows at the Käthe Hamburger Center for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies, the CAPAS, which is an exciting new institution at Heidelberg University. Emily and Robert, welcome to the HCA podcast.

Robert Kirsch: Thanks for having us.

Anja Schüler: So, let's start with you, Emily. Please tell us a little about your work and what brought you to CAPAS.

Emily Ray: My work is, generally, an environmental political theory. Specifically, I look at social and political responses to climate change, the possibilities for addressing this collectively held problem, and what is available and what is not. What social and institutional arrangements shape these possibilities? I more specifically look at the new Space Race, Neoliberalism, and Silicon Valley in the US, and the ideologies that shape the way public and private sectors respond to the environmental crisis and how they imagine becoming a multi-planetary species can help with avoiding the total loss associated with climate doomsday. How I got to CAPAS was a kind of funny, informal way to start our project. I came across a pop cultural article about prepping kits that appeal to the middle class; they are not kits that look too utilitarian, but something that is marketed as stylish – to have on your bookshelf in full view of your guests and the public. I thought that was an interesting way to approach preparing in the market for preparing because ordinarily, I think of prepping as more of a fringe social-political or religious operation, and this indicated to me it was becoming an increasingly mainstream activity and accepted as a necessity. I sent

that to Robert, and we just started chatting about it. Then we started writing about it and realized how there's something here. We propose completing our book project here at CAPAS, which w''ve had the opportunity to do. I've received incredible feedback from our fellow colleagues here and the director's staff as well.

Anja Schüler: To get this clear, are you talking about something sort of Etsy-style, something sold on *Etsy* – a little escape kit?

Emily Ray: Something even more exciting than *Etsy* because this is a little escape kit that Oprah Winfrey's show promotes, and it's promoted by Gwyneth Paltrow's *Goop*, which is a marketplace and kind of community for wellness and health for the upwardly mobile white woman. They have been singing the praises of this particular little prepping company that makes these kits that are supposed to look good and are supposed to have the necessities for survival, like emergency food and water provisions. They also have little desirables – a little bit of high-quality whiskey or chocolate, really good quality toiletries. You can shampoo and wash in the same class status that you were shampooing and washing prior to disaster kicking in, so we thought this was fascinating. The bags are made of canvas and sown leather. They aren't plastic or metal or the things we associate with bearing in your backyard and pulling out for disaster. So, this gave us the impression that prepping is increasingly mainstream. And if it's mainstream now, how did we get there?

*Anja Schüler: "*Escape in style," but we will probably turn to this further along in our podcast. But before we go there, Robert, some members of our podcast audience, I'm sure, had an opportunity this month already to get insights into your work when you gave a talk here at the HCA on the bunkerisation of America. For those who couldn't make it, please tell us what your work focuses on and how it connects to what's going on at CAPAS.

Robert Kirsch: Sure, thanks for that question. I think I'll start with the end and work my way back through. First, I want to echo what Emily was saying, that our work on campus here has been richly informed by the interdisciplinary approach of so many scholars from different fields working together on similar questions. What we thought was a nice, very contained political science project on bunkerisation has turned into this fertile project. We hope to be able to manage that going forward – I'm confident we can with the colleagues we have here. My work, which I mentioned at the talk earlier, has to do with bunkerisation. I'll briefly define that as the creation of a bunkering subject – somebody who goes into the bunker. I look at the historical transformation of everyday life that turns domiciles or homes into fortified bunkered encampments. When I talk about bunkerization, I'm not suggesting that people are outbuilding these backyard places to escape. Still, rather, they're turning their homes into fortified bunkered living units. Part of the project that I'm focused on is the antecedents of that process because one thing that I try to resist is the notion that social phenomena fall out of the sky from nowhere. I wanted to answer the question, why is it that during the Cold War, when the US government told its citizens to build

backyard bunkers, it elicited a serious response from people. I look at a couple of these trajectories in early 20th-century American society to set the stage for what a bunkering American looks like. I'll give a couple of concrete examples: for instance, the role of scouting and how scouting organizations help build a national identity and a sense of what it means to be an American. In the case of the Boy Scouts of America, their motto is "Be Prepared." So, you already have this notion of an American identity built around an individual's ability to master nature, production, and reproduce Americanness on an individual scale. This gets carried through into the notion of a bunkering American who takes America with themselves, metaphorically, into the bunker and preserves it. Then we also look at some millenarian or religious movements; they were popular in the early 20th century and still are now. A modern analog would be that there are Evangelical churches that are selling preparedness kits for the rapture. I don't know a lot about theology, but it seems like an interesting move. In case you're not raptured, in case you aren't quite good enough to get zapped off the face of the earth, and you must live through the tribulation, it's important to have enough shelf-stable goods on hand. So, you have these churches selling these preparedness kits for people who are hedging their bets about their salvation. This is a common thing, and it becomes this market, it becomes a way to consume shelf-stable goods and sort of purchase your way into a certain kind of security. That's where I'm taking this and pulling the story of American identity from responding to industrialization, responding to the creation of mass production and mass consumption, into this notion of consumption effectively being the only response to political or social problems.

Anja Schüler: Of course, as a historian, I always like to explore the roots of something, but you also said that there is a turning point if I understood you correctly. That turning point in the social and political history of bunkerization is the mid-20th century, which is, of course, also the beginning of the Space Race. So, is this where you two connect?

Robert Kirsch: It is, and I'll turn it over to Emily momentarily. I'll say that prepping is certainly, we think, the apotheosis of this broader response to industrialization and that it rationalizes what it means to be an American through consumerism. When you tail that with the neo-liberal project of hollowing out the state and public services and replacing those with market rationalities, we get the construction of an American who assumes a radical, individualized responsibility for natural, social, and ecological crises, entirely more or less through the vector of mass consumption. So again, we're looking at this bunkering subject as the apotheosis of this kind of American who takes on the burden of social reproduction entirely in their self-contained domestic unit.

Emily Ray: I pick up at the Nuclear Era at this time. During the Cold War period in the United States, there was deep concern that we were locked in a fate of mutually assured nuclear annihilation with the USSR. The US government had to confront how to prepare people to meet this eventuality and to assure them that survival for some is possible and desirable and why. The state considered funding public bunkers and

determined it was very expensive and inefficient. Then the state, meaning the federal level of government, also considered supplying or providing funding for individuals and families to build their own residential bunkers and decided they didn't want to spend that money in part because doing so, they thought, was a signal that the US was making a turn towards communism or socialism by providing social services funded on the scale by the state. Instead, they recommended that people take it upon themselves to decide that they needed to roll up their sleeves and do the hard work of seeking out bunkers, survival, and preparation equipment on the market. I think this is interesting for showing where the state deliberately creates a void by removing itself from providing or responding to the needs of the public collectively and instead allows that void to be filled by the market. This becomes a problem that can be solved by becoming a consumer, rather than a problem that citizens should seek the state to support them. The state did all kinds of things to try to encourage people to take their individual responsibility up, including producing these doom towns or survival towns. They were mock suburban communities built in the Nevada proving grounds, where they were testing atomic weapons and building homes. They used cars, appliances, clothing, and mannequins. They made mockups of a family having a dinner party and playing board games before bed. Many people in the private sector were happy to have their products tested this way. It could then become a selling point or marketing opportunity. Then they detonated a bomb in the neighborhood and went to investigate what the effects were and used that to scare people into buying the provisions they needed to survive.

This is what a fully exposed family would experience in the average suburb of the United States, which also produces a motif for an image of what that ideal modern suburban family looks like, what their consumption patterns are, what class status they occupy – that they're a nuclear family in a nuclear context. We look at this, including the videos, pamphlets, and recommendations the federal government printed and provided. Ultimately, one of the directors for one of the agencies tasked with making decisions about civil defense wrote a piece in *Collier's Magazine* claiming that fear, rather than the bomb, was the ultimate source of the power of the USSR. If the American public didn't prepare themselves, they would let their fear overcome them. They needed to become the self-possessed, manifested American person, channeling the heritage of the yeoman farmer who could make it on their own in the frontier environment, with correct orientation to the state: being sufficiently nationalist, proud, and Christian, but not dependent in the right or wrong ways. Again, this produces subjectivity as much as it produces a set of practices for dealing with crises. But the bomb from the USSR does not drop. Then, this buildup of creating a society of people meant to prepare diffuses into a generalized state of preparation. We see in the 1970s, these civil defense administrations and agencies started to dissolve and then configure themselves in the Federal Emergency Management Agency called FEMA, which people may recognize from response to Hurricane Katrina and other major national disasters in the United States – so that's where that energy goes into, this kind of general preparation for problems.

Anja Schüler: Emily, if I may pick up on one thing you just said. You mentioned class, and I was wondering about the class aspect of bunkerisation. Obviously, surviving is not for everybody. Just recently, in preparation for this, I read a newspaper article that was talking about the survival of the richest. So, when the apocalypse hits, who has access to bunkers? Or when we talk about alternative habitats, about leaving earth, going into space, who gets to leave in the event of a catastrophe? The rich – right?

Emily Ray: This is interesting; it's a great question. We connect this kind of 20th-century piece to the New Space Race here in the 21st century as another avenue of preparing and taking your mobile rocket bunker to try to make this species multi-planetary – extending the logic of bunkering into the New Space Race. Who gets to go? The space race is largely funded by the superrich or the people who are presenting themselves as superrich, like Elon Musk – it is hard to say exactly how rich he is at a given moment – and Jeff Bezos. Both have rocketry companies now, called *SpaceX* and *Blue Origin*. I'm sure they are imagining themselves having the cowboy's ride up to outer space. When Jeff Bezos did his test ride to touch the edge of the atmosphere, he wore his cowboy hat. I imagine that the superrich who are interested in going off-world are not imagining themselves as the class of laborers who are also going to be required to go off-world to do the incredible, difficult work of making life in outer space habitable for humans on an ongoing basis. There are many people who could, in some great distant future, go and do this, but not everybody is going to do so. Class stratification from the earth will follow us in the way that we think about preparing a place for disaster survival off the world. One of the things that's interesting about looking at preparation in the US is that it has become so mainstream that you can do this at every price point and every class status. People who are living very off-grid and maybe very low budget in a remote part of the United States can find a way to consume themselves into a bunkered way of life. We just discussed the example of the prepping bag that is now supported by people who want to participate in the consumer world of wellness and such. Then there is also the superrich like Peter Thiel, who can buy citizenship and have helicopters and have compounds. There's a bunker for everybody.

Anja Schüler: I have been wondering about one thing now; you said that everybody can participate in this consumerized bunkerisation. I was wondering, though, for marginalized groups, for example, that live in the city, if you stocked up on what the government recommends, you do need an extra budget, and they might not have it.

Robert Kirsch: That's a good point. I think this is why we think it's such an insidious thing that prepping gets transformed into a vector of consumerism because there is a really important public policy discussion to be had about what it means to provision the things that we need, those are really important questions. But that's a different discussion than which price point leather bag I should buy. What kind of artisanal chocolate? And I'm being a little facetious, but I think it makes the point that there's a difference between the actual political problem that we face about such questions as:

Is it worthwhile to keep seven days of drinkable water on hand, or is ten days better? And that has to do with a functioning society as opposed to "We don't need to have that debate because everybody will purchase the things they need." The problem, of course, is that when you turn it into a consumer project, the level of preparedness and the efficacy of that preparedness becomes a function of your purchasing power, and that's variable, as you mentioned. If you're in an underserved area or you don't have the means, what preparing means for that person looks different than for the ultra-rich. We've really picked up on that here during our time at CAPAS. This idea is that even the apocalypse itself has class dimensions and that the apocalypse is unevenly distributed, slowly unfolding, that it happens to different places, to different people, and with different levels of impact. I think it would be an important pivot, and one that we'd like to have, to stop thinking about this in terms of what I can buy, but rather, what do we need to do to sustain ourselves in the face of an uncertain future?

Anja Schüler: In that context, I think it does boil down to the question of who provides. Does the individual provide for themselves, or does, for example, the state provide? If we, for example, look at Europe, I think we probably have a different approach to bunkers, not the least because of our historical experience. But the idea was that the state would provide shelter during a war, for example, during air raids in Great Britain, Germany, and France. Is that different?

Robert Kirsch: There's a difference, and there's a worthwhile comparative analysis to make. While our book focuses on the American experience, we have become aware during our time here in Heidelberg that there is a totally different cultural frame of reference here. You pointed out that there's a history of lived experience and shared trauma around bunkering warfare; I think that's important to point out. I also would suggest that the inverse is true in the United States – that part of the reason this bunkering mentality persists is because Americans have never actually had to use their bunkers for their intended purposes, and so in that sense, they can sustain this fantastical register; they can remain somewhat abstract, they can remain a proof of concept because they haven't actually had to go into them and live in them. In that sense, the way that bunkers are presented in America is essentially like a backup home with a kitchen and all the sort of comforts that you're used to, just maybe slightly smaller and underground, with fewer windows. But you can maintain that fantasy if you don't have the experience of going into them. It's worth noting that when you look at communities and people that do this bunkering behavior in the US, they don't live in them. I'm sure some do, but it's always this sort of fantasy. I think that abstractness is part of what makes this a unique American phenomenon that they haven't had to confront in the same way that maybe a comparative analysis from various parts of Europe might.

Anja Schüler: But let's stick with that comparison for a minute, and I would like to ask Emily, as the space industry expert here: does the European space industry, in that respect, look different to you than the American space industry, which, as you have pointed out, is quite privatized?

Emily Ray: It's interesting who they partner with in the US. The private partnerships are with *SpaceX*, which is Elon Musk's rocket company – that is part of his grand vision of making the species multiplanetary because of this perceived loss of human consciousness that would occur if we were on a climate-damaged planet that no longer was hospitable to human life. Building this company is not just strictly a matter of capitalizing on a crisis; it is that as well, but it is also bound up with the political and social ideology that is going to space, along with the actual payload that they're being hired to take the space station. In the US, there are these partnerships, but the European Space Agency also sustains itself on public-private partnerships as well. I don't know if has the same extent of reliance on the defense industry that NASA has, but the European Space Agency works with *Airbus* and with *SpaceX* in part because *SpaceX* is able to produce rockets ready to go before the agency can produce that for itself. There's this question of funding and efficiency that compels them to have to work in these partnerships. I believe that the UK, the US, and the Russian Federation were the first signatories of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which was the first major treaty that allowed for international cooperation to try to manage outer space as a common global common for all mankind. It was trying to restrict the ability of individual states to play land grab on celestial bodies and even use the void of outer space, so we would have to work cooperatively to determine what are the appropriate and proper use of all other resources, especially mining and extractive resource opportunities and maybe colonization opportunities. In some senses, the ESA and NASA have been on the same side of a lot of decisions together, and both are developing more commercialization opportunities with the private sector. I'm not sure that there are as many distinctions as we might hope in a narrow arena.

Anja Schüler: You also said land grab is something that reminds us of a land grab that was going on a little earlier in the 20th century, very much on planet Earth. Robert, I understand that's something you're working on.

Robert Kirsch: That's right, there's a lot of parallels around the discourses of how we conceptualize outer space and how we conceive of it, both in terms of a place where there are resources waiting for us to exploit and how it's also a site for contesting sovereignty in a first come first come basis. There are parallels here to the way that Antarctica was being explored in the early 20th century. There was a lot of discourse that suggested that this empty space – nothing's empty, of course – but this space belongs to nobody; it's for scientific research. At the same time, there was this intense national push to claim the South Pole. In fact, one of the first sorts of quasi-permanent bases set up in Antarctica was referred to as "Little America." There was this notion that this is an important thing for scientific research, but we must make sure we're there first, and that's the way that space exploration has gone. Emily highlights this: it's not a mistake that the US put its flag on the moon, for instance, even though it is supposed to be non-territorial.

Anja Schüler: I could continue this conversation for a long time, but we're limited here timewise. But before we go – you can tell that this is something that really

fascinates me – we have talked about the class aspect of prepping, but to take this a little further, you cannot help but wonder how much of a status symbol these bunkers can become. People are replicating their escape world even though they might never use it. Bunkers, as you've mentioned, Robert, were certainly a status symbol in Cold War America – you had to be able to afford it. You must live in the suburbs to dig a bunker on your ground. But all this, I think, has really taken on a new dimension. I've read a couple of articles on it now, and we have probably all seen them, articles about how luxuriously the superrich are prepping. Maybe you can give us a few examples – it almost seems as if having access to a luxurious escape is this new fantasy.

Emily Ray: I think that's right; it is a new fantasy. There's an interesting tension here because, especially in the US context, having a bunker is meant to be a secret. You are not supposed to tell your neighbors that you have a bunker. You're supposed to arm yourself or provide protection in case your neighbors try to get in. Essentially, if anybody does not provide for themselves and does not take the same good American initiative as you did, whether that's friends, family, or anyone else, you should exclude them from your bunker – you can't survive otherwise. I think that even for the superrich, prepping also requires a high degree of secrecy. You can't tell people where your bunker location is. You can't tell them how you're going to get there. You certainly want to keep them from knowing how luxurious it is because it might incentivize people to try to find your fancy bunker instead of being in whatever little dugout they have. I believe Jules Rushkoff has talked about the anxieties of the superrich, trying to figure out how to placate their security detail so that when the big one hits and they're all in the bunker, they won't get overtaken by the people they've hired to protect them. On the other hand, how do you make sure that you're still signaling your class status through your ability to prepare and how you prepare? Even having the promotion, making it obvious that these kinds of accommodations exist, makes it clear that there are people who must be able to avail themselves of it there now. There wouldn't be a market if there weren't people buying it, but I think this tension makes it difficult, so there must be other ways. Maybe if you have your own private jet or private helicopter or your private security, you are in some way able to signal that you have made provisions for being able to survive. See how Robert picks this one up.

Robert Kirsch: I think, too, there's always sort of this interest in what the ultra-rich are doing for good or bad reasons; I really think that in the instance of prepping, we use it as an example of what American social theorists Thorstein Veblen called "conspicuous consumption." We start from the premise that there are ultra-rich people who are literally constructing artificial islands in the Pacific Ocean, and they're buying citizenship in countries like New Zealand. Emily mentioned it; they're staffing personnel in these fantastical islands, and then they're broadcasting that. They're saying this is what we're doing, and you read it in *Forbes* or some publication like that. I think where "conspicuous consumption" comes in, and where we really pick up this analysis, is that there's what Veblen called this need to emulate the wealthy, and

so we start building these middle-class versions. We can't build our own private islands, but maybe we can make a panic room in our house that has a reinforced steel door, and maybe we can get fancy food that will be good for ten years or something like that. So that process is something that's important to us and why we really wanted to, in this book project, push past going at the ultra-rich and then look how that gets disseminated into sort of everyday life. And how that starts to inform, through this notion of emulation, this notion of everyday life for the prepping American or the bunkering America.

Anja Schüler: Fascinating. Thank you so much for those insights. It was a truly fascinating conversation, and I could go on for a while, but I'm afraid we have to go. I'm sure that your work at CAPAS is progressing very well, and before we sign off, I would like to mention that Emily Ray and Robert Kirsch are about to complete a manuscript for a book entitled *Worst Case Scenarios: The Politics of Prepping in America*. It's due out with Columbia University Press this fall, so that we will be watching out for that. Thank you both for joining us today.

Robert Kirsch: Thank you for having us

Emily Ray: Thanks.

Anja Schüler: This wraps up the current episode of "Quo Vadis USA?" My name is Anja Schüler. This podcast is produced at the University of Heidelberg with support from the Jacob Gold Schurman Foundation. As always, I would like to thank Élena Brandao-Mecker for technical support, and I would like to thank you for listening. In our next episode, I will be talking to Soledad Álvares-Velasco from the University of Illinois, Chicago, about migration in the Americas and especially about the hardships that migrating children face. So don't miss out … and please stay healthy.