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RESISTING THE FUTURE: PREPAREDNESS, DEGRADATION, AND ‘INQUIETUDE’ AMONGST  
SURVIVALISTS IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE

### **Abstract**

In France today, an increasing number of people consider themselves to be “survivalists”. Presuming an inevitable crisis, they are organizing themselves to acquire and develop the skills, techniques, and knowledge they believe are necessary to survive the potential dissipation of mainstream ways of life. Based on ethnographic data collected in the Southwest of France, this article aims at understanding the motivations surrounding “preparedness” – as well as the discourses it generates and the practices it engenders – by repositioning them within the political and social context in which they emerge. For the most part, French survivalists develop traditional anti-liberal discourses, values, and practices, wherein notions of disaster, or collapse are used as vehicles to promote a conservative political agenda. However, for some, prepping may also be a way to confront a feeling of the degradation of their lives, transforming survivalism into a paradoxical way of re/affirming one’s place in the world.

### **Keywords**

survivalism, futurities, affect, resistance, infrapolitics

RESISTING THE FUTURE: PREPAREDNESS, DEGRADATION, AND 'INQUIETUDE' AMONGST SURVIVALISTS IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE

The sun rises over the valley of the Torn, a small river drowned in a mist that meanders below the old oil mill of Saint-Félix. Loïc finishes his coffee, seated on the steps at the entrance of his house. He enjoys observing the reflections of the sun in the foliage of the forest that adjoins his property. "I like to stand there," he says, "it's an opportunity to watch animals... Like deer and hares; more often jays and raptors." On this lovely late winter morning, Loïc intends to start working on his vegetable garden. In his living room, some seedlings have already started to sprout. It will soon be time to put them in the ground. He plans to install his plants below the henhouse, explaining that this is a "system" where the hens, in addition to feeding on slugs, would provide a natural nitrogen fertilizer with their droppings.

Today, Loïc's goal is to finish his *hügelkulturs*, now that his wooden containers are made. He fills them with bits of bark gleaned from his woodshed, branches, dead leaves and rotten wood collected in the nearby forest. Then come layers of shredded wood and straw a neighbor has given him. He works hard most of the morning, going back and forth with his wheelbarrow. After finishing his work, he tells us that he will complete the bins in the coming weeks with mowed grass before covering them with a new layer of soil and straw. He expresses his doubts, however: "This is the first time I've done this and I don't know if it will work... But I'm trying and learning as I go."

Loïc is gradually transforming his living space into what he calls an "autonomous space", increasingly self-sufficient. Newly settled in the region, he and his partner have decided to "prepare for the probable end of the current system". The henhouse and the vegetable garden are part of an elaborate plan to anticipate the degradation of the world and,

above all, to resist it. “Now, he says, I am a survivalist. I’ve come to view things that way. I’ve been thinking about it for a while, and I decided to take the plunge. I’m not going to sit back and wait. A global degradation is just happening. I have to do something about it.”

Since the end of the 1980s, a growing number of social scientists have studied the topic of survivalism. Primarily focused on the United States, their initial contributions centered on the political ideology of survivalism, and on its links with the ultranationalist and supremacist extreme right (Coates 1987; Lamy 1996). At the beginning of the 2000s, the publication of Richard Mitchell’s book *Dancing at Armageddon* revealed the richness and complexity of the modes of preparation for disaster or social collapse (Mitchell 2001). Drawing on the ethnography of a survivalist community, his book suggests that preparedness can be seen as a critique of, and resistance to, industrial society and the majority way of life. In particular, Mitchell emphasized the presentness of survivalist practices: indeed, if the fears that motivate preparedness efforts are always-already defined in terms of anticipations concerning an expected future (Anderson 2010), they cause actions which are undoubtedly inscribed in the present – a moment that jointly shapes concerns and solutions.

Recently, a new set of ethnographic studies show how a veritable “prepper culture” has gradually developed (Barker 2019) since the beginning of the 2000s, supported by an apocalyptic fantasy that it has fostered in return (Foster 2014). Recent studies on survivalism also points to the diversity of social, political and spatial configurations in which preparedness strategies are embedded. In South Africa, for example, the survivalist strategies of white minorities are shaped by racial anxieties (Senekal, 2014), while in Finland, preparation advice values ordinariness and “the impotence of keeping the everyday safe” (Parkinnen, 2021). Beyond national variations, this new set of research calls for survivalism not to be dissociated from the historical-political context in which it takes place, and to question the meaning that

individuals who subject themselves to these forms of anticipation give to their actions (e.g. Mills, 2019).

In France, survivalism remains little known and little studied by social sciences, with the exception of few recent works that stem sometimes from the margins of journalism (e.g. Burgalassi, 2021; Vidal, 2018). The first aim of our contribution is to advance the development of current research on survivalism, from the French perspective, in order to help understand the phenomenon as a whole as well as its variations. Secondly, drawing on in-depth interviews with four French survivalists living in a territory battered recent socioeconomic development, we set out to examine more specifically the feelings that animates these individuals, to think how vulnerable agents react to social, political and ecological turmoil. Lastly, we demonstrate how survivalism may be considered, in certain cases, as a form of “infrapolitical resistance” (Scott, 1990), showing how the people we met were able to find – in preparation – resources enabling them to gain a modicum of power over their own lives. As such, through these survivalists’ words and stories, preparation reveals itself as a way of developing a consistent critique of current times, and, by doing so, of imagining alternatives to “resist the future”.

## **Methods**

In 2018, a survivalist we interviewed in Southwestern France invited us to join him at his shooting range for an initiation session, in a small town named Castac. Castac has about 15,500 inhabitants (and is the center of an urban area of 35,000). This little town expanded from the end of the 19th century to World War II, before experiencing a long period of plateauing and of aging of its population. Located between forests and hedgerows, Castac benefited from a strong logging and leather industry. However, the furniture and glove workshops, where they still exist, have long since lost their luster and no longer attract young

people, workers, or investments. However, if the population of this municipality has increased little since 1968 (+7.8%), its urban area has exploded (+49.7%). As D. (the regional metropolis) suffers from high real estate prices, many families have chosen Castac as an alternative solution to access property – as commuters only need one hour to navigate between the two cities that are linked by a highway. Nowadays, Castac now has the reputation of being a dormitory town, with a gloomy center, sprawling commercial zones, and charmless housing developments.

Several statistical indicators reflect the difficulties faced by Castac. In 2016, the median disposable income per household reached 19,346 €, below the French national median (€20,520), with an average poverty rate of 16.4% (14% nationally) and an average unemployment rate of 15.2% (10% nationally). With no surprise, recent electoral results have confirmed the malaise experienced by the inhabitants. The so-called “governing parties” (from both the left and the right) have seen their scores dwindle to the benefit of anti-establishment and populist movements. The local barons from the *Parti Socialiste* [Socialist Party] (social democrat) and the *Parti Radical de Gauche* [Radical Party of the Left] (center) have been gradually replaced with new elected officials from *Le Rassemblement National* [National Rally] (far-right) and *La France Insoumise* (radical left).

We decided to regularly return to the shooting club, and we started to attend the *Amicale Castacaise* several times a week. We have conducted an ethnographic fieldwork there, with people who self-identified as “survivalists”, without them necessarily agreeing on the term or the reality it designates. Our fieldwork consisted in sharing activities with 13 self-identified survivalists, conducting face-to-face interviews with 8 of them, and keeping digital watch on online survivalist communities for a little over a year.

Interviews were conducted after a long period of mutual acquaintance and personal trust with every respondent. These interviews were not systematically recorded, lasted

between 2 and 8 hours, and were usually repeated. As ties grew stronger with some individuals, we conducted with them other activities such as dinners, hikes, bivouacs, etc. We also observed (and sometimes participated in) online survivalist spaces, forums or groups – as off- and on-line worlds are constantly interconnected, without necessarily overlapping or merging. Tutorials and video courses, in particular, received a lot of attention as they are very often used amongst survivalists to teach techniques, disseminate knowledge, and fortify the sense of belonging. Our analysis has also been enriched by some additional insights. [Author 1] focused on the genealogy of the movement to trace the history of commitments, the dynamics of circulation and the proximity of certain references to the margins of the political field. Meanwhile, [Author 2] has been investigating the US survivalist movement since 2021 (Author 2, 2023). If this article does not directly mobilize the data collected in the United States, some analyses have nonetheless benefited from the heuristic contribution of comparative approaches.

This article is mainly organized around the portraits of a couple (Arthur and Arwen), a man (Loïc) and a woman (Justine). Given the importance of these individuals in our exposition, we asked each of them to read the sections that concerned themselves to ensure that they agreed with their depictions, could validate the quotations we selected, and felt sufficiently protected by our strategy of anonymization and confidentiality. This review process was conducted on a first draft redacted in French, in order to facilitate their participation. More broadly, we have consistently and systematically explained our positions as sociologist and anthropologist during the fieldwork process, receiving prior verbal agreement from all our interlocutors – in accordance with the deontological recommendations of our respective professional spaces.

## **Imports & Transnational Circulations**

Survivalism was born in the United States in the 1960s, during the early years of the Cold War. Individuals and communities, sometimes backed by religious congregations, developed innovative survival techniques and strategies. Fearing the possibility of an accident or nuclear war, they encouraged the construction of private bunkers, reformed children's education, and advocated the creation of home reserves. Following these first initiatives, the perceived risks diversified, and the movement took root – backed by a growing specialized press that encouraged training and anticipation. In the 1970s, authors and thinkers advocated preparing for the possibility of an economic collapse; in the 1980s, people were more concerned about increased Soviet and U.S. military arsenals; in the 1990s, they were worried about the return of a Democratic president and the restrictions on possessing weapons that he wished to impose; in the 2000s, zoonotic flu epidemics caused concern about health risks. More recently, ecological and climate crises have given rise to new anxieties (Ford 2020).

However, as early as the 1960s, Kurt Saxon – an activist of the American ultra-right and a former member of the American Nazi Party (ANP), as well as other anti-communist groupuscules – defended preparedness as a solution to “moral depravity”. He even claimed to have coined the term “survivalism” (Crockford, 2021), whose Darwinian connotations he exalted: the world to come, he claimed, would be reserved for those who resisted the weakness, degeneration or decay induced by modern comfort. Since the 1970s, the educational project of civil protection promoted by religious communities has been gradually replaced by the exaltation of preparedness as a moral and political reform. Strongly inspired by libertarian thought, US survivalists value the constitution of independent, armed, and self-managed local and/or family units – cured of their supposed dependence on government and liberated from the constraints and regulations it imposes. Reconnecting, they say, with the “free spirit of the pioneers” and the founding values of modern Americanness, survivalists are



recruited mainly (but not exclusively) from the white, Christian, conservative middle class – and in turn reinforce a traditionalist ideology in which the armed, trained, self-reliant white man is affirmed as a subject capable of overcoming any apocalyptic catastrophe.

Today, including in the United States, the world of preparedness has diversified, while remaining marked by its majority proximity to conservative and even reactionary circles. Yet, the international diffusion and translation of survivalism as a mode of preparation has blurred its original political affiliations. Within its various national and local variations, one can now find traces of an American past without understanding its depth – as it is the case in France. To put it another way, if survivalism in France owes much to survivalism in the US (on the political, ethical, practical and aesthetic levels), both modes of preparations are not identical, nor do they cover similar semantic and political meanings. In concrete terms, while the majority of survivalists in the United States affiliate themselves with conservatism and libertarianism (their statements being in defense of Christian, traditionalist, masculinist, militarist, and supremacist values), many survivalists in France remain often (and surprisingly) unaware of the political connotations surrounding their practice.

In France, indeed, the notion of survivalism itself – *survivalisme* – only appeared in the media at the end of the 2000s, when extreme right-wing personalities started to promote it-- especially Piero San Giorgio who published his first book, *Survivre à l'effondrement économique*, [Surviving the Economic Collapse] in 2011. Piero San Giorgio is a Swiss extreme-right activist for whom collapse is inevitable. According to him, the intertwining and co-dependency of economies, the weakness of civilizations, the inevitable competition for supremacy, and the fragility of our systems of production will lead to a major global collapse in the mid-2020s. It is urgent, he says, to start preparing for the world-to-come by developing self-sufficient units in rural areas – he labelled as *Bases Autonomes Durables* or *BAD* [Sustainable Autonomous Bases]. According to San Giorgio, the collapse of our current

system would be both an ordeal and an opportunity for living in a world where competition, selection and hierarchy would allow the survival and “regeneration of (the Western) civilization”. His book quickly sold several tens of thousands of copies. Other books by the same author followed in the 2010s: *Rues Barbares, survivre en ville* (2012) [Barbarian Streets: Street Survival] co-authored with blogger Vol West who runs the website “Le Survivaliste” (2012); *Femmes au bord de la crise* (2014) [Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown], based on selected testimonies, defends the action of women “autonomous and independent” against the perils of the moment; *NRBC: Survivre aux événements nucléaires, radiologiques, biologiques et chimiques* (2016) [NRBC: Surviving Nuclear, Radiological, Biological and Chemical Events] co-authored with Cris Millennium, a former director of the elite tactical unit of the French National Gendarmerie. All of these books were published by *Le retour aux sources* – a publishing house co-led by Michel Drac, a radical activist also linked to Alain Soral and the New Right. The concept of BAD, which Piero San Giorgio develops and refines, was already present in a slightly earlier book, co-authored by Michel Drac himself with Serge Ayoub and Michel Thibaud (*G5G: Declaration de Guerre*, 2010 [5<sup>th</sup>-Generation War: Declaration of War]). In this text, the BAD is an additional (and necessary) tool in the struggle to be waged; survivalist units thus become spaces of white homogeneity for armed “resistance”, and for meshing the national territory with zones of withdrawal and/or assault.

However, with the growing success of the theme, the connection between survivalism and the extreme right has been diluted. In the United States, preparedness is already a structured market, organized around services (such as training or courses) and conventions (such as *PrepperCon*, *Prepper Camp* or *Self-Reliance Experience*). Preparedness has become a business with its own experts, Youtube channels, magazines, publishing houses, seminars, etc. In France, during the 2010s, survival courses and trainings have developed too, often led

by sympathizers of radical movements. Some commercial websites opened (such as *Instinct de Survie* directed by Alain Soral). While surfing on the success of outdoor activities, some other mainstream actors have engaged in this promising market, and partly depoliticizing the object. For example, the *Survival Expo* event, which presents itself as the “outdoor and autonomy trade show,” includes among its exhibitors sellers of weapons and tactical equipment, as well as manufacturers of 4x4s (*Land Rover*) and distributors of specialized equipment, intended more for the general public (such as *Le Vieux Campeur*).

Thus, the definition of survivalism (as an object) has also been translated for us as an empirical problem. To address this concern, we have privileged an ethnographic definition rather than an analytical one. As such, when individuals self-identified as survivalists, we were careful never to judge the quality, veracity or authenticity of their self-identification. The portraits that follow illustrate how individuals express a differentiated relationship to a practice that cannot be reduced to its theoretical form<sup>1</sup>. This diversity is not so much the mark of a lack of information on the part of the respondents or the product of a supposedly lesser or superficial commitment to their practice, but rather a trace of the recent history of survivalism in France and a consequence of the circulation of the category beyond the sphere in which it was initially formalized and defined.

## **Home, A Citadel**

Arthur and Arwen live in the villa that the couple built near the shopping area of Castac, which is dominated by an oversized supermarket. Arthur, 41 years old, was born in Castac; his parents still live there. He has always worked as an accountant in the sawmill his

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<sup>1</sup> To account for this diversity, sociologist Nathan Gaborit suggests thinking of survivalism in France “not as a homogeneous movement, or ideology”, but as a “continuum” of reactions to “threats of a breakdown in normality”(see Gaborit, 2022).

father worked in. Arwen, 40 years old, was born in Touraine; currently unemployed, she is looking for a job as an administrative agent. Arthur is attached to a certain “territorial identity” [*identité régionale*] and cultivates the accent and the French expressions from the local dialect spoken by his grandparents. He likes grandiloquence and provocation. Arwen, daughter of a police chief and a secretary, is more discreet and measured.

Arthur and Arwen are parents of three children: Achille (6 months), Jérémie (10 years) and Héloïse (12 years). Héloïse and Jérémie are from previous unions, but as Arthur and Arwen have custody of them, they educate them with their youngest. Arthur feels “rather right wing” - because he has “never been in the business of trade union movements, of social discussions”. He considers himself to be on the side of “the order: the traditional order, the established path, the state order”. Although he may have voted sometimes for the National Rally, he may also have supported the Green Party. As for Arwen, she expresses a strong distrust for politicians. She voted a few times, but slipped a blank ballot into the box. In 2019, and even though he “had never been involved in anything other than associations or clubs”, Arthur “became political” through the “*Yellow Vests*” movement (Reungoat *et al.*, 2022) with the consent and support of his partner. He has a strong memory of it:

“Something happened at that time. This is when it started to boil over; people were fed up. I did convoys, went out at night, brought water to the guys... And then, there were deaths, people were injured, some were arrested. To me, this is when a certain kind of repression started.”

Finding himself confronted with police violence for the first time, Arthur feels a sense of “betrayal from the State”, the “Government” and “the police force” – in which he has some of his friends and family members. As the *Yellow Vests* movement wanes, the couple’s concerns grow. They feel that their material conditions are deteriorating. In addition, Arwen regrets “a growing individualism [and] a loss of values”. They also worry about becoming the

target of those who have less when the political revolt comes, which they think is now inevitable:

“It’s going to be a revolution, and we all know what a revolution is: heads will roll. And it can be ours because we have a house! [...] They’re going to burn our cars and they’re going to burn our houses because we have them!” And Arthur adds fatalistically: “Life will become too expensive. The way of life we know is doomed to disappear in the near future”.

The couple’s concerns are also ecological, but they see the environmental crisis through the prism of the violence it will generate. Arthur and Arwen fear the potential arrival of climate refugees and the supposed dangers of future waves of migration:

“People will move where it’s better. I put myself in the shoes of these people. They are going to do what it takes so that their children don’t go hungry. So these people are going to move, they’re going to come to us.”

Arthur explains to us that he understands them, and adds:

“Myself, you know... The day my children starve, someone will have to die. I am very comfortable with that, I have no problem with that! Men are violent, but the world is violent!”

As often, the violence he anticipates in others justifies his own, especially as he prepares to defend his home – a duty he says “the man of the family is responsible for”.

Arthur discovered survivalism through the French-American blogger Vol West. The couple began long conversations about converting their pavilion into a BAD. They already had a rainwater recovery tank, dug when the house was built for environmental reasons. They considered photovoltaic panels for energy, but were discouraged by the excessive price. They set up a vegetable garden and a chicken coop. Arthur learned to shoot and bought three guns: a .22 LongRifle, a short-barreled shotgun and a pump-action rifle, the latter two chambered in 12 gauge. The rifle must allow for the regular training of Arthur and his family; the shotgun is understood as a hunting tool; finally, the short-barreled shotgun integrates what Arthur names

the “home defense device”, completing the alarm system and the regular training to which the whole family is obliged.

Arthur laments what he calls “the end of the State”. In Castac, several post offices have closed since the end of the 2000s, as well as a maternity hospital. Arthur reads these transformations as “another mark of the betrayal of the government”. He would like to see “the return of a strong State. “Why not a king, by the way?” he asks us one day. Arthur and Arwen, while saying they are worried about the disappearance of public services, have chosen to enroll Benoît and Héloïse in St-Joseph - the private Catholic school in Castac. The Christian religion, they say, “conveys solid values” in terms of morality, pedagogy and education, contrary to the public school system they denigrate as “populated by marginals [*cas sociaux*], managed by overworked people without charisma, and contaminated by the laxity of post-1968 ideology”.

Therefore, the couple have organized themselves and turned their home into an armed citadel. Arthur and Arwen expect a slow deterioration of the situation, not a rapid collapse or a catastrophe. However, this anticipated deterioration is also an opportunity for the couple to relearn the knowledge and skills deemed useful and necessary. At home, Arthur and Arwen respect a traditional sexual division of labor. If the defense and heavy logistics are assumed by Arthur, the care, food and budget are managed by Arwen. She is particularly interested in the cultivation and use of medicinal plants and learns certain food preservation techniques (sterilization and lacto-fermentation). Her investment in survivalism, however, remains less significant. She “lacks the time to fully dedicate [her]self to what would be required to prepare”. Most importantly, she knows that she and her family can reach another, even more secure place, at any time: a fortified, operational hamlet that her parents and some of their friends would have set up. While the couple has mentioned this fortress on several occasions,

they have also been careful never to divulge too much information about its location or what it contains.

Thus, for Arwen and Arthur, the preparation is organized above all as a mode of defense. They defend themselves against moral decadence and its effects, against the foreigners who will come to take refuge in France, against the end of the State and its authority, against the laxity of the “post-1968 ideology”, against the disappearance of the post offices, against global warming... Against a world whose evolution, they think, divest them and dispossess them. They arm themselves, train and organize. The “slow descent towards the less good” that they expect will not preserve them; but they intend to resist it and to surpass it, by “prepping before it is too late” in order to resist a supposedly warlike, violent and impoverished future.

## **To Live Again**

Loïc lives with his wife in the old walnut oil mill of St-Félix, a village located about 15 kilometers from Castac. Loïc, 34 years old, was born in Montpellier. His father, now retired, was a specialized educator in a therapeutic institute. His mother, a former nurse, died a few years ago of breast cancer. Her maternal grandparents, former farm workers in northern Italy, arrived in France in the immediate post-war period to work in the fields. Sharecroppers for a long time, they were eventually able to buy their land by dint of their savings. Loïc remembers with nostalgia his childhood in the countryside and the “small mills that [he] made with his grandfather in the streams”. He retains a deep attachment to nature: “I have always loved it,” he says, “that’s why I wanted to leave the city. I was suffocating. I am not indifferent to the beauty of the landscape. Here, you see, in the morning, I can stay a long time watching the sun rise.”

A doctor of history, Loïc wanted to go into research. But the competitiveness and structure of academic recruitment forced him to join secondary education. He was recruited for three years as a contract teacher in a professional high school, where he found the kids to be difficult and the working conditions deplorable. A member of the *CGT Educ-Action* [a leftist trade union], he participated in several demonstrations where students recognized him and complained to their dean. Last year, his contract was not renewed. “Too bad”, he laments. He “could have given some people a taste for reading Marx and Bourdieu.”

Loïc says he “started to develop a survivalist logic” following the IPCC reports. He “doesn’t expect a zombie attack or a nuclear accident, but believes very much in a degradation that will become more pronounced. A process over several generations where the Earth will be less habitable.” However, for Loïc, the ecological crisis is an apocalypse (McNeish 2017) that does not come alone; it is much more an additional manifestation of the ravages caused by a deleterious capitalism:

“Before, the future looked better than the present. An improvement in social conditions, working conditions, social rights (the 8-hour day, paid vacations, etc.) More and more people could live better. Today, it’s different. I don’t think I’ll live as well as my parents. [...] Pensions are disappearing, the social security system is disappearing... And on top of that, the environmental and climatic degradation, the biodiversity... There are no more bees, risks of famine... Well, it’s not going to be possible anymore.”

Loïc bought the mill with the advance on the inheritance his father gave him when his mother died. “I was able to buy the house without credit. There’s a little bit of work. The mill is not very big, but at least [he doesn’t] have to [worry about] paying back the banks.” Today, Loïc lives on a little more than 1,000 euros a month from unemployment benefits and “that [is] enough for now.” When he moved to St-Félix with his partner, they both registered to vote. “Not for the presidential or legislative elections. All that, [he] no longer believe[s] in it. For local elections only, which can make a difference.” For the rest, he no longer votes.



Since he moved to St-Felix, Loïc has tried to turn his house into a space “open to friends in case of need,” not “a bunker where you live alone and see others die; if that’s what it’s all about, you might as well stop right now.” Rather, he wants a place for inventing a form of “collective autonomy”. He warns us:

“I’m not a backward-looking person. Going back to the land is a fantasy. Farmers didn’t talk to the birds or the bees – and those who did were in trouble [laughs]. [...] Before, we knew how to manage to grow food, at least in the countryside. My grandparents knew how to hunt a wild boar, how to empty its entrails without spoiling the meat, how to preserve it, how to make pâtés or salt it, how to treat the skin. I don’t know to do any of that [...] We have been dispossessed of skills that allowed us to fend for ourselves.”

He often returns to this feeling. “The vegetable garden, the chickens, all that, it’s a reappropriation of oneself. There is a relationship to the environment that industrial society and capitalism have taken away from our lives. And when we move away from that, we are badly off and alienated.” For some time, Loïc has been reading authors like Alain de Benoist, who are classified as far right. “Through survivalism in fact, you look at blogs and you read stuff like Alain Soral”. He says:

“At first, it was to know the enemy. And then later, out of intellectual curiosity. The fascist anti-immigration stuff, that’s totally disgusting. Yet, they also say stuff about resistance and reorganization.”

Loïc’s world is “deteriorating” to reuse a term that saturated our discussions. Environment, relationships, politics... Loïc lives in a universe where the future is always the time of the worst. Besides, the intellectual weapons he has put so much energy into acquiring shape him but also seem, at the same time, a little vain. “I did everything right, I did well in school, I have a doctorate. But it just so happens that today, there’s no place for me.” A white, educated man with degrees of high cultural legitimacy but low profitability in the job market,

he understood his social downgrading as one more trick of capitalism, the political and ideological system he loathes.

Loïc has too learned to shoot. He shares with Arthur a marked taste for weapons. Both often meet on weekends and spend several hours at the shooting range, despite their political differences. Loïc also talks about defense, but with defiance. He sees the Ruger rifle he bought as “a tool”. “We are Homo Faber,” he says, “and it is in this spirit that [he] wanted to equip [him]self”. Next fall he hopes to get his hunting license. He doesn’t plan to use the guns he owns for personal protection:

“Having a gun in the house changes things, it makes you ask questions you never thought about before. You have a new responsibility: you have a tool whose primary purpose is to kill. Do I want to shoot a guy who comes into my house? No. Would I even be able to? I don’t think so. And I don’t even want to consider it.”

Loïc is ready to leave if necessary; he makes sure to keep his BOB (Bug Out Bag) stocked. But he doesn’t intend to “die for some house,” especially since “[he does] not really believe in property.”

More gentle, sensitive and thoughtful than most of the survivalists we met, Loïc considers preparation as a form of care. First, of others. He is constantly concerned about his friends, his family, his girlfriend. As he insists: “Surviving alone is useless.” After his PhD., he went through “difficult times”, but “settling in St-Félix [allowed him] to rediscover the taste for doing things”: preparing a chicken coop, clearing a plot of land, learning permaculture, learning a little mechanics. Finally, the environment, to which he is deeply attached. And if he “cannot prevent capitalism from destroying the world”, at least, on his own scale, he will have tried to “do the best” and not to “damage it too much”.

## **A Pursuit of Autonomy**

Justine is a 39-year-old woman who came to shoot at the *Amicale Castacaise* in 2020, for the first time. She says she is “interested in survivalism” but hesitates to call herself that: “Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It depends on who I talk to – but either way, I don’t really like labels.” She is one of the few women we met who theorizes gender roles in preparation and laments the preponderance and exacerbation of masculine values there. “Well, she adds, not only masculine values. Many of survivalists’ values present a problem for me: the relationship to racial and sexual minorities, violence, militarization, anti-liberalism, the reactionary project...” While feeling “uneasy with all of that,” she still decided to “come and take what was there [at the shooting range] and train to shoot.”

Justine grew up in Nice. Her father was an agricultural engineer in an international company with a branch in Sophia-Antipolis. Her mother, a former tax inspector, stopped working when Justine’s little sister Laura was born. Justine remembers a “quiet childhood, defined by petite bourgeoisie”. After high school, she followed a university career that ended with a master’s degree in marine biology. She worked for a long time in Nantes as a service provider for a public research center. There, Justine had set up her own marine consulting business. She liked the daily routine of her job, which combined a certain experimental practice with the more bureaucratic writing of reports: “I found this job interesting because you’re often outdoors. You learn things, I like that. You’re on your boat, it breaks down, you fix it. You’re on your own and that’s cool”. Yet, over time she began “to find it a bit repetitive though”. Additionally, she was dependent on the fluctuating budgets allocated to the main laboratory that contracted her.

In 2012, Justine went back to school to study humanities, which endeavor concluded five years later with a master’s degree in Romance literature. She wanted “a change, to give herself a bit of air; to keep doing science, but not exclusively.” In 2018, she decided to leave

the Loire-Atlantique for the south of France. She now teaches French and biology in an agricultural high school on the edge of Castac, as a contract worker. She decided not to live in the town, though. Instead, she chose to move to D., the regional capital located 90 km away from Castac. She commutes back and forth three times a week between her home and her work, but she prefers to live “near cinemas, bars and theaters”.

Justine says she is prepping “for the end of the current system [due to] global warming, biodiversity loss, pandemics...” She says expert reports are piling up, data and facts are accumulating. To her, “we are going to hit the wall”. She thinks “people do not change. Or so slowly that it’s gonna be too late. It is already too late.” She admits she is often taken by a feeling of sadness and incapacity towards the current upheavals and “all the things we lost already.” (Elliott 2018). If she defines herself as a “real leftist”, she insists on her environmental sensitivity, which often gives her “a feeling of emptiness in front of the current disaster.”

Over the years, Justine has developed a strong interest for autonomy:

“The main thing for me is to be able to cope if things go wrong. I like learning. I have learned Morse code for example, just to figure it out. I know how to start a fire under the rain. I’m a student shooter. I have a boat license. I know how to cut wood, I know some wild plants, I have basic knowledge of electricity, plumbing, beekeeping [...] I have the project to one day have something isolated. A corner that belongs to me where I can do my stuff, put it into practice, have a somewhat direct relationship with nature.”

When the coronavirus crisis broke out, Justine left the city. She spent the first lockdown in the Hautes-Alpes, in a secondary house that relatives left her. She did not hesitate for long to “evacuate the city”, as she put it. She explains:

“In the future, if things get tough, I don’t want to stay in town. I don’t know... An industrial accident, a solar flare, whatever... things can happen. But I will not stay in town, that’s for sure.... Civilization doesn’t last long. If

things get bad, I won't stay and defend a piece of land or a house. That's too dangerous. I have to move."

Justine stands out. Few women are visible in the world of survivalism, where men are almost exclusively in charge of vital duties. Not surprisingly, the history of preparedness and the values it promotes result in a universe in which men are responsible for essential activities (such as reaction, evacuation, safety, etc.) and women are restricted to ostensibly less important domestic activities. It is true that some female figures are now famous in the United States, but they tend to adhere to and reproduce a complementarian view of gender roles that specializes them in cooking, plants, care or hygiene. Some alternative groups, often labelled as "Liberal Preppers", try to counteract this inegalitarian logic by building "inclusive spaces" they wish to be antisexist, open to the diversity of sexual orientations and of identities, and anti-racist. However, these initiatives remain very much in the minority, and TEOTWAWKI ("The End Of The World As We Know It") is still mostly conceived by men as a manly ordeal that will witness the triumph of their renewed masculinity. Justine explains:

"As a feminist, this is something I'm sensitive to, you know. I've been thinking about it for years. I try to make sure that gender inequality is not an obstacle. In my life, my job, my sexuality, my friends, everything. [...] Most survivalists are guys doing guy stuff for guys. Like, they're the ones with the gun pretending they will defend their wives who make pies and cans, and who only know how to yell if a danger is coming. Even for the outdoor stuff you find on video: tent tests, bag tests, gear tests, stove tests, bushcraft tutorials, it's always guys, guys, guys. They are never scared of giving their opinion and of saying what to do... You have almost nothing made by women for women."

Justine feels empowered by learning to prepare for the future. It gives her reasons to learn – after all, she has always made education and knowledge (practical or theoretical) a pillar of her existence. Paradoxically, she also uses prepping as a resource to circumvent gender inequalities and gendered relations of power. The survivalist world is a world shaped by sexist and conservative values, reinforcing and naturalizing a sexual division of labor that

keeps women in subordinate positions. But sharing concerns without embracing solutions, she maintains the distance that allows her to acquire skills, knowledge and techniques without accepting the values that underlie them. And her preparation, less than an adherence to an ideological project, is more akin to a strategic use of available knowledge aimed at strengthening her capacities for autonomy and resistance.

### **A feeling of *inquiétude***

These three portraits present individuals with varying values, beliefs, motivations and backgrounds, but all share a common sentiment. Indeed, Arthur, Arwen, Loïc and Justine are concerned with a future that would disrupt their lives and radically transform their existences, and for which they intend to prepare themselves. However, if their concern occupies their minds in a dominant, if not exclusive way, it is also a constant invitation to action. Their concern is therefore an *inquiétude*, a word that can be translated using “concerns” in contemporary English, but which epistemology also refers to as “*non-quiétude*”: that is to say, to a feeling that leads one to become “un-quiet”, and consequently to set things in motion, to act.

In the prepper community, fear is a common topic of discussion. Whether at survivalist events, group meetings, or in various forms of media (books, videos, and podcasts, etc.), fear is viewed as an emotion that is considered both rational and acceptable, but also one that should be overcome. An initial fear is a reasonable emotion: it’s the mark of a certain lucidity vis-à-vis dangers and threats. As Sara Ahmed writes, “fear involves an anticipation of hurt and injury. Fear projects us from the present into a future” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 65), and in the prepper world the future’s potential threat is so great that not being afraid would be a perilous oversight. Yet this fear is expected to diminish through preparation. Indeed, by acquiring skills, honing the body and mind, and engaging in proactive planning and

organization, preppers are meant to gradually overcome this feeling. Thus, while the acknowledgment of fear signifies vigilance, its gradual disappearance signifies effective, if not complete, preparedness.

Yet, the feelings expressed by Arthur, Arwen, Loïc and Justine differed from the expected tropes. None of them suggested that their initial fear had been fully conquered through preparation, nor did they seek glorify themselves as individuals liberated from their initial emotions. On the contrary, they consistently voiced concerns about both their own existences and the world they were living in, including during more relaxing and joyful times. More precisely, they regularly expressed that they were witnessing the precarization of their own lives, which for them was palpable in the real world, embodied in their individual trajectories, and experienced daily. In other words, our respondents consistently linked the degradation of *the* world to the degradation of *their* world. They conceived their own individual experiences as a synecdochic reflection of a larger social, political and ecological breakdown in which they found themselves deeply entwined.

Indeed, for Arthur and Arwen, their *inquiétude* is related to the social difficulties that Castac is undergoing and to the uneasiness of the middle-class suffering from socio-economic transformations, changes in the welfare state and the rapid dismantlement of local public services in France. The couple themselves refer to the state as having “abandoned” and “betrayed” them, especially when post offices, small hospitals or train stations close down. As for Loïc, he did not find opportunities on the job market that matched his training and his high educational level. His move to St-Felix was also a choice imposed by the relatively low price of real estate there. Loïc’s feeling of downward social mobility is not only the result of local socio-economic dynamics and of the political neglect to which “Little-Middle” France is victim (Cartier *et al.* 2016). It is also a direct consequence of the disqualification of educational capital vis-à-vis economic capital, and of an organization of the labor market that

considers critical and academic knowledge as misaligned skills. Finally, Justine is also over-qualified for her current professional activity. Moreover, if she has chosen to leave Nantes and to lead an existence more in line with her aspirations and values, Justine is also part of a downward social trajectory. She in turn experiences more vulnerable material conditions than her parents, further reinforcing the feeling of precariousness and impediment to which she bears witness.

Their feeling of *inquiétude* is all the more pregnant as anticipations of degradation and deterioration – of these subjects' lives as well as of the world in which they are embedded – seem inescapable. As such, *inquiétude* is not just anxiety, in the sense of an unidentifiable, floating threat with no specific object (Rachman 1998, quoted in Ahmed *op. cit.*). On the contrary, all of these individuals anticipate specific scenarios, with a relatively defined temporality, and deploy carefully thought-out strategies to cope with them. Certainly, for them, the perils are intertwined and to some extent interlinked – ecological destruction, migratory waves, urban violence, civilizational breakdown, social destructuring... – even if the threats take on varying degrees of importance depending on their political sensibilities, positions, and social trajectories. Yet they all share a conviction of inescapability, as if the world they live in and humanity as a whole were doomed regardless of actions or events. Like their individual experiences, marked by a structural degradation independent of their wills, efforts, and investments, they believe that the world is inevitably deteriorating, independently of individual actions or initiatives, condemned by social and political “systems” (to use Loïc's expression) that are both inert and deleterious.

As such, *inquiétude* may be classified as a “negative affect” – such as distress, exhaustion, cynicism, shame, sadness, etc. Negative affects have been reconsidered by an expanding body of work (e.g. Probyn, 2004; Vine, 2020; Richaud, 2021), which posits that such emotions may actually have mobilizing effects (Ahmed, 2004; Yusoff, 2011), while



“positive affects” (such as optimism or trust) may conversely restrict agency and change. Indeed, for the survivalists we met, their sense of *inquiétude* is also a resource for action. Whereas fear could be paralyzing, and anxiety – as it is not fixed on an identified object – might engender powerlessness, *inquiétude* is a fuel that led the people we met to movement. Further, it is *in* and *through* preparation that they overcame sideration and hopelessness, and that they paradoxically regained hope. *Inquiétude* thus generates a reaction in which the subject, as they are “*inquiété·e*”, sets themselves in motion. The representations that the subject makes of threat and danger –necessarily positioned in the insecurity and uncertainty of the future – may generate reactions that transform both the subject and their world in the present. As such, if *inquiétude* is a feeling which acts on the subject, it is also and at the same time a motivating emotion.

### **The infrapolitics of preparation**

The feeling of *inquiétude* generates actions (and reactions) in the present, but what is their nature? Among the many strategies the survivalists we met could have deployed, the choices they did make were aimed at building a future in line with their interests, surely, but also with their values and their political opinions. Arthur and Arwen were building a citadel where, they hoped, they could fend off waves of migrants and resist violence from supposed “invaders” – literally and figuratively cementing their fantasies of race war and of heroic struggle to safeguard white privileges. Loïc, for his part, envisioned a fortified place too, but one that would also be generous, supportive, and open to friends and relatives; and one where he could implement his liberal views, develop local production, and care for nature. Justine, because she educates and cultivates herself, hoped that the world to come would leave more space for (capacitated) women, and become more inclusive and more rewarding (even if more dangerous). Seen thusly, preparation is always an individual process, certainly molded by

concerns, but also – albeit more subtly – by the hopes that animate the subjects and by their anticipation of opportunities that the future may bring.

Hence, preparation can also be analyzed as a form of “infrapolitical resistance”, because it contains both a critique of the present time and a desire for better alternatives. According to James Scott, infrapolitics characterizes political forms of expression that are little-known because they are hidden from the dominants, and rarely considered as part of legitimate political activities (Scott, 1990, pp. 199-200). If we follow this invitation to think of politics beyond the forms recognized as such in liberal democracies, preparation – as a marginal action – can also be considered as such. Indeed, beyond Arthur, Arwen, Loïc and Justine, none of our respondents who claim to be survivalists have engaged in structured partisan activities. Most of them no longer vote systematically, or do not recognize a single party affiliation; they may change their vote between elections, even to support successive political candidates or policies usually considered as irreconcilable. Yet these individuals engage in their own way: sometimes around local issues, sometimes in trade unions or associations, and sometimes within the non-partisan political movements that have appeared in the French political landscape for some years now, such as the *Red Bonnets*, *Nuit Debout* and the *Yellow Vests* (Della Sudda & Reungoat, 2022). Besides, and most notably, they also actively participate in refusing the status quo and in promoting more desirable futures by prepping. In fact, preparation is never only an accumulation of goods, techniques, or knowledge; nor it is solely an endless process of self-cultivation (Foucault 2011) where individuals actively and relentlessly work upon their own conversions. Preparation surely involves both, but also more: a form of unvoiced expression of conflictuality; a suspension of trust in the State, in institutions, in the private sector or, more broadly, in the authorities to whom the determination of the future and the steering of the present are delegated; and, an invitation to consider other forms of political organization. In short, preparation is also an

action fueled by the desire by some to break down part of the social contract which unites citizens around a shared project, and to replace it with alternatives that may seem promising (if sometimes dreary).

For Arthur, Arwen, Loïc, Justine and the other French survivalists we met, the future no longer represents a credible promise of a happier time, or even of a peaceful time. To them, the proof is evident in their own lives: already clear examples of betrayed promises and foretold degradation. Yet, these subjects pride themselves on being neither blind nor paralyzed: “When faced with a wall, I’m not like a rabbit caught in the car lights,” Loïc once told us. On the contrary, the *inquiétude* they feel motivates these individuals to action: to criticize, in practice and in theory, a degradation of the current times that they intimately experience, and to dream of alternatives. Paradoxically, survivalists keep hope alive. Not the hope of a better world, of renewed progress or of shared salvation<sup>2</sup> – that would be delusional, they believe, considering the gravity of the situation. But rather the hope of possible alternatives, of reinvention, and of political byroads. Perhaps they will be wrong – “time will tell”, they say – but “at least [they] are getting ready”, and, by doing so, they find ways to resist a future they reject, and above all, to cope with the violence of the present.

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<sup>2</sup> Religion is not discussed in this contribution since, in France, the survivalist movement is predominantly secular, unlike in other national contexts, first and foremost the United States. (Barkun, 2011; Crockford, 2018)

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