The Self-sufficient Citizen: Ecological Habitus and Changing Environmental Practices

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Abstract

Past research demonstrates that social practices are not simply a matter of individual choices, but a reflection of social conditions that take place within systems of power. Applying theories of practice to environmental practices, this paper analyzes the adoption of self-sufficiency by two groups, homesteaders and preppers, based on evidence from interviews (*n* = 23, 13 homesteaders and 10 preppers) and participant observation between 2013 and 2017. Seeking to re-negotiate the material flows of their daily lives to account for discomfort with contemporary social and environmental risk, homesteaders and preppers adopt an environmental self-sufficiency practice that purports to decrease or eliminate reliance on institutions they distrust, a model I call "the self-sufficient citizen." Homesteaders and preppers experience a *double bind of reliance and distrust*, which they channel into renegotiating their *ecological habitus*. They do so by calling on traditional American beliefs in individual responsibility, which, although they appear politically neutral, reinforce the dominant power structures that they distrust. By situating self-sufficiency as reflexively cultural and material, I suggest that our study of environmental practices must move beyond individual attitudes, beliefs, values, and practices, to consider *environmental subjectivities*: the lived experience of relating to the environment in a social context that incorporates the study of power, ideology, and agency.

Introduction

Citizens of the contemporary United States are rarely involved in meeting their own needs. Rather, they are alienated from the ecological basis of their own subsistence (Worthy 2008). Complex market and state institutions mediate access to environmental goods and services, including food, water, waste disposal, shelter, health care, and energy. The institutional provision of basic environmental needs has long been considered a benefit of modernity. However, some Americans question the wisdom of depending on institutions to meet their needs. With growing discomfort about physical dependency on institutions they have come to distrust, Americans are increasingly participating in subcultural practices organized around the ideal of *self-sufficiency*, a state of individual or household independence from the institutions that otherwise organize

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modern material life. This paper examines the practices and discourse of two of those subcultures, homesteaders and preppers, and argues that homesteading and prepping represent emerging environmental practices in response to awareness of environmental risk, which is filtered through participants' socially structured cultural dispositions, or, *ecological habitus* (Kasper 2009). Homesteaders and preppers share common practices, aimed toward achieving self-sufficiency, that vary at the group level because self-sufficiency appeals to people who occupy social positions of relative privilege but limited political influence over systems that they are simultaneously reliant on, and distrustful of.

Americans have been idealizing self-sufficiency since at least the late nineteenth century (Brown 2011); about the time that they began to lose it, as workers throughout the nineteenth century were urged into growing urban labor markets (Dickinson 1995). The desire for self-sufficiency recurs throughout American cultural history; it is reflected in back-to-the-land movements that tend to peak around financial crises (Brown 2011:3) and by groups like survivalists, religious communities, and others who had cause to distrust dominant institutions such as the state and private, capitalist enterprises (Mitchell 2002). A wide variety of ideological movements, including but not limited to anarchists, socialists, progressives, marginalized religious groups, and white supremacists have turned to self-sufficiency, not necessarily as a solution to modern risks, but as a personal buffer against them (Brown 2011).

Environmental concern wasn't linked to turns toward self-sufficiency until the back-to-the-land movements of the 1970s (Brown 2011:8); however, I argue that the adoption of practices coded "self-sufficient" has always been environmental practices, in that individuals seek to re-imagine and re-arrange their access to ecological goods and services by opting out of the status quo of urbanized, industrialized, capitalist societies, instead adopting practices that put them in direct contact with the land, water, plants, and animals that they depend on to survive. The adoption of self-sufficiency at the individual and household level is a case of changing environmental practice that does not necessarily rely on an environmental narrative because it involves renegotiating socioecological material flows, the material systems that are socially organized to support human life (Schlosberg and Coles 2015). By growing and preserving their own food, procuring energy and water off-the-grid, and changing their consumption practices, homesteaders and preppers re-negotiate their relationship to the environment of their daily lives. Homesteaders believe self-sufficiency is the optimal response to major environmental degradation and problems of global social justice that they feel implicated in when participating in mainstream American lifestyle practices. Preppers show less outwardly political concern for the environment or social justice and justify their self-sufficiency practices by a commitment to responsibility for self-protection and the safety and sustenance of family and chosen community. But there is significant overlap between them, and both groups are concerned with the sustainability of institutions that by default, they are dependent on.

Drawing from ethnographic participant observation, interviews with 27 individuals (13 identified as homesteaders and 14 identified as preppers), and analysis of online content, this paper explores the development of self-sufficiency as an effort to challenge *ecological habitus* by way of changing environmental practices. Ecological habitus refers to "the embodiment of a durable yet changeable system of ecologically relevant dispositions, practices, perceptions, and material conditions—perceptible as lifestyle—that is shaped by and helps shape socioecological contexts" (Kasper 2009:318). Homesteaders and preppers call into question the default material organization of modern life (access to professionally constructed indoor living space, electricity, municipal water, car travel, professional health care services, police and emergency services, and consumer markets for food and goods), instead seeking to meet their needs without relying on institutions, as heavily, or in some cases, at all. In doing so, they rely on narratives of individualism, moral responsibility, risk perception, and idealized models of citizenship that I call "the self-sufficient citizen." Like Jennifer Carlson's (2015) "citizen protector," the

self-sufficient citizen enacts a moral disposition in an embodied practice (p. 83). As middle-class families increasingly fail to see the benefits of public support systems (Reich 2016), the turn toward self-sufficiency as the "mark of a full citizen" (Carlson 2015:67) gains salience as families choose to arm themselves, rather than rely on state protection, opt out of public health recommendations about vaccines, or devote time, energy, and attention to producing, preserving, and protecting their own food, water, energy, and medical care, as in the case of homesteaders and preppers. But habitus is not easily changed. One of its defining qualities is its durability. In seeking to opt out of modern institutions without engaging in collective efforts to change them, the self-sufficient citizen reproduces ideals of dominant institutions, especially cultural individualism. Homesteaders and preppers thus simultaneously challenge and reinforce the legitimacy of dominant institutions.

Cultural commentators have observed that Americans live in a "culture of fear" (Furedi 2006; Glassner 1999; Hubbard 2003); Brian Massumi (1993) documents a "politics of everyday fear." Ulrick Beck (2008) theorizes contemporary socioenvironmental conditions as "risk society," a concept that epitomizes the modern era of wrestling with the side effects of successful modernization (p. 8), resulting in collective feelings of insecurity. Yet, there are many potential responses to feeling collectively unsafe. The *self-sufficient citizen* emerges as an ideal response to risk society because it allows participants to respond to threats to health, safety, and well-being in individualized ways that do not ultimately threaten the institutions that they simultaneously distrust and depend upon. Calling upon a mythical American past of rugged frontier individualism (especially salient in the adoption of the moniker "homesteading"), practitioners of self-sufficiency reinforce cultural individualism that is the hallmark of American national identity, and an important tenet of neoliberal politics (Brown 2015; Carlson 2015; Reich 2016). Theorizing environmental practices in relation to an *ecological habitus* can help explain the social reproduction of daily life without dichotomizing the individual and social structure, focusing instead on the relational dynamics that laden individual actions with the weight of institutionalized power relations (Kasper 2009). Self-sufficiency emerges as a central cultural logic in the context of American civic life. The model of the *self-sufficient citizen* reproduces politicized narratives about citizenship that locates idealized environmental practices at the level of the self and the household but has implications for how environmental practices emerge in conjunction with social locations and their shaping of citizen's cultural worldviews. First, I situate the self-sufficient citizen in a historical context of American subcultures of self-sufficiency; I then theorize the self-sufficient citizen through a frame of environmental subjectivities, best explained through theories of practice. The empirical section explores commonalities and differences between homesteaders and preppers before focusing on the important areas of overlap that bind the seemingly disparate groups as they embody environmental risk, and navigate a double bind between reliance on, and distrust of contemporary institutions. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the political implications of self-sufficiency as an environmental practice.

A Brief History of Self-sufficiency

Self-sufficiency as an ideal has long appealed to Americans. It appears prominently in back-to-the-land movements, which historian Dona Brown (2011) traces back to the late nineteenth century. But each wave of interest in self-sufficiency, and its related skepticism about modernization, has its own unique qualities. Most back-to-the-land movements emerge in times of economic uncertainty, and this one is no different; however, since the 1970s, interest in self-sufficiency by back-to-the-landers has increasingly been tied to environmental concern (Brown 2011:8). Another place where self-sufficiency ideals appear is in survivalist movements. Also recurrent in American political culture, survivalists see self-sufficiency as necessary to survive the various scenarios of collapse that they anticipate (Mitchell 2002).

Self-sufficiency is more than an ideal. As a practice, it has historically been the norm in American life (and elsewhere), with individuals playing an active role in the production of food, energy, and household goods like clothing, tools, and toys (Dickinson 1995). Many people around the world live self-sufficiently, producing their own food, procuring water, shelter, and energy and relying on self and community for medicine, child, and elder care. In the United States, one need only go several generations back to find informal household labor as the norm. The transition away from home-based economies was gradual, taking place in the United States over about 100 years from roughly 1830 to 1945, as corporations and state supported organizations engaged in a cultural campaign to reframe home-based labor as a marker of poverty, pushing workers into wage labor instead. Both capitalist industrialists and civil society organizations sponsored by them worked to change cultural norms around home-based work, framing as shameful instead of industrious. What had been a common feature of daily life for most Americans was increasingly something to be done only by the newly minted category of the unemployed poor. By the end of World War II, labor norms had shifted substantially; with some exception (such as victory gardens during the war), self-sufficiency was no longer the norm (Dickinson 1995).

Powerful institutions looking to grow the low-wage labor pool made self-sufficiency out to be shameful—a mark of poverty and backwardness. But counter-cultural movements began idealizing self-sufficiency almost as soon as it stopped being the default. Dona Brown calls self-sufficiency an "enduring feature of American life" (2011: 3) and traces back-to-the-land sentiments as far back as 1897, when key figures began to urge city-dwellers to seek "refuge" from cyclical financial collapses, and depressions in the "green earth" (Brown 2011: 4). The cultural narratives that bolstered back-to-the-land practices tended to be critical of dominant institutions, but nonradical: Individuals were urged to seek alternatives to "mechanization, monopoly and consumerism," but not to challenge them politically. Successive waves of interest in postindustrial self-sufficiency by choice have ebbed and flowed throughout twentieth-century American history. It appears across the political spectrum, with both the left and the right seeking refuge in off-the-grid, rural places. The counter-cultural movements of the 1960s are a classic case, as disillusioned young people adopted and applied the logic of environmentalism to the ideals of self-sufficient living (Brown 2011: 8). Many people sought to adopt self-sufficiency in the name of challenging (or at least distancing themselves from) dominant institutions responsible for war and environmental destruction, while others on the right hoped to escape the results of these movements—increasing diversity, the growing power of women and people of color demanding equality, and the social problems that were attributed to this shakeup of the naturalized social order. Although there are certainly cases of marginalized groups seeking self-sufficiency (lesbian separatists, Jewish agriculture collectives, disenfranchised African-Americans, and immigrant groups, to name a few), popular representation of self-sufficiency by writers, advocates, and self-proclaimed leaders has largely been directed toward middle-class whites: People perceived as having agency to make lifestyle choices, but not the political power to effect social change. Brown observes that despite appeals to universalism, there were different back-to-the-land appeals for "us" and "them," with race serving as the main marker of difference. Self-sufficiency as an ideal is adaptable: It is a story about the ideal relationships between humans, the environment, and social institutions.

Self-sufficiency movements take on various forms in response to specific historical circumstances. In addition to homesteading and prepping, manifestations include urban farming, permaculture (Haluza-DeLay and Berezan 2013), voluntary simplicity (Grigsby 2004; Kennedy, Krahn, and Krogman 2013), eco-villages (Ergas 2010), and survivalism (Mitchell 2002). The relegation of individual creative expression under bureaucratic organizations that privilege standardization, efficiency, and consistency over creative expression and political imagination is a hallmark of rationalized society. Resistance to rationalization and its infiltration into nearly

every sphere of contemporary American daily life is an important theme in all existing studies on subcultural worlds related to self-sufficiency (Ergas 2010; Grigsby 2004; Mitchell 2002; Weber 1947, 2003).

In practice, self-sufficiency takes the form of active renegotiation of an individual or household's relationship to the institutions that mediate their access to the material world. Some groups are concerned with renegotiating a relationship to the market, as in anti-consumerist behavior (Cherrier 2009) and simple livers (Grigsby 2004). Others are more concerned with state failure to ensure expected freedoms, as in the case of survivalists (Mitchell 2002). For permaculturists, nonlocal institutions interfere with a value of place-based economies that are seen as integral to renegotiating human-scale relationships with local ecosystems (Haluza-DeLay and Berezan 2013). Differences in these groups include time-scale (whether practices are present or future oriented), political ambition (desire for political change, or withdrawal from politics all together), depth of practice (all-encompassing lifestyle change vs. moderate behavior change), and specific focus of practice (variation in a wide range of overlapping activities). Regardless of time horizons, politics, and qualities of practice, however, all are concerned with engaging in creative adaptations of structural constraints that limit autonomy and a sense of individual empowerment.

The Self-sufficient Citizen

The self-sufficient citizen is independent, individualistic, and fully responsible for their own health and wellbeing, and that of their family. The self-sufficient citizen may fear environmental, economic, or political disasters that leave them vulnerable to death, illness, injury, or resource shortage, but, rather than wait for someone to come and rescue them, the self-sufficient citizen takes matters into their own hands. The self-sufficient citizen is the liberal, autonomous, rational individual incarnate. Liberalism, which centers around ideals of individual freedom, equality, and rational thought (Nussbaum 1997), is linked to modernity and as such it is racialized and classed (Bonilla-Silva 2014). It is also gendered, centering male subjects historically granted the cultural and political right to exercise freedom (Jagger 1983).

The self-sufficient citizen is fully embedded in, but distrustful of modern institutions. The self-sufficient citizen may seek self-sufficiency in the present (as is the case with homesteaders) in order to opt out of systems they find unjust, unsustainable, or simply ineffective; or, in the future (as is the case with preppers) in order to protect themselves from the (inevitable) collapse of such institutions. Thus, the self-sufficient citizen is both strongly attached to the political philosophy of modernity and deeply critical of its outcomes. The self-sufficient citizen occupies an uncomfortable social position that I characterize as a *double bind between reliance and distrust* of institutions that they are physically dependent on. The practice of self-sufficiency emerges an idealized response to risk society in that it is a practice that allows individuals to respond to risks without challenging the cultural ideals that underpin their social standing, identities, and sense of social belonging.

This tension between objective conditions and the subjective experiences of individuals who occupy similar social locations within it is best explained by theories of practice, which seek to explain behaviors in the context of historical conditions and the ways individuals come to embody and perform their *environmental subjectivities* through systems of meaning that are linked to the material organization of social life (Bourdieu 1977; Haluza-DeLay 2008; Kasper 2009; Shove 2010). The concept of *environmental subjectivity* reminds us that the lived experience of human-ecological relations is understood to take place within systems of power that unequally distribute access to environmental decision making, resources, and risk (Agrawal 2005; Segi 2013). Practice theory posits that cultural practices are shaped by a confluence of structured, intersecting social fields (economic, political, and cultural fields, for example) and group dispositions, the

"strategy generating principle[s]" which, determined by past conditions, shapes future ones (Bourdieu 1977:72–3). Fields are not external to social actors; indeed, fields are constituted *by* social actors and their configurations in relation to each other. The self-sufficient citizen is shaped by their relationship to political, economic, educational, cultural, and environmental fields—and they also participate in constituting these fields (Bourdieu 1977).

Social actors internalize aspects of the fields in which they are embedded, which shape their dispositions—the things they think, believe, feel, and know. This is embodied in a habitus. A strength of practice theory is its capacity to bridge the gap between structure and agency, and material outcomes and cultural ones by "infus[ing] thinking about social beings and social phenomena with relational processes" (Kasper 2009: 316). We can apply the lens of relational processes to the strategies that actors generate in response to environmental circumstances without assigning the full weight of their actions to (rational) individual choices, values, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, or concern—variables that are too often isolated in the search for the emergence of a seemingly logical set of environmental practices that meets the expectations of social researchers (Kasper 2009; Shove 2010).

Individuals who live in the core of globalized industrial society occupy a social location in which they simultaneously benefit from and suffer the consequences of political-economic systems that produce environmental crises and threaten the sustainability of life-sustaining resources. Materially, their lives are relatively comfortable: They have regular access to clean, cheap, running water; electricity and/or gas; and an unprecedented variety of food. They need not spend the majority of their time, brain-power, or energy keeping themselves fed, hydrated, and thermoregulated. These things are widely built into the infrastructure of industrialized societies, and their availability is generally taken-for-granted, even as social marginality renders them unequally available to some. All but the poorest of Americans are raised in houses or apartments where electricity is available at the flick of a switch, and water comes out of the tap. These systems are not natural or inevitable, but the result of historical processes and human decisions. The ecological habitus of a middle-class American embedded in contemporary material society might include skills such as identifying and shopping at a supermarket, working a microwave or blender, knowing how to drive a car, or take a bus, turning the heat on and off, shopping for weather appropriate clothing, and fixing a leaking faucet—or calling someone with the skills to do so.

Modernization may have its benefits, but it also has well-documented costs, including historically specific forms of human suffering, unstable financial cycles, and unprecedented scales of environmental destruction. Beck coined the phrase *risk society* to capture the unique conditions of modernity, in which institutions across the board must make sense of the "side effects of successful modernization" (Beck 2008:8). Whether or not individuals consciously adopt environmental values, or identify as environmentalists, they live in a culture that is infused with a sense of environmental risk, or a "culture of fear" (Glassner 1999). Those who understand and accept environmentalist narratives *may* engage in a process of pragmatic deliberation, in which they evaluate what they know about the state of the environment and identify logical responses to it (see, for example, Lorenzen 2012). But we know that many who identify with environmental values and concern do not in fact act on it (Blake 1999; Kennedy et al. 2009; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). Regardless of individual values or concern, most individuals face a mismatch between their ecological habitus, which is attuned to industrialized, ecologically destructive society, and the circumstances of risk society, in which the costs of old ways of being are becoming increasingly hard to ignore.

Data and Analysis

This paper is based on a multicase, multisited ethnographic study which includes in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The two cases that emerged include

homesteaders and preppers. This distinction emerged in the field when I set out to find preppers, the initial source of in my interest, only to discover significant overlap with groups who referred to themselves as homesteaders. It quickly became apparent that ideals of self-sufficiency were the common link between these groups, and I observed with interest as the groups performed boundary work (Lamont and Molnár 2002) around their similarities and differences. The distinction between homesteaders and preppers was emic, emerging from distinctions made by my participants. The lines were never clear; for example, some of the participants in the homesteading club were also members of prepping clubs, even as the leader of the homesteading club spoke critically of preppers. Preppers were generally willing to acknowledge their interest in homesteading, even as they saw the practice as incomplete—usually because homesteaders did not concern themselves as readily with matters of personal security, namely gun protection. Some homesteaders admitted fears for the collapse of society as a motivation for wanting to be self-sufficient, marking them as more like the preppers than they perhaps cared to admit. Not all homesteaders were prepping, and not all preppers were interested in homesteading (one form of preparedness is to simply stockpile mass produced goods), but often there was noticeable overlap in both practice and ideals.

My field work took two main forms: participant observation and interviews. Participant observation included classes, meeting, expositions, and community gatherings hosted by and for homesteaders and preppers in and around urban areas of the Pacific Northwest, and to a lesser extent, the inland Northwest. Activities I participated in included but are not limited to berry-picking, canning jams, fruits and pickles, dairy making classes (how to make yogurt, butter, ice-cream, cheese, etc.), a beginner pistol shooting skills class, a fall harvest party, a homesteading expo, a sustainable prepping expo, a field weekend that included building emergency shelters, clearing a fallen tree with hand tools, developing emergency plans, and learning about HAMM radios, and workshops to learn about body armor and food storage. Early on in my observation I revealed my status as a researcher to the leaders of the clubs that I observed; none seemed concerned about this. One noted that the nature of the clubs was public, and that people attended them for all sorts of reasons that may or may not have been their stated intent. For example, he said that many people used the meetings to find people to date, even though this was not their explicit purpose. He explained that he did not see my research interests as any different. While taking field notes, I made general observations and avoided using names; when necessary, I used coded references (i.e., the man in the red hat) that were not identifiable in order to protect the identities of the participants.

I conducted two waves of field work; the first based in urban areas of Oregon throughout the spring, summer and fall of 2014, and the second based in a small city in Idaho during the summer of 2017. I also conducted several phone interviews with people outside of these areas, who were connected to the movement via social media. The Northwest has a long history of drawing people interested in self-sufficiency, and there were many social groups, events, and business devoted to homesteading and prepping in the region that drew my attention as a researcher. After spending time in Oregon, I selected Idaho as a secondary location due to the frequency it was referenced by preppers as a hub of self-sufficiency. Idaho was frequently referenced as an ideal location to get off the grid. It was often juxtaposed to the coastal states due to its conservative state politics, low urban density, and relative isolation.

Twenty-seven interviews were conducted; 13 with people who identified primarily as homesteaders and 14 with preppers. Of the homesteaders interviewed, eight were woman-identified, and five identified as men. All but two of the preppers interviewed were men. I read all respondents as cis-gender, and none offered information about their gender that challenged this. During the first round of field work, none of my participants identified their sexuality to me, but heteronormative interactive relations were common in both homesteader and prepper groups. One lesbian couple and their child regularly attended prepper meetings, but I was not able to interview

them. In my second round of interviews, one participant identified herself as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Otherwise, all participants signaled heterosexuality through identification of current and former partners or assumption of heterosexual norms and language. Participants' ages ranged from late 20s to early 60s. All but three were white. All but one identified as middle class. The participant who did not came from a middle-class background but found herself living in poverty after a change in family structure. Interview recruiting strategy focused on people I met during participant observation, followed by snowball sampling. All but one of the interviews was conducted as a one-on-one interview; the exception was a couple that I interviewed together.

While the people I studied resided in the Northwest, they pulled broadly from cultural sources that originated outside of the region, including internet resources (blogs, podcasts, social networks, etc.) and mainstream media (including news media, television programs, movies, and published books of fiction and nonfiction). They themselves saw self-sufficiency movements as both localized, in that becoming self-sufficient required a reacquaintance with the resources at hand in a region, and as national, in that the interest and desire for self-sufficiency spanned the country and the national culture. This is confirmed by the presence of online clubs devoted to homesteading, prepping, permaculture, wilderness survival, and self-sufficiency practices in general in locations throughout the world. About 130,373 members of Meetup.com are members of one of the 514 groups dedicated to self-sufficiency; the majority are in the United States. This doesn't account for subcultures related to self-sufficiency such as prepping: 35,563 members of Meetup.com are members of 157 prepper groups that span 131 cities. Totally, 11,478 more are "interested" but do not live near an active Meetup. Online clubs for preppers and homesteaders also exist in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and Germany; there is also a prepper club in Singapore and homesteading clubs in India and Mexico. Meetups for self-sufficiency are even more prolific, extending to the United Arab Emirates, Ireland, Spain, France, Hungary, Austria, Brazil, Argentina, and New Zealand.

This paper focuses on self-sufficiency as practiced in the Northwest but recognizes that the practice of self-sufficiency in the twenty-first century is influenced by both traditional media framing and internet organizing. The people I interviewed and observed rarely had friends or family members that shared their interest in self-sufficiency without prompting: Most of them found community, resources, and educational resources on the internet, enabling self-sufficiency to spread through message boards, blogs, and social networks.

I identified homesteaders and preppers by joining online clubs in two major metropolitan areas in Oregon; these clubs are open to anyone to join, often for free, sometimes for a small membership fee. Many events were mixed age and gender, with the exception of some of the homesteading meetings which were posted as "ladies only." Because preppers were less willing to be interviewed than homesteaders, I made an effort to spend additional time in participant observation with preppers. In general, they were warier of my research motives, pointing to a stronger concern about security, as well as a general distrust of state surveillance. This led to several false leads. Several preppers responded affirmatively to my request for an interview but then failed to follow up on scheduling. Several asked me whether I was with the NSA. They were only half joking. Those who did agree to be interviewed were significantly more recalcitrant than the homesteaders, who were eager to show and tell me about their way of life. All interviews were consensual, following an institutional review board (IRB)-approved protocol of informed consent. Pseudonyms were adopted to protect the identities of all research participants.

Identifying interview subjects using tools like online clubs, I acknowledge that I risk overselecting participants who were new to self-sufficiency, seeking those with common interests and hoping to acquire new skills, rather than impart them. I also risk disproportionately covering the motives and interests of preppers and homesteaders in urban areas who were inclined toward

social settings. I acknowledge this risk; however, I contend that it does not harm my study, which seeks to understand why people adopt self-sufficiency.

Data analysis consisted of line-by-line and axial coding of transcribed interviews and field notes of participant observation. Using Atlas.ti, I conducted line-by-line coding following grounded theory methods until thematic codes emerged consistently, and then subsequently focused on these themes. Analytic strategies were influenced by grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2014; Strauss and Corbin 1998) but do not claim to be fully grounded theory.

Commonality and Difference amongst Homesteaders and Preppers

Interest in self-sufficiency took various forms in the communities I observed. It was referred to as self-sufficiency, self-reliance, or more specifically as homesteading, urban farming, permaculture, emergency preparedness, and prepping but it organized around two central poles, homesteading and prepping. Both groups valued self-sufficiency, but their expression differed along the lines of temporal focus, the default political identity of the group members, and subcultural gender norms.

Homesteading. Homesteading as an activity was situated broadly as "do-it-yourself" with a focus on making things from scratch, living "naturally" and becoming "self-sufficient." The term "homesteading" was ambiguous, even to participants of a homesteading club that I attended. In my field notes, I describe an interaction between the host of a homesteading club meeting, and a new participant:

> When Annette asked Karen to describe her experience homesteading, Julie said, I'm not entirely clear what we mean by that, and Annette gave a rough definition that went something like making things from scratch, do it yourself, etc.

Self-sufficiency is the core theme of homesteading, as homesteader Ryann explains:

> Homesteading to me means self-sufficiency. To be able to fend for yourself, provide for yourself, take care of yourself and your family and not for a short period of time but to do that as long as you need to . . . If anything ever were to happen, if you were to lose a crop, if, who knows, we could have a huge, crazy earthquake and have one of these volcanoes go off, not have access to things for a while. You never know what can happen. I don't want to live in the what-ifs, but I'd like to be able to take care of myself. (Ryann, homesteader)

Homesteaders seek to attain self-sufficiency in the present: Changing the way individuals organize the material flow of their home production and consumption to move away from the status quo of consumption, wage labor, and outsourcing production of basic needs. Homesteaders value productivism over consumption, and although most continue to purchase some market goods (such as sugar, coffee, and oil), they prefer wherever possible to develop home-based systems of production. The language of self-sufficiency here is clearly gendered: To fend for yourself, to take care of yourself and your family reproduces idealized masculine traits such as independence, autonomy, and strength. The double bind between reliance and distrust is apparent here: To trust in institutions was to exhibit a lack of personal responsibility. As Ellen explained, "It's hard to trust claims of certified organic, it's hard to trust the claims of non-GMO, it's hard to trust the claims of, of anything." Rather than rely on institutions they distrust, homesteaders tried to do as much as possible in a DIY manner.

Of the motives named for seeking self-sufficiency, the most common reflected political concerns linked to politically liberal discourse: concern for personal health, environmental sustainability, and social justice. Homesteaders were concerned about toxics in food, water,

the air, and consumer goods, and critical of the system that produced them. Some were also concerned about the effects systems of production had on poorer people in developing nations, a dynamic they felt guilty about perpetuating. In addition to providing perceived protection, self-sufficiency absolved them from participation in systems they considered unjust.

Self-sufficiency, via homesteading, offered a level of control over one's engagement with institutions that were otherwise impossible for individuals to affect. For some, homesteading felt hopeful, in a system that otherwise incited anxiety and despair. One homesteader, Corrine, explained,

> Our urban farming lifestyle gives me hope, because I can do something that connects me with our environment, our place and everything that goes with that. I'm proud that we changed our landscape into a desert of life into a life sustaining ecosystem of sorts and I look around our neighborhood and see SO MUCH potential.

Corrine and her partner had converted a small single-family home in a mid-size city into a highly productive garden, inspired by what she called "ecological design." In addition to fruits and vegetables, her garden contained local herbs and wild greens, and she sent me home with packets of seeds that she had cultivated. Although Corrine admitted to having fears about disaster and social collapse, she framed her interest in self-sufficiency as a way of creating cultural change in the present. "By starting with ourselves, by making the shifts we need to make, cultural change feels more tangible. We're doing it and we can teach others too," she explained.

Self-sufficiency was adopted by homesteaders in response to their awareness of risk: Homesteaders were very aware of the types of modern risks that define *risk society*: threats to life and lifestyle that were a result of successful acts of modernization such as industrialization, production, distribution, or bureaucratization. Homesteaders believed that contemporary circumstances of risk are unprecedented; yet their response to contemporary, collective problems of modernization was to adopt traditional cultural practices that reproduced familiar social norms. One place where this is evident is in the gendered division of labor that emerged in homesteading spaces.

Homesteading spaces were dominated by women, and tasks that have traditionally been coded feminine: Much of homesteading is centered in the garden and the kitchen and the range of skills involved in producing, preparing, and preserving food as directly as possible. When the entire family participated in homesteading activities, couples tended to model traditional gender roles. The family and the household are gendered institutions where women have had a central, defining role (Acker 1992). Women gardened, cooked, canned, made homemade cleaning products and body products (such as soap and lotions) and did textile crafts (such as sewing). Men were more likely to do projects that involved building (garden beds, solar dehydrators, fencing), although they also spent time on garden and kitchen projects such as canning. They showed no interest in more traditionally feminine crafts such as working with textiles or making soap or body products.

Even as they tried to do something different in response to their concern over environmental risk, homesteaders reproduced traditional cultural patterns toward which they were already disposed; this is evident even in the moniker they adopt, which ties the practice of self-sufficiency to frontier expansion via the Homestead Act of 1862. In imagining themselves to be homesteaders unconstrained by modern institutions, homesteaders unwittingly reproduce cultural logics of settler colonialism and racial colorblindness, illustrating the durability of the habitus, and its tendency to reproduce objective structures even as individuals exercise agency (Bourdieu 1977:77).

Prepping. The moniker "prepping" derives from preparedness, which orients present activities toward future events. Preppers engage in many of the same activities as homesteaders, but they do so with an eye to impending calamities such as natural disasters or extreme weather events, economic downturns, acts of violence, or the collapse of society, referred to widely as "the end of the world as we know it" (TEOWAWKI). As preppers anticipated major catastrophes and collapses, they too embraced self-sufficiency as a necessary goal of survival. Benjamin, a middle-aged male prepper explained,

> I can see that prepping is an area that you have to cover in order to survive disaster but eventually you have to survive long-term. Unless you learn all of the skills that you need to learn for homesteading, you're not going to survive. On the same boat . . . you can know everything about homesteading but if you don't know the skills of prepping, you might find yourself all set up . . . and being attacked by people who are going to take your food . . . you have to be balanced.

Preppers viewed self-sufficiency as a necessary component of a thorough preparedness strategy because in the event of the collapse of society, the institutions upon which they relied upon by default would no longer be there. Early phases of prepping often focused on quickly building up "preps" by stockpiling supplies, food, water, guns, ammunition, and preparing emergency plans, but then turned toward long-term self-sufficiency, which involves growing, catching, or foraging one's own food and water, and generating energy for heat, cooking, and other uses without the amenities of modern life.

Preppers were critical of dominant institutions, but their framing did not focus on social justice or environmental sustainability. They did share many of the personal health concerns homesteaders expressed, including toxic chemicals in food, water, and air. These they tended to blame on government failure to regulate, even as they expressed concern about government overreach. The default political identity of preppers was conservative: Within social spaces where preppers gathered, I frequently witnessed individuals assume that others around them were also conservative, unless proven otherwise. Libertarianism was well represented among preppers, and even those who didn't identify as libertarian seemed to adhere to beliefs that align with libertarian thinking, similar to the tendency Matthew Schneider-Mayerson (2015) observed in his study of the peak-oil movement. Not all the preppers I met were conservative though. I also met preppers who were centrists and Democrats, as well as at least one radical liberal anarchist.

Prepper spaces were dominated by men. While the homesteading groups I attended skewed toward women (in some cases, they were advertised as exclusively for women), prepper events were much more heavily attended by men. All the leaders of clubs and organizers of events I attended were men, and the topics preppers spent the most time addressing aligned with interests traditionally viewed as masculine: security and guns, analysis of political instability, home infrastructure projects such as water storage and energy generation. When preppers did attend to cooking and food storage, they did so in ways that played up masculine pursuits such as hunting, fishing, and cooking outside. Men with wives openly acknowledged relegating food storage, preparation, and preservation to their female partners.

Although prepping was male-dominated, gender interactions varied, ranging from traditional to fluid. One lesbian couple routinely attended club meetings in Oregon and as far as I could tell, were treated respectfully. One club leader proudly declared himself a feminist and challenged a club member who made a comment suggesting that women were less competent shooters, and needed smaller guns, pointing out that taste in guns was based on individual preference and body size, and not a function of gender. When I participated in tasks coded as masculine, such as chopping wood, or building a fire, it went unchallenged, but not unnoticed. Despite performing the same level of labor as everyone at a prepper field-training I participated in, I am treated as vulnerable, and in need of male protection at key moments. My field notes from that day note,

> I somehow become in charge of keeping the fire going. The others decide to do a class on flashlights, but I'm tapped out and offer to stay and watch the fire. They give me a radio, and say my codename is the fire goddess. One of them makes a big deal about leaving me alone and asks if I'm sure I'm ok staying. I insist that I am.

Their interest in my ability to keep a fire going takes a gendered label—reinforced by the solicitousness of a prepper who showed no similar concerns about any of the men in the group.

Overlap between Homesteaders and Preppers—Forming the Self-sufficient Citizen

Like homesteaders, preppers interpret contemporary risk as unprecedented. They too make sense of the circumstances they find themselves in through the parameters of the social fields in which they are embedded, and whose logic they have embodied. What are the conditions that make adopting a new set of environmental practices geared toward the collapse of society more palatable to individuals than seeking collective solutions?

On the surface, the difference between homesteading and prepping might appear to be merely political. But this obscures the complexity of the impulse toward self-sufficiency that spans political party, even as its outward form might be influenced by it. Historian Dona Brown observes "a bewildering array" of social and political paths to self-sufficiency throughout American history, and this is reflected in the diversity of political identities of homesteaders and preppers—even as individuals acknowledged default political cultures of each group, with homesteaders presuming others to be liberal, and preppers assuming conservatism.

Political differences do play an important role in shaping the dominant narratives of each subculture: Preppers focus heavily on security and lean toward conservatism where gun rights are concerned. They are more likely to critique the government first, before corporations. But many homesteaders also keep and use guns, and advocate for the right to bear arms. And while their critique of risk society aims for corporations first, a critique of government often follows. Indeed, both preppers and homesteaders speak broadly of "a system," that resembles scholarly findings that neoliberalism functions through the convergence of state and corporate entities (Brown 2003; Chari 2015; Krippner 2007).

Rather than focus on political differences, many preppers and homesteaders prefer to avoid the distinction altogether. Self-sufficiency is framed as apolitical, in that a person's claim to it is defined by their skill and knowledge, rather than their belief in an ideology. As Samuel, the leader of a prepper club put it, "I don't care . . . who you are politically as long as you can divorce yourself from that if something happened and be good at distilling water." Kirk, a man who organized a meeting hoping to recruit locals for a collective homesteading project made a similar case: "I stay away from enviro, tree-hugging stuff because every time I say it, it alienates someone. I don't need to say it!"

> He states that it doesn't matter what people's motivations are, once they start doing self-sufficient activities, they won't be burning fossil fuels, polluting the sky, etc. A woman speaks up and says that we're coming together in our common humanity [appealing to new age liberal ideas of social justice]. Kirk says, *I try to stay away from that humanistic stuff too, hippy talk, it scares people off.* The woman says *well that's too bad because it's true; if people don't want to hear it it's their problem.* Kirk *says it doesn't matter why people are motivated to be self-sufficient as long as they are.* He says that showing people how to be self-sufficient is "a whole lot better than a bunch of armed people coming up a hill." (Field Notes, September 18, 2014)

While some social spaces for preppers or homesteaders were openly politicized, many participants, especially those who were interested in playing a leadership role (being a club organizer,

for example), intentionally downplayed the political nature of self-sufficiency. And even those who did offer an explicitly political critique of social problems, turned to individual solutions. Indeed, depoliticized, individual response is the hallmark of self-sufficiency, and it is a pathway that appeals to Americans distrustful of politics, on all sides.

Rather than engaging in the political processes that produce and enable the conditions of environmental risk that homesteaders and preppers fear in the present and future (toxicity in food, water, air, resource shortages, natural disasters, etc.), they seek to buffer themselves from the systems. This resembles what Andrew Szasz refers to as "inverted quarantine," where individuals try to quarantine themselves from collective environmental harms via consumer purchases such as bottled water or bomb shelters, rather than stop the source of the pollution. In a "culture of political avoidance" (Eliasoph 1997), individual solutions to collective problems proliferate. Attempting to attain individual or household self-sufficiency is a form of inverted quarantine: Homesteaders work to protect themselves from bodily harm in the present by transitioning from consumption to production of as many subsistence goods as possible (to varying degrees); preppers protect themselves from future bodily harm, sometimes by stockpiling goods, and also through learning skills of self-sufficiency that will allow them to survive and subsist outside of institutions.

Embodying Environmental Risk

Concern for bodily wellbeing was central to the distrust homesteaders and preppers exhibited toward institutions. Bodies highlighted the distrust individuals felt toward social institutions, as they navigated impersonal, confusing food systems, health care institutions, and the regulatory bodies tasked with overseeing them. Concern about bodies took two main forms: fear of the health consequences of modernity, which exposed individuals to toxic chemicals and poisons, and concerns about security from violence, including violence from other humans, and the violent disruption of access to resources.

Health. Caroline, a homesteader in her mid-30s, told me

> Dad put poison all over the yard and mom put poison all over the inside. My brother and I were very unhealthy and they couldn't figure out why. They said its white bread and white sugar and pasta and milk and they didn't know why we were sick all the time. Yep. But I'm not bitter. (laughter) . . . I was a sick little kid. I didn't have cancer or anything but just constantly [sick]. So many antibiotics my adult teeth are yellow. My mom called our doctor the pill man. He basically would just write you a script because we'd been sick so much.

This narrative portrays modern life as a toxic minefield, with poison on the outside via household lawn chemicals, and poison on the inside, via food. Again, the double bind between reliance and distrust is revealed. Home, food, and health care are all basic necessities, and here they are coded as unsafe. Food, water, and household chemicals as carriers of toxicity emerged as central cites of concern, as it linked homesteaders and preppers directly to the industrialized systems of production, they hold responsible for a highly tangible form of environmental risk. Many of the activities that preppers and homesteaders engaged in were domestic activities revolved around reducing exposure to toxicity via home food production, preparation, and storage. Participants focused on learning to do "everything possible" for themselves (Field Notes, March 7, 2014). This also extended to household products like cleaning supplies.

When asked what she was trying to avoid by growing her own food, Ellen, a homesteader, told me, "definitely chemicals. Um, pesticides, herbicides, you know . . . inundation of unnecessary vaccinations because of an overpopulated facility of animals crammed into

small areas . . ." While the proliferation of chemicals has been framed as a positive benefit of modernity (summarized in the adage "better living through chemistry," a riff on a DuPont ad from the 1930s), environmental critics have also challenged the safety of the rapid increase of industrial and household chemical use that has occurred since the mid-twentieth century. Ellen's focus on "chemicals" broadly echoes the environmental critique, which focuses largely on unknown effects of chemical interactions that are not tested for by producers or regulating agencies.

Likewise, Samuel, a prepper, explained his preference for organic foods as a way of avoiding chemicals and pesticides, noting,

> I just consider [organic] to be a purer form of the food. Less polluted with chemicals and pesticides, and those don't really sit well, that's why I try to eat a purer food, or closer to the origin of what it was.

Here, Samuel juxtaposes nonorganic foods (those grown using pesticides and agricultural chemicals) as less pure than conventionally grown.

Interest in procuring food outside of industrial food systems was linked to actual as well as potential health conditions. At one meeting of homesteaders I attended, three of the seven participants (not counting myself) reported suffering from the auto-immune disease fibromyalgia, which is associated with food hypersensitivity (Berstad et al. 2012). Joan, a homesteading club participant in her mid-60s, explained that

> her motivation [to homestead] largely stemmed from a recent medical diagnosis that left her unable to eat anything "boxed, bottled or canned." She was focusing on "shopping the periphery of the supermarket" and eating whole foods but was unsure of how to become less reliant on processed food. (Field Notes, February 22, 2014)

When Joan received her diagnosis, she was confronted with an ecological practice (eating outside of the norm of consuming industrialized, processed food) outside of her existing body of skills and knowledge, or *bodily hexis*, which was geared toward the status quo (Bourdieu 1977). Homesteading and self-sufficiency offered alternative pathways to meeting basic bodily needs with the potential to circumvent the status quo. This was not met without resistance in her social world; at a subsequent meeting, although she expressed interest in gardening to grow some of her own food (thus controlling her exposure to pesticides), she reported that "her husband wouldn't let her compost because it would look like a pile of garbage in the yard" (Field Notes, March 7, 2014). Beliefs about what is an appropriate use of a middle-class suburban yard challenged Joan's interest in using the resource differently.

Safety. In addition to concerns about health focused on toxicity and illness, safety, and security from disasters, violence, or other forms of bodily harm appeared to be a major concern for homesteaders and preppers. Preppers especially focused heavily on armed security, emergency communications systems, and defensive systems for the home and on the move. Like the gun-owners Carlson (2015) studied who adopt an identity as citizen-protectors, preppers believed it not only prudent to take security into their own hands, rather than relying on the state to protect them from violence, but morally imperative. While most did not explicitly criticize the police (in fact former police, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians [EMTs] appear to be over-represented in prepping subcultures, according to several interviewees), they instead focused on the possibility of social collapse which would undo the institutional fabric of state protection. Like concerns about toxicity and illness, actively working toward self-sufficient home-security allowed for the protection of bodies outside of dependence on the state.

Security went beyond just having guns though. Echoing feminist theorists who challenge us to expand our concept of security beyond militarization (Sutton and Novkov 2008), security was extended to include the meeting of basic needs. As Annette put it, "people who control food control people." Preppers and homesteaders both framed the ability to grow their own food as a form of security, described by Kai as "ecological security":

> We're in such a precarious state where we're vulnerable to so many different potential political economic ecological factors mainly because we're not taking responsibility for our physical security and our own ecological security. As we've outsourced that from the family farm and the homestead to all these different levels of law enforcement agencies and all these different levels of industrial global economies, especially becoming an importer of food, and all these being leveraged so far out in our land in so many ways. (Kai, prepper)

As individuals experienced a loss of ecological security, they were left feeling vulnerable and alienated from the very source of their own subsistence, recalling Kenneth Worthy's (2008) concept of "phenomenal dissociation." As they became aware of the fact that they did not participate materially in meeting their own subsistence needs, homesteaders and preppers attempted to overcome phenomenal disassociation, into a state of awareness based on practices outside the structural default. Habitus is inscribed on and in the body (Bourdieu 1977:87); bodies thus are a potential site of conflict over changing practices. The physical demands of the body kept individuals tied to untrustworthy institutions. The body was also perceived as a site of resistance though, capable of embodying new skills and knowledge that could enable the creation of an alternative future.

The Self-sufficient Citizen Navigates the Double Bind

Self-sufficiency is both an environmental practice that modifies material flows that connect human bodies to their ecological support systems, and a cultural project in which individuals adopt cultural tools that allow them to navigate social problems with their cultural worldviews intact. Even as they express concern for, and interest in collective problems, narratives of liberal individualism are central to preppers and homesteaders, shaping plans of action, and helping filter between solutions that are viable, without a costly burden of "cultural retooling" (Swidler 1986). Self-sufficiency serves as a cry of resistance against the status quo of risk society, even as it reproduces cultural ideals that are inextricably tied to the production of dominant political-economic systems. As they navigate the double bind of reliance and distrust, homesteaders and preppers both pull from a social identity shaped by a depoliticized liberal cultural ideal.

Practitioners present self-sufficiency as politically neutral, obvious, common-sense, and morally superior to the default mode of remaining dependent. Neutrality is often a mask for invisible power though. As Nina Eliasoph shows in her work on American political culture, "citizens actively create 'hegemony'" in interaction (Eliasoph 1998:234); they may do by validating some ideas and rejecting others. The act of identifying with one part of America's mythical past and envisioning who survives to see its apocalyptic future are political acts. The discourse of self-sufficiency has powerful cultural undertows that reinforce status quo social relations. The ideal of the self-sufficient is embodied by the settler/homesteader/frontiersman, a figure celebrated for qualities such as rugged individualism, fortitude, propensity for solitude, physical strength, diverse physical skillset and body of knowledge, and willingness to defend self, home, and family from threats to American land-claims through violence. This ideal is also tacitly masculine and white. Native Americans are the invisible "other" to this image and the implied target of this violent defense. Feminization is implicated in dependence on what some preppers refer to as a "nanny state." Self-sufficiency movements pull from a

discourse that sees individuals as autonomous, rational actors who are responsible for their own wellbeing and success. The collective work that secures the constituent elements of a "successful" individual is rendered invisible; for example, the state sanctioned colonial violence that secured land to be privatized in the first place and the patriarchal and white supremacist power that withheld liberal freedoms and rights from women and people of color for much of the mythical history that is invoked.

Self-sufficiency serves as the basis for a model of citizenship that refuses dependence on the state, even as the ideals that qualify this model of citizenship pull from the political historical lexicon of American values—independence, rationality, valuation of private property, individual responsibility, and the erasure of the collective. Further research is required to analyze in greater depth the gendered, racial, and class dimensions of who has access to models of self-sufficient living, and who is most likely to remain dependent on risk-producing institutions (Beck 2008).

Conclusion

In this paper, I show that homesteading and prepping are two subcultures of self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency is a cultural movement that produces environmental practices centered around renegotiating the material flows of individuals and households. Everyday environmental practices are organized around the liberal ideal of self-sufficiency, which simultaneously challenges and reinforces the status quo. Caught in a *double bind of dependence and distrust*, homesteaders and preppers seek to undermine their dependence on institutions they distrust by seeking closer proximity to ecosystems they rely on. The adoption of this practice is influenced by historical and contemporary cultural ideals, including traditional American liberalism and individualism, and neoliberal ideals; concern for bodily health, well-being, and safety, and discomfort with dependence on institutions they distrust. The process of denying dependence and seeking self-sufficient lifestyles is best explained by theories of practice that reflect the dynamic relationship between cultural discourse and material practices, situating all social practices as relational.

Renewed interest in self-sufficiency shown by homesteaders and preppers serves as a case of changing environmental practices, shaped by a durable, and transposable ecological habitus. Environmental practices are best understood not as an immediate response to environmental concern or values, but as complex social practices that are situated in both material and cultural systems of power.

By framing self-sufficiency practices as a site of resistance and reproduction of *ecological habitus*, I hope not only to explain the emergence of a new/old environmental practice that potentially directs energy away from collective solutions for environmental problems, but also to call attention to the way in which cultural narratives and projects are potential tools of environmental change, or stasis. Culture is not antithetical to a material understanding of environmental issues, but central to it. Actors have various levels of agency based on their location in a social field, and their relations to each other: this is embodied as habitus. Self-sufficiency movements can illuminate the way that individual environmental practices are situated in relation to dominant social institutions, transmitted or transposed in embodied practice *and* discourse, and articulated through discursive strategies that seek to justify changing relationships to dominant institutions through the construction of the self-sufficient citizen ideal.

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