

A Socialist Approach to Disaster Preparedness

A Leftist guide for the coming catastrophes.



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Abstract: Socialists have historically thought a lot about the catastrophic risks society faces. Today many DSA chapters have gotten involved in mutual aid to respond to the Covid crisis, generating a debate about how mutual aid fits into socialist work. One form of community engagement that is likely to be increasingly necessary, and is an opportunity for radicalizing angry neighbors, is disaster preparedness. While the prepper subculture is perceived as right-

wing, and parts are tied into the militia movement, there are also opportunities for progressive organizations to work with FEMA and local governments. This essay discusses distinctive socialist perspectives on disasters past and future and gives examples of strategic ways socialists can help build disaster-resilient communities.

In the last couple of years, the growing US socialist movement has stepped up to serve their communities *after* disasters in places like Miami and Houston. After all, “everyone’s a socialist after a disaster.” But what about integrating community preparedness into socialist strategy *before* the disasters? Since most of those on the Left expect a growing intensity of ecological, political, and economic crises in the coming decades, it is time to get serious about socialist disaster preparedness.

Disasters, Catastrophes and the Collapse of Capitalism

When preppers and survivalists are portrayed in the media, they are usually anticipating some kind of catastrophe so massive that federal and state authorities will be unable to respond, and there will be prolonged outages of electricity, transportation, food, and medicine. They anticipate many different scenarios, but things on the order of nuclear war, crippling cyber-terrorism, mega-volcanoes, or plagues. Catastrophes of that scale would kill many at the outset and many more in the ensuing weeks and months.

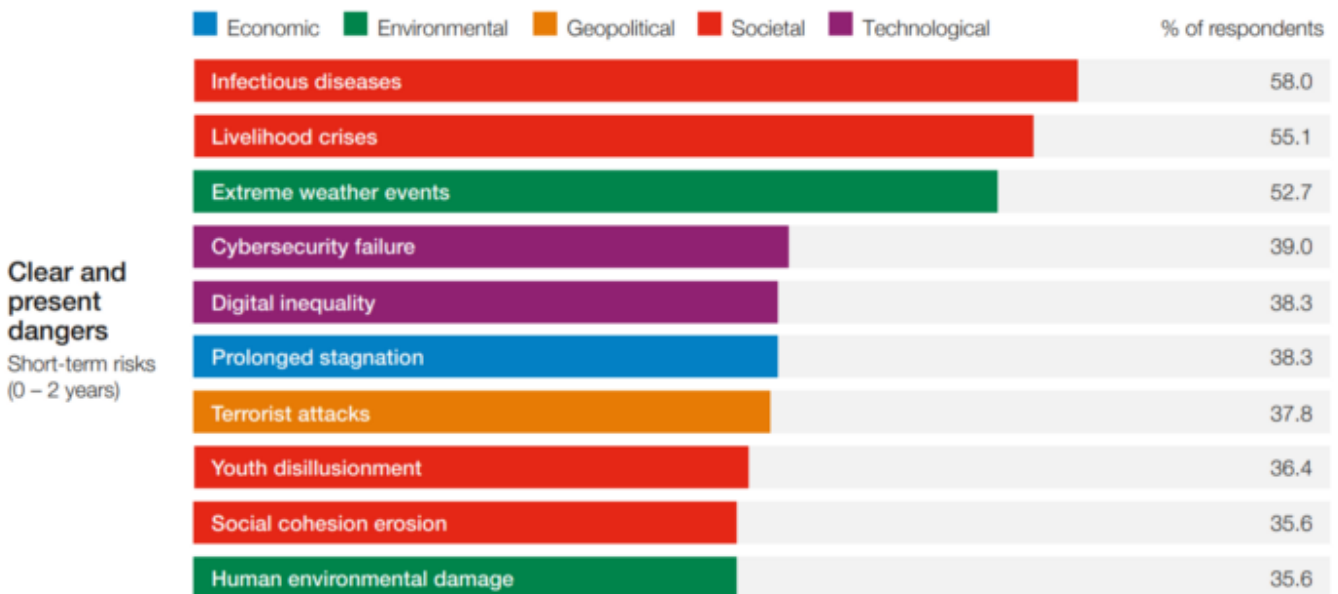
While there is always a non-zero risk of these kinds of catastrophes, and even of “existential threats” that could kill us all, the much more common risk is of major disasters, such as earthquakes, storms, and pandemics. Covid has caused massive economic devastation and killed half a million Americans. At least half of our plague victims would have survived if the party of death hadn’t actively promoted Covid’s spread. For those who have tried to warn us about coming plagues for decades, Covid was just a prelude to the much more contagious and lethal plagues we can still expect. On the other hand, with the lessons learned about prevention, tracing, and containment, and with a one year turn-around for a half dozen vaccines, we will probably be able to muddle through plagues that are two or three times as bad as this one.

So part of what we have to assess politically, and as historical materialists, is how likely different kinds of disasters are, how well prepared we are to muddle through, and how they will shape our work for a more equal and democratic future. I won’t try to parse the

actual catastrophic risks we face here, partly because I know that I have an apocalyptic bias. When Reagan was elected in 1980, the prospect of nuclear war freaked me out so much that I started studying rural communes since I thought I would have to bug out to one. I prepped for the Y2K bug, and after the 2008 collapse, I started a huge garden and started stockpiling food and supplies. At least the face masks and hand sanitizer came in handy in 2020, even if I wasn't using them to bury plague victims. If you are interested in attempts at comprehensive risk assessment, the World Economic Forum issues an annual [Global Risks Report](#). While the capitalist titans who run the WEF may have rose-tinted blinders in public, they are much more sober when considering the threats to their industries and wealth. For the WEF "youth disillusionment" is right up there as a risk alongside terrorism.

Global Risks Horizon

When do respondents forecast risks will become a critical threat to the world?



([WEF, 2021](#)).

From a network of self-governed socialist communes to the rural, patriarchal neo-feudalism so often depicted in post-apocalyptic fiction, part of the psychological appeal of apocalypticism for both the far-left and the far-right is that big catastrophes could wipe out the political and economic order and make way for something new. Socialists have long been attracted to apocalyptic prophecies for this reason. Proto-socialists in the medieval period often turned to the Book of Revelations for a roadmap and religious

rationale for uprisings, finding inspiration and religious legitimation in the expectation that the corrupt secular powers would be cast down, allowing the Sanctified to build a new Heaven on Earth.

Marxism gave socialist apocalypticism a new materialist grounding. Marxism predicted that capitalism would generate all kinds of problems, from starvation to war, as it ground inevitably to its collapse. Like Christians looking for signs and portents to determine whether the End Times and Rapture were imminent, Marxists analyzed the problems and dynamics of capitalism, waiting for the advent of the Kingdom. So far, capitalism has proved far more resilient than expected.

Socialists may also be inclined towards apocalypticism because of an intuition that large-scale disasters tend to make society more equal. In his massive historical study *Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*, Walter Scheidel argues that only four things have ever reversed the tendency towards inequality: mass-mobilization warfare, transformative revolutions, state collapse, and catastrophic plagues. If the balance of forces aren't favorable for a political reset, catastrophes may provide the necessary push.

Faith in the historical inevitability of socialism has almost disappeared on the Left today, with most socialists seeing our future as a binary, “socialism or barbarism.” Since World War Two, and the advent of nuclear weapons, the Left was forced to include the possibility that we might just commit suicide. In the Fourth International after World War Two, there were Trotskyists who thought nuclear war was inevitable and that the task of socialists was to prepare to lead a revolution in the post-apocalyptic aftermath (Berch, 2020). The experience of fascism, even though it was defeated, suggested that capitalism might find a totalitarian form that would be impossible to overthrow or reform. Then the ecological crisis began to convince some that we are on a path to ecological and societal collapse, with “deep adaptationists” arguing that we should simply begin preparing for the worst (Bendell, 2019). Today's socialist futurism is less about looking for signs of millennialist prophecy being fulfilled and more a hope that we can avoid apocalypse and dystopia.

Today there are some on the US Left that have embraced the growing likelihood of some combination of capitalist and climate catastrophe, and they have an affinity for local, community-oriented strategies of base-building and mutual aid projects. These

strategies seek to build “dual power,” working-class institutions at the community level that could take over from a failing government and economy. To be sure, only some of those advocating base-building, dual power, and mutual aid are catastrophists. Some are simply trying to help folks amid this crisis (see, for instance, “Mutual Aid: How to Build a Network in Your Neighborhood” from Boston DSA.) These strategies are also prioritized by anarcho-socialists, who are suspicious of electoral politics and would like to see grassroots cooperation replace modern capitalism with or without a systemic crisis. Revolutionary socialists, critical of the Left’s lack of an organic base in the community, see base-building as a way to break out of our cultural ghettos and connect with actual workers.

But whether building mutual aid and alternative local institutions is explicitly fueled by apocalyptic expectations, they generally assume that these alternative institutions will grow in the face of state failure. Instead of agitating to increase the capacity of the state and community to respond through *existing institutions*, engaging with the actually existing risk mitigation and community resilience institutions, which we then attempt to democratize and improve, the strategy tries to re-invent the state from the ground up (Lee, 2021).

Even if we witness state breakdown or systemic collapse in the coming years, an eventuality many base builders take as given, it’s likely they won’t be able to take advantage of the situation because their strategy will keep them too small and isolated beforehand. Why should the desperate masses turn to organizations they’ve never heard of for salvation? (Maisano, 2021)

Knowing that I have overestimated the risks of collapse in the past, I have tried to pay less attention to collapse scenarios and more attention to the proximate forms of disaster preparedness (and the activities that our communities are already engaged in) to prepare for everyday disasters. There is always some possibility that modern civilization could face a war, plague, or natural disaster so enormous that it would cause the collapse of political authority and the modern economy. The more likely trajectory is a growing series of disasters that present better opportunities for advancing a left agenda than the much more difficult and isolated work of cooperative institutions. Should we organize farm-to-table coops and free groceries, or help grocery workers get unionized, pass the Cares Act, and lobby for a universal basic income? Should we organize co-

housing experiments or help get tenants publicly funded attorneys? A catastrophic future argues for the former, but a merely disastrous future argues for the latter.

Even if the growing scale of disasters points to catastrophe and collapse, preparing with one's neighbors for floods and terror attacks through "resilience-based organizing" is a solid foundation for responding to those larger challenges. Whether you are waiting for SHTF (shit to hit the fan), building a revolutionary community base, or just getting to know folks so you can ask for their vote, connecting your neighbors to state and federal resources is far more effective and appealing than offering to help re-invent those services through volunteerism. If and when those resources turn out to be inadequate, we can then explain why and suggest alternatives. Communities only develop "radical resilience" through experiencing the limitations of the state.

(In New Orleans after Katrina in 2005, Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami, and Haiti after the 2010 earthquake) conflict between governors and governed instigated autonomous self-management among inhabitants that produced fruitful planning results... planners should encourage, and even nurture, specifically those agonistic conflicts that seem to have the potential to incite autonomous self-management among inhabitants (Jon and Purcell, 2018)

Government Prepping and Progressive Preppers

Community disaster preparedness involves both official, state-directed preparedness programs and the very diverse prepper subculture. Government disaster preparedness is coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency or FEMA. FEMA is understaffed (Levy, 2020), underfunded (Cusick, 2020; CRS, 2020), and has badly mismanaged some disasters, such as New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria (Budryk, 2020; OIG, 2020). Nonetheless, FEMA actively tries to prepare communities for everything from hurricanes and pandemics to terrorism and war.

One of FEMA's preparedness activities is training and coordinating 1200 Citizen Corps Councils, involving civilians, law enforcement, and emergency medical and fire responders. FEMA's Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program trains volunteers in skills like first aid and how to set up a shelter. The folks involved in these activities are not survivalists, but firefighters, nurses, local officials, and the same

engaged citizens who volunteer as election workers. Ironically, FEMA also runs a DSA cadrification program, although their Disaster Survivor Assistance teams are trained to help devastated communities, not democratize capitalism, and participants are obliged to take an oath of loyalty to the Constitution.

Who is Disaster Survivor Assistance?

Based on the desire to provide expanded services to disaster survivors, FEMA leadership transferred the Community Relations program to the Recovery Directorate, effective April 8, 2013.

In an effort to reflect our commitment to the disaster survivors and the expanded role of the cadre, FEMA changed the name from Community Relations to Disaster Survivor Assistance.

DSA's mission is to build and sustain an expeditionary cadre that can address disaster survivor's immediate needs by:

- * Establishing a timely presence;
- * Providing in-person, tailored information and services;
- * Providing referrals to Whole Community partners as needed;
- * Collecting targeted information to support decision-making; and
- * Identifying public information needs so critical messages can be prepared and distributed.



Five Essential Functions of DSA

- **Assess, Inform, Report (AIR)**
 - DSA Teams assess what's really happening in the community, inform disaster officials of those conditions, and report back to the Operations Section.
- **On-site Registration Intake**
 - Using mobile technology, DSA Teams offer survivors the opportunity to register for FEMA disaster assistance on-the-spot.
- **Case Status Inquiries and Updates**
 - Mobile tools allow DSA Teams to check and verify information already provided by survivors, update their record, or discuss next steps in the assistance process.
- **Pre- or Post-Registration Survivor Needs Assessment**
 - DSA Teams are trained to identify survivor needs and provide available assistance whenever and wherever they interact with survivors.
- **Referral to Whole Community Partners**
 - DSA Teams inform survivors about the range of help available in the community and maintain close contacts with State, Tribal, and Local governments, and with other partners.

DSA Teams are a professional "force multiplier" that support Federal, State, Local, Tribal, and Territorial requirements in the field. DSA Teams can quickly deploy in advance of (or immediately following) a disaster declaration.

(FEMA, 2020)

Disaster-minded leftists may also find opportunities for community-oriented prepping with progressive neighbors in the prepper subculture. Probably a plurality of American preppers are still politically conservative to far-right, focusing on their family and friends holing up with guns and food to ride out the imminent race war until the restoration of white, patriarchal order. On the other hand, as the Natural Geographic show Doomsday

Preppers illustrated, there are preppers of all political persuasions and relationships to reality. As Chad Huddleston found in his anthropological study of preppers:

Most of the preppers I have met are well-educated citizens who are friendly and open about why they choose to prep. They say they aren't trying to survive the end of the world or aiming to rebuild society in some utopian vision. They prep for the events that worry most people: storms that knock out the electricity, house fires, gas leaks, tornadoes, floods, and maybe a little civil unrest. They appreciate how quickly societal structures can collapse in the wake of a disaster and feel they can't, or shouldn't, entirely rely on government organizations to protect or rescue them. They neither see themselves as community guardians nor attempt to be vigilantes.

These people have full-time employment, kids who play sports on the weekends, and social media accounts; none are living in secret bunkers in the forest. Most of them are very willing to share their knowledge: Many host monthly events at libraries, other public venues, and local businesses to talk about how to design a disaster plan for one's household, the usefulness of short wave radios, and the importance of knowing basic first aid.

(Huddleston, 2018)

Since the 2016 election, there has also been a surge of interest in prepping among liberals and the Left (Stryker, 2018; Riederer, 2018). If you can't wrap your mind around FEMA's DSA cadres, some of the liberal, ecologist, progressive and radical prepper groups include:

- **Red Preppers on Reddit** — An organizing hub for leftists who want to join the prepping subculture with a political purpose.
<https://www.reddit.com/r/redpreppers/>
- **Mutual Aid Disaster Relief** — A network of radical and anarchist groups that organize disaster response, including some DSA chapters.
<https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/>
- **Black Prepper** — Prepping for people of color in urban environments.
<https://www.blackprepper.com/>
- **The Prepared** — A prepper community open to liberal and Left preppers.
<https://theprepared.com/>

What distinguishes left-wing prepping from right-wing prepping?

Leftist preppers have some distinct arguments to make with neighbors interested in working on disaster preparedness. First, left-wing preppers are generally focused on different and far more grounded, catastrophic possibilities than right-wingers. Right-wingers tend to assume that society is about to collapse into civil war because of “socialism,” racial conflicts, wars, monetary crises, or government conspiracies. Left-wingers are more likely to foresee catastrophic scenarios in climate change, growing inequality, and capitalist fragility, although we also can’t discount racial conflicts and wars as systemic risks either. Both the right and left see risks of a breakdown in democracy and civil order because of increasing authoritarianism and political polarization. So left-wingers engaged in prepping have an opportunity to steer those prone to QAnon conspiracies towards actual threats and to reframe collapse scenarios that we are both worried about.

Second, left-wing preppers are more interested in “bugging in” and building community resilience, especially in urban areas, rather than “bugging-out” to isolated, well-armed, rural compounds ([Bounds, 2020](#)). Right-wing prepping overlaps with gun culture, imagining scenarios in which well-armed compounds have to fight off bands of looters and the black helicopters sent by Kamala Harris. Right-wing preppers also are generally anxious about urban, multi-ethnic populations causing social collapse, marauding in the post-apocalyptic aftermath, and the desperation of urban populations when electricity and law enforcement collapse ([Urban, 2020](#)). Left-wing preppers are more likely to be urban and to believe in the possibility of community resilience and cooperation in the face of disasters. Left-wing preppers can turn to a growing literature on community resilience during disasters — such as Rebecca Solnit’s *[A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster](#)* — to back up their view that catastrophes do not generally create dog-eat-dog Lord of the Flies anarchy (see the community resilience resources at the bottom).

Third, left-wing preppers are not resigned to the inevitability of civilizational collapse and integrate prepping into political organizing to mitigate disaster risks. Right-wing preppers tend to believe in the inevitability of a social collapse, either because they think we are in the End Times or because they believe in some other SHTF scenario. Left-wing preppers, even full-on catastrophists, are more likely to believe in the possibility of

mitigating catastrophic risks through political organizing. For the Left, preparedness is an arena for political education and community organizing, a way to advance policies that might mitigate social risks and to shape what emerges from social disorder and conflict.

Fourth, socialists have an analysis of why some communities are more vulnerable than others. There is a large body of work documenting the unequal impacts of disasters on poorer communities. For instance, earthquakes of the same magnitude kill far more people in poor communities than in wealthy communities. The poor are more likely to live in disaster-prone areas, and in buildings made of poor quality materials. The poor are less likely to have home or medical insurance, savings, or access to medical care. Likewise, hurricanes of equal size are more likely to kill the poor ([Krause and Reeves, 2017](#); [Taub, 2017](#)) and poor communities of color are more vulnerable to wildfires. The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction's 2018 report *Poverty, Inequality and Disaster Vulnerability* is an excellent summary of why growing inequality makes us more vulnerable.

Even FEMA is aware that their programs are more likely to benefit the affluent than the poor. In their 2020 annual report, FEMA's advisory council asks for routine equity assessments of their programs

***Programs are Not Targeted to Those in Greatest Need** Many FEMA programs do not consider the principle of equity in financial assistance relief. Damage assessments are based on property ownership, which immediately focuses on the wealthier parts of a community, and disadvantages renters and the homeless population. The Public Assistance Program most benefits communities that can afford to pay the required match and can navigate the complexities of the contracting agencies. The Individual Assistance Program is more accessible to those with time, income, and access. The National Flood Insurance Program inadvertently assists the wealthier segment of the population by serving only those who can afford to buy flood insurance. By perpetually assisting larger communities that already have considerable resources, the smaller, less resource-rich, less-affluent communities cannot access funding to appropriately prepare for a disaster, leading to inadequate response and recovery, and little opportunity for mitigation. Through the entire disaster cycle, communities that have been underserved stay underserved, and thereby suffer needlessly and unjustly. ([NAC, 2020](#))*

The advisory board's proposed solution is to include equity assessments into FEMA evaluations, not to tax the rich and eliminate income insecurity. But kudos for a federal agency giving any attention to inequity under Trump.

Fifth, when social services are inadequate, socialists have a cogent explanation for why: capitalists and the rich throttle public services, so they don't have to pay taxes. FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund was empty in February, barring additional Congressional appropriations (Johnson and Zimmerman, 2021), and the CDC budget has been flat, despite inflation, for twenty years.

Sixth, socialists can warn against predictable plans for "disaster capitalism," which promotes neoliberal policies that would not have been considered until an emergency. As a result, these local disasters tend to exacerbate inequality. Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* is the classic argument, but see also *Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction* (Gunewardena and Schuller eds. 2008). Klein's new book, *The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists*, documents the efforts to privatize social services after their 2017 hurricane.

This fight began immediately after the hurricane. Electricity, hospitals, water, roads, and more: all would require rebuilding, a process that could take two paths. Given the desperation and distraction brought about by the disaster, the federal government, corporations, and investors sensed an opportunity: Puerto Rican society was at its most vulnerable, making it the perfect time to snap up bargains, privatize industry, and remake the island. A small elite of non-islanders, who own and control infrastructure and resources, would benefit from the profit-driven privatization and monetization of the island, which has been touted as the libertarian enclave of cryptowealth, a tax haven for certain private interests. (Winterbottom, 2018)

To counter disaster capitalism, the Left must be prepared with "survival socialism" policies that support community self-reliance (Flanders, 2018).

Towards a Socialist Strategy for Community Resilience

Socialists have tended to believe that capitalism was close to collapsing when it wasn't, and ecologists may overestimate the speed of ecological collapse. Nonetheless, we know

that rising inequality and climate change are pushing the world towards greater instability and a greater frequency of disasters. Some see base-building, mutual aid, and building dual power institutions as the best way to build socialism and prepare for a terminal capitalist crisis, and they are certainly ways to meet and talk to some of our neighbors. For now, however, most of our neighbors will be more interested in stimulus checks than free groceries delivered sporadically by volunteers.

For leftists concerned about catastrophic risks, a more effective activity may be to join with existing institutions like FEMA's Citizen Corps, which works to make communities more resilient to disasters, as well as with sane neighbors interested in prepping. Leftists engaged in disaster preparedness will learn useful skills and have an opportunity to point to the structural problems that make our communities more vulnerable. We will then be better positioned to organize angry neighbors when the FEMA response is weak and radicalize them around the underfunding of federal and state agencies like the CDC. While the right-wing preppers counsel isolation and xenophobia, socialist preppers can build solidarity and effectively prepare for whatever may come.

Additional Resources on Community Resilience

- *Resilience Matters* (URP, 2020)
- *The Community Resilience Reader* (2017)
- *A Whole Community Approach to Emergency Management* (FEMA, 2011)
- *Community Resilience* (RAND, 2015)
- *Disaster Resilience: A National Imperative* (National Academies Press, 2012)
- "What Do We Mean by 'Community Resilience'?" (Patel, et al, 2017)
- *Disaster risk reduction for community resilience: a synthesis of lessons from more than a decade of disaster risk reduction programming* (UNISDR, 2015)

Building Disaster Resilient Communities (UNDP, 2007)

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