

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

The myth of preparedness

Journal Item

How to cite:

Aradau, Claudia (2010). The myth of preparedness. *Radical Philosophy*, 161 pp. 2–7.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2010 Radical Philosophy Ltd



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2187&editorial_id=29048

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

The myth of preparedness

Claudia Aradau

Look at this place! It's buzzing... [Bomb explosion. People screaming. Chaos] Were you caught off-guard? That's the problem. Can you imagine life without the places where we congregate? These are convenient places, places where we want to go, are free to go. In airports and stadiums you can monitor access, they are contained. Public spaces are not contained. You have a part to play to ensure that freedom doesn't make you vulnerable. When people are freely collected together, it presents an opportunity to those who want to cause mayhem. You not only have the skill and knowledge to cope with a terrorist attack, but help prevent it. Maybe you don't realize it yet. Until then we're back to anxiety, confusion, fear: just what they wanted'.¹

Thus starts one of the DVDs shown as part of preparedness exercises across the UK. In a shopping centre, an urban square, a nightclub or a hotel, a bomb explodes. All preparedness exercises start from the moment of the unexpected event: the screen goes blank, the sound takes over and the action reverts to the 'real' participants in the exercises. These are not fragments of disaster movies which effectively modulate an excitable public, but the very opposite of mediatic representations: they are modalities of expert knowledge mobilized anew as part of extensive emergency preparedness plans in the UK. Rather than faded memories of the Cold War civil defence drills or the much derided 'duck and cover' rituals, preparedness exercises have remained at the centre of emergency management knowledge and practice. More recently, they have been reinvented and have increasingly proliferated, their practice required by law and their knowledge taught in dedicated institutions for emergency planners: the UK Civil Contingencies Act requires emergency responders to hold regular exercises to prepare for future potential emergencies, while the government's Emergency Planning College provides expert knowledge for the growing profession of emergency planners. Every local police force, every local council, every NHS body, every fire service, electricity supplier, gas supplier, train, airport, railways operator and so on is required to hold regular exercises to test emergency preparedness.

From floods and other weather disasters to the 'next terrorist attack' as a potential CBRN emergency, preparedness exercises create worst-case scenarios as '[t]his helps the emergency services and all those who respond to incidents of this nature to prepare for similar events of smaller scale, which are more likely to occur, as well as for worst case scenario'.² As potential disasters appear now as indeterminate, unpredictable and unexpected, preparedness exercises are placed at the heart of a new *ratio* which challenges or replaces statistical calculability. In this sense, the future of unexpected events cannot be known or predicted; it can only be enacted. Uncertainty becomes an opportunity to 'speculate not just about "the future", but about a *range of possible futures* that might arise from the uncertain course of the forces of change'.³ This is what futurists have concerned themselves with since Herman Kahn's work on 'thinking the unthinkable' at the RAND Corporation, through the Schell scenarios in the 1960s and 1970s, to the

more recent governmental scenarios by the National Intelligence Council in the USA or horizon-scanning projects in the UK. Preparedness proposes a mode of ordering the future that embraces uncertainty and ‘imagines the unimaginable’ rather than ‘taming’ dangerous irruptions through statistical probabilities. The archival knowledge of the past is replaced by the enactment-knowledge of continual rehearsal of the performance to come.⁴

Project Argus, a series of counterterrorist exercises organized by the National Counter-Terrorism Security Office (NaCTSO) is ‘exploring ways to aid you in preventing, handling and recovering from a terrorist attack’.⁵ Exercise Osiris aimed to test the operational response to a chemical attack on the tube. Atlantis considered London’s response to a scenario where four areas of London were flooded at a result of a river breach. Exercises simulate an emergency situation and aim to prepare organizations to withstand disruptive challenges. Yet these exercises do much more (or much less, in a sense). Despite their claims of embracing radical uncertainty and openness, exercises do not prepare subjects to imagine the unimaginable or even a more limited range of different futures. Preparedness exercises do not imagine an overturning of the present social order. They also don’t exactly engage in performative enactments of neoliberal speculation or in fostering entrepreneurial subjects willing to bet on the future. The *ratio* they act out has more in common with myth.

Exercises like Argus, Griffin, Osiris, Kali, Demeter, Atlantis, Agni or Enki have resurrected the ancient names of deities and other mythological or legendary beings. ‘Enki – the Sumerian God of Fresh Water and Wisdom. Associated with the intellect and medicine, creation and fertility’ notes the Major Incident Exercise Report from Barking and Dagenham. ‘Agni is a Hindu deity. The word Agni is Sanskrit for “fire”’ explains another exercise. Argus, the hundred-eyed giant of Greek mythology appears to be the aleatory result of acronymed ‘Area Reinforcement Gained Using Scenarios’. Although many exercises have more mundane names (such as Domino, Herald, Avon Express or Willow), the mythical references are symptomatic of the return to myth in the confrontation with the unexpected, the incalculable and the unpredictable. As Adorno and Horkheimer have formulated the mythical tendencies underpinning Enlightenment rationality, both myth and rationality are responses to the fear of the unknown and attempts to devise strategies of ‘mere self-preservation’ and resisting radical change.⁶ Rather than shattering scientific certainty, the unexpected and the catastrophe return the *ratio* of preparedness to the mythical process of rite in which the possible consequences of unexpected events are suppressed. The futurity of unexpected events cannot be sustained and subjects–players inhabit the future as a mythical space of inevitable fate, inconsequential activity and mimetism.

Mythic inevitability

After 9/11, organizations, bureaucracies and intelligence services are required to expect the unexpected and replace the improbable with the mere possible and imaginable.⁷ Preparedness entails modes of organization not based on the past or the present but in relation to a radically uncertain future. Yet the limits of scientific calculability do not break the mould of enlightenment knowledge but revert back to ritual enactments of factuality. With the *ratio* of preparedness, as with Enlightenment, there is a return to mythology as ‘[f]actuality wins the day: cognition is restricted to its repetition; and thought becomes mere tautology.’⁸ While exercises appear to set out an unexpected event in the future, this unknown possibility is not new but harks back to an inevitable necessity. ‘The next terrorist attack is a question of when, not if’ repeat the counter-terrorism security advisers at the beginning of Argus exercises. Or ‘What happens abroad is replicated domestically’, so there will be a next terrorist attack as in Bali, Mumbai or Kandahar! The principle of fatal necessity rules preparedness as it had ruled rationalistic science and the destiny of mythical heroes.

Preparedness exercises do not create something new, they do not organize subjects with a view to radical change, but rehearse in a ritual play that which has already been set out as inevitable: the 'next terrorist attack' which will differ from previous ones only in the intensity and/or extensivity of destruction. Mythic time replaces the temporal indeterminacy of the unexpected future event. Exercises function in the modality of the future anterior, not as a wager made in the present for changing the future, but as the continuity of a pre-given future back into the present: the next terrorist attack will have been. The future anterior of preparedness allows exercises to function in a time of certainty, of tautology and of a 'foregone conclusion' in which the unexpected is always expected as it will already have been.⁹

The anterior futurity of preparedness suspends argument and debate about truth and falsity, meaning and representation. What matters are not distinctions between true and false but those of credible and incredible, between plausible and implausible. Project Argus depicts a scenario, through audiovisual media, which takes place in real time, and asks players to make decisions in the event of a terrorist attack. It combines a series of video and audio materials to develop a credible terrorist attack scenario to which participants are expected to respond. Credibility is the result of artifice: realistic but inconsequential details need to be included as part of scenario planning and delivery. Thus, exercises start with clear indications of time, space and weather, incorporate maps and other visual representations of urban spaces, flows of people, traffic and materials which create a 'false clarity' of the event. The future event will have been at '16:15 hours, Wednesday 16th February 2005. It's a cold and dry afternoon, with a temperature of 7°C. There's a light east, south-easterly breeze of about 5mph.'¹⁰

Exercises establish a sensorial regime of inhabiting the future in which indeterminacy and uncertainty revert to mythical inevitability. Historical time is withdrawn from detailed spatial representations and replaced with the cyclical time of weather patterns or the linearity of clock time. Inevitable is not only the disruptive event but also the response to a disaster. Response unfolds according to predetermined clock time: each time interval requires predetermined actions and processes. The first 5 minutes are about communicating with those around, 15 minutes about 'taking control', 40 minutes about reassuring those around, 2 hours about working together with the emergency services; longer times are about business continuity and return to normality. Clock time unfolds to allow the planning to reach the conclusion that the exercise authors wanted and 'tames' the unexpected event under the linearity of response. The exercise ultimately 'imprisons human beings in the cycle objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects'.¹¹

Deactivation

As *The Odyssey* combined myth and rational labour giving expression to the dialectic of Enlightenment, preparedness responds to the mythical inevitability of fate not by avoiding it but through cunning and artifice. Preparedness does not try to find a rational way to avoid the 'next terrorist attack' or to confront it with superior knowledge, but to use artifice to avoid its consequences and ensure the self-preservation of atomistic individuals, the entrepreneurs who have taken precautionary measures. Artifice allows exercise players, like Odysseus, to lose themselves in order to save themselves.

According to manuals for emergency planning, the goal of exercises is to test plans, train staff and validate existing emergency procedures. The injunction to act entails not a series of goal-oriented actions, but a state of activation in which one 'expects the unexpected', is alert, ready for action, vigilant. It means to be able to read signs and interpret omens: detect the potential terrorist behind the ordinary neighbour, the bomb in the anonymous bag, the explosive in the white van, the chemical device in the innocuous garbage bin. It is to be ready for 'pseudo-activity' as the spurious and

meaningless activity reflecting the impossibility to change social relations.¹² Activated subjects both recognize artifice and use it for self-preservation.

What matters is not the content of action, but the ways in which one makes use of artifice and cunning to present one's actions visibly as something different. Exercise players accomplish standard gestures and fulfil a ritual that is subsequently reflected in the media coverage of the event. As with all rituals, activity is a 'determined process' which can be influenced by magic (i.e. expert knowledge). The subject of exercises takes on automaton-like qualities. Following expected procedures, performing the



right gestures, the subject withdraws from historical action and relinquishes political responsibility. 'Who is to blame? Architects who designed the buildings' notes a post-emergency imaginary BBC broadcast shown as part of an Argus Professional exercise. Argus exercises reduce blame to mediatic shaming and legal procedures. Not to be blamed can only be therefore to be *seen* as acting responsibly, visibly following emergency protocols, enacting the artifice of contractual responsibility. Responsibility is artifice, appearance rather than substance, and the response to an unexpected event

is ordered at the level of appearance. Setting up connectivities, finding alternative means of communication, is the answer out of the emergency situations; causes and pre-vental circumstances are immaterial.

The artifice of activation is not without dangers: activated subjects can become unpredictable, disruptive and unruly. To activate is to create potential exposure to excitable reactions. Therefore exercises need to channel activation through pastoral care. Pastoral care is the form that leadership takes rather than a goal for action; it is directed at irrational, emotional and suggestible crowds whose activated alertness needs to be channelled and managed. What is needed in emergency times, exercise wisdom teaches, is a 'strong leader' who can assuage panic and fear among the crowds. From a concert stadium to a demonstration or a shopping place, there is no difference, as fickle crowds and their unstable affects need to be channelled by a leader. The economic subjects who congregate in shopping centres and other public spaces can dangerously morph into potentially destructive crowds that could disrupt the socio-economic system. Nominating key individuals as leaders can help tame the potential violence of crowds and de-collectivize their power.

The collective subject of unexpected events is individualized, reduced to lists of business employees whose names are to be called out in the event of a disruption. Activating subjects to anticipate the future through preparedness exercises is not to inhabit a future where failings of the present would be overcome. Activating subjects is also not to train them to become more alert or imaginative – but to accustom them to artifice as the essence of what they have always been. 'You already have the knowledge and skill to cope with a terrorist attack' repeat all the Argus DVDs. Exercises return subject to the myth of the atomized individual, deprived of collective power and its potentially destructive capacity. Activation becomes a form of political disactivation and disarray, as innocently noted by an exercise on emergency evacuation after an aircraft accident:

Passengers in the forward end of the cabin were uncertain what to do when the 'accident' started, many staying in their seats for some time without attempting to evacuate. The 'dead' status of the two cabin staff was not clear to the passengers; *this was confusing because they were waiting for a lead from them.*¹³

Mimetism

While experts never tire of emphasizing the unpredictability and indeterminacy of disruptive events, their possible activation at any moment and catastrophic effects, preparedness exercises ultimately rely on mimetism. The mimetic faculty, as described by Benjamin, is 'the compulsion to become or behave like something else'.¹⁴ It entails both the cognitive capacity to see resemblances, correlations, patterns and the expressive capacity of imitation. In that sense, preparedness exercises are both semblance and play. The semblance or correlative function of mimesis re-emerges in preparedness exercises as a replacement to the function of probabilistic calculation. At the same time, similarly to children's mimetic play, exercise players enact themselves as others, from the safety manager to the business manager.

The players' perception of correlations and similarities is structured by the sensuous images replayed on the DVD. The white van, the garbage bin, the suspect rucksack, these are all instant triggers of possible correlations that spell 'danger'. Yet sensuousness can be deceiving and emergency planners need to create habits of decoding nonsensuous similarities. The mimetism of exercises is reinforced through mnemonics: each stage of the response has its easy-to-remember constructs. During the first 15 minutes, security managers are required to take control of the situation by simple action words such as 'survey', 'assess', 'disseminate'. When contacting the emergency services, the mnemonic CHALET contains all the indications for information needed: C (casualties), H (hazards in the areas), A (access to the location), L (location of the incident), E (emergency services required), T (Type of explosion. In the event of a Mumbai-type shooting, four Cs encapsulate the exemplary behaviours: C (cover), C (confirm), C (contact) and C (control)).¹⁵ By privileging semblance, exercises replace genuine cognition and thinking with automaton-like stimuli and correlations.

As the worst-case scenario is taken as the object of mimetic adaptation, any disaster becomes equivalent to any other and universal interchangeability is made possible. Exercises activate habits of preparedness to a whole array of events, from terrorist attacks to climatic disasters, as set out by the 2004 Civil Contingencies Act, which lists together under emergency events serious industrial strikes, disruptive political protests, terrorist outrages, disasters arising from storms or epidemics, and incursions on national infrastructures such as computer networks. No protest or mobilization can be safely outside the list of emergencies. By repressing the conditions of the emergence of catastrophe, preparedness exercises become exemplar for any disruption businesses can be confronted with and where the mythical gestures of survival and continuity are at stake.

Through the compulsion of mimetic similitude, players can simultaneously be self and other, leader and led, worker and managed, disciplined and flexible. Thus, players simultaneously establish rituals of command and leadership while undertaking an adaptation to nature understood as complex, adaptive, non-hierarchical. Players are required to make themselves similar to the threat environment through affinity and adaptation: 'The whole community has a part to play in devising and implementing measures that are dynamic, flexible, agile and adaptive.'¹⁶ As threats are virtualities which can be activated at any moment, they need to be tackled in a similar modality of activation which allows mimetic adaptation to external changes. Preparedness aims at modelling the social world on ecological systems analysis and its theories of resilience and complex adaptive systems. As ecological knowledge is increasingly concerned with the persistence of ecosystems in the face of abrupt change, preparedness replicates this rationality and attempts to sustain a desired state in the face of any possible and unexpected disruption. Through adaptation, systems do not remain exactly unchanged, but, as definitions of resilience suggest, they absorb disturbances and reorganize so as to retain essentially the same main functions.

Stabilizing identity and retaining the system's main functions is at the heart of ecological knowledge about adaptive systems. Disruptions can be absorbed through increased adaptability: by creating diversification of tasks, redundancy, co-management, communication channels, 'social memory'. Yet, the non-sensuous similarity assumed by the *ratio* of preparedness is constantly subverted by the sensuous similitude between social world and hierarchical systems. If the adaptive capacity to withstand disruption and absorb it is to work on the model of ecological systems, order, hierarchy and leadership are needed. Unlike ecologically adaptive complex systems which can also reorganize in a new state, social systems cannot be allowed to morph into a new identity. At the same time, in line with ecological systems knowledge, preparedness exercises do not enact unchanged recovery (it is not physical survival that is the main aim of preparedness), but the continuity of a commodified environment of business survival and continuity. 'Nearly 1 in 5 businesses suffer a major disruption every year. Yours could be next. With no recovery plan, you have less chance of survival' ominously warns a preparedness document offered as supplementary reading with the Argus exercises.

A stark rendition of the goal of preparedness inadvertently appeared in a scenario by the National Intelligence Council in the USA. The 'Caliphate' scenario uses a fictional letter written by a fictional grandson of bin Laden to a fictional relative in 2020 about Islam's struggle to wrest control from traditional regimes. 'Oh, what confusion did we sow with the Crusaders', exults the fictional character. 'An almost forgotten word reentered the Western lexicon and histories of early Caliphs suddenly rose to be bestsellers on Amazon.com.'¹⁷ This final sentence is revealing for what is implied in the new preparedness myths: every disruption, however catastrophic, is ultimately absorbed by a system which preserves its identity as a capitalist system above anything else. While the CIA conjures images of a spiritual caliphate, we will still have Amazon.com.

Notes

1. Notes from Argus Retail, 9 June 2009, Doncaster.
2. London Fire Brigade, 'London Community Risk Register', London, 2010, <http://www.london-fire.gov.uk/Documents/LondonCommunityRiskRegister.pdf>.
3. Bill Ralston and Ian Wilson, *The Scenario-Planning Handbook: A Practitioner's Guide to Developing and Using Scenarios to Direct Strategy in Today's Uncertain Times*, Thomson/South-Western, Crawfordsville IN, 2006.
4. Stephen Collier, 'Enacting Catastrophe: Preparedness, Insurance, Budgetary Rationalization.' *Economy and Society*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2008, pp. 224–50; Tracy C. Davis, *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense*, Durham NC, Duke University Press, 2007.
5. National Counter Terrorism Security Office (NaCTSO), 'Project Argus: Protecting against Terrorist Attack', London, 2008, <http://www.nactso.gov.uk/argus.php>.
6. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, London, 1997.
7. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 'The 9/11 Commission Report', 2004, <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/911/Index.html>.
8. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 27.
9. Brian Massumi, 'The Future Birth of the Affective Fact', in *Conference Proceedings: Genealogies of Biopolitics* 2005, <http://browse.reticular.info/text/collected/massumi.pdf>.
10. Humber Emergency Planning Service, 'Exercise Guide', <http://heps.eastriding.gov.uk/index.asp?docid=1002540>, p. 8.
11. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 12.
12. Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 86.
13. N. McDonald, R. Fuller and G. White, 'The Design and Evaluation of an Emergency Exercise', *Simulation Games for Learning* 22, 1992, p. 326.
14. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty', in *Selected Writings: 1931–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999.
15. Notes from Argus Hotels, Cambridge, 20 June 2009.
16. NaCTSO, 'Crowded Places', London, www.nactso.gov.uk/crowdedplaces.php.
17. National Intelligence Council, 'Mapping the Global Future', National Intelligence Council, Washington DC, 2004.