

Mutual Aid and the World as it Should be

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In March of 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe, and governments around the world began forcing people off the streets and into their homes. It quickly became clear that those who were most vulnerable and marginalized under even normal circumstances, would suffer dramatically more under pandemic conditions. With the medically vulnerable unable to meet their basic needs, and the economically marginalized unable to pay for their basic needs, something had to be done.

Then, in little more than the time it takes to say “no one cares anymore,” groups organized to meet the sudden urgency of the problem. Teenagers shut out of school started creating shopping services. Residents of apartment buildings organized to find out who was medically vulnerable and economically marginalized and helped them meet their needs. Neighborhoods organized birthday parades for their children. Formal nonprofits repurposed themselves from their normal services that had been shut down by government policies around the virus. And activist groups, especially those with anarchist leanings, sprang into action to support food access, protect housing rights, and provide social support. And they organized not just to provide the most vulnerable with resources, but to build solidarity, community, and power.

Evolution of an Idea and a Practice

As the number and visibility of groups helping their communities expanded, people began to talk about “mutual aid.” It isn’t a new term, and it isn’t a new practice. The theory of human mutual aid dates back over 100 years to Peter Kropotkin’s book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, but Kropotkin draws on evolutionary theorists Charles Darwin and Karl Kessler before him. Kropotkin argued that mutual aid was at the core of not just any civilized society, but of nature itself. Beginning with a resurrection of a long-ignored argument of Darwin’s that cooperation, not competition, best assures a species’ survival, Kropotkin goes on to show that cooperation--from land crabs, to the earliest humans, to the people of his time--survived and thrived through cooperative organization. The seeming decline of both the culture and practice of mutual aid, he argued, was a consequence of the growth of a state whose main task was to break the bonds of community in order to create a population malleable to the needs of industry and profit.

It is from this analysis that Kropotkin earns his “anarchist” label, even though he was among the most mild-mannered of anarchists in the same vein as the Christian anarchist Dorothy Day who co-founded the mutual aid Catholic Worker movement. No label is treated as more threatening in contemporary society. Not even “communist” carries the same sense of threat. As they say in activist circles, “They jail the communists; they hang the anarchists.”

The practice of mutual aid, as Kropotkin noted, has always been present in human society. Even in the United States, formal mutual aid groups dated back nearly to the founding of the country, as documented by the National Humanities Center. One of the first, the Free African Society in Philadelphia, organized to support Blacks newly freed from slavery. Then there are the many social benefit organizations and fraternal societies whose have been influenced by quintessentially US-style libertarian philosophy. The common thread is that such groups have always organized in the context of either oppressive/repressive state action or the vacuum of its inaction.

Many such groups since then, perhaps unaware of Kropotkin, have organized textbook examples of mutual aid. Most recognized were the Black Panthers, who organized free meal programs for children, education programs for neighborhoods, safety programs for elders, and even health care and ambulance services. It is their model that Professor Robert Soden hears New York mutual aid groups most cite as inspiration. Less heralded have been the food and clothing programs, gasoline co-op, and credit union of the United Farm Workers.

And there are many, many groups that respond to crisis and disaster. Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, for example, is composed of some of the largest, and most hierarchical charity organizations and NGOs in the world. They are people with power and privilege designing and providing relief to people without.

Those involved in mutual aid have also evolved over time. A number of members of the Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR), one of the larger, Kropotkin-influenced groups, first organized as the mutual aid group Common Ground in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. When Common Ground imploded from internal conflict that some attribute to an agent provocateur, its organizers and leaders moved into the Occupy movement, especially Occupy Wall Street, in 2011, which combined mutual aid and protest. Some of those activists then eventually went on to found MADR.

In many other cases among the most oppressed, exploited, and excluded peoples, mutual aid groups always exist, becoming more prominent in times of acute crisis and then receding into what Verta Taylor calls abeyance when people's collective existence is more stable. Such is the case described by Professor Adriana Garriga-López with the *auto-gestión* in Puerto Rico, which mobilized in the wake of Hurricane Maria, then remobilized during the recent earthquake, and now again during the pandemic.

Overall, mutual aid is less a specific type of service or resource provider and more a way of organizing to provide resources and services. It is most typically a form of crisis response where the people experiencing the crisis are engaged in leading and implementing the response. The mutual aid resource site Big Door Brigade lists a wide range of issues taken on by mutual aid groups: bail funds, bystander intervention, childcare, cop watches, disability justice, emergency preparedness, food distribution, forming groups & projects, health care,

housing, immigration, legal support, parole, prisoner support, self-defense, and sex trades support.

Mutual Aid in the Spring of 2020

The most politicized mutual aid groups have dramatically expanded their engagement in the context of not just a pandemic, but of a state so completely structured to maintain white supremacist patriarchal capitalist power that they were unable to cope. The U.S. state, from the local to national level, was unable to set coherent policy, provide adequate health care, or adequately support unemployed workers. It was unable to shift the food supply chain to prevent farmers from dumping milk and vegetables in ditches while grocery store shelves sat empty. It was unable to shift the manufacturing supply chain to provide adequate protection to front-line workers. It was unable to shift policy to protect people's ability to meet their basic needs.

So it is unsurprising to see a sudden and dramatic rise of both informal and formal groups to help people meet their needs. No one knows for sure just how many mutual aid groups there are. In the U.S, a national network--the Mutual Aid Hub--formed, as more than 800 groups self-identified their work. This is likely only a small fraction of all the groups doing mutual aid-type work. COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK has documented a similar explosion of "thousands" of groups across the globe. All the lists continue to grow.

Many of these mutual aid groups took on an expanded mission on May 25, 2020, when Minneapolis police murdered George Floyd in broad daylight in front of citizen witnesses with cameras. It became clear that a state unable to provide for people's basic needs during a pandemic could still sustain a police force structured to protect property over people. George Floyd was killed after he passed a fake \$20 bill to a retailer. Protests exploded across the U.S., and then the world. As the pandemic crisis gave way to mass protests against oppressive/repressive policing, mutual aid groups shifted nimbly from providing for the needs of the vulnerable and marginalized to providing for the needs of the protestors--food, water, and medical care on the streets. At ground zero of the protests in Minneapolis, with grocery stores damaged and shuttered, and public transportation halted, community members faced an even more desperate food situation. Pimento Jamaican Kitchen, in the most affected Minneapolis neighborhood, became a center for food, water, mask, and gloves donation and redistribution to protestors and community members.

The Political Consciousness of Mutual Aid Groups

Mutual aid groups' political analysis runs the gamut. The most anarchist-leaning groups use the label *mutual aid* consciously and cite Kropotkin. They are explicitly anti-state, believing that the state is inherently oppressive and repressive. From the perspective of the New Orleans Mutual Aid Society, government has caused the problems so we can't look to the same government for the solution. They even refuse to accept government funds that could support their work. In a different vein, the Canadian "caremongering" groups described by Yvonne Su understand they

are stepping in for a poorly functioning state but hold out hope that a better state structure is possible.

Many other groups are carefully apolitical, have no conscious analysis of the state, or let the state off the hook because they see the crisis as a unique event that could not have been planned for. Witness in my hometown of Madison, Wisconsin, the difference between the Industrial Workers of the World-sponsored Dane County Community Defense and Dane County Neighbors Helping Neighbors.

Dane County Neighbors Helping Neighbors: "This group facilitates neighbor-to-neighbor support. To center this goal, we prohibit posts that are political in nature, including discussions about political candidates or parties, as well as petitions."

Dane County Community Defense: "There is a noise protest at the jail tomorrow at 11am to free people. Jails are vectors for infection for the entire community. They force people to be locked up and in close quarters and then send jail workers in and out of the jail to spread the virus to the entire community. It's also cruel and unusual punishment to keep people locked up to get sick and possibly lose their lives all for a system of 'justice' in which there is no proof that it deters crimes..."

The label of mutual aid has now been processed through mainstream culture, where even organizations such as AARP promote it as "informal groups of volunteers that help neighbors connect during times of crisis and assure no one in the community has to face it alone." There is even one case of state appropriation of the label mutual aid. The State of Alabama's *Mutual Aid System* is essentially a state-run apparatus of disaster services--a most un-anarchist formulation.

But for those groups who take the label of mutual aid most to heart, there are a set of common principles.

Solidarity, Not Charity

The slogan for the most politically conscious mutual aid groups, particularly those working from anarchist philosophy, is "solidarity, not charity." For law professor and activist Dean Spade, mutual aid is "a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable." On Big Door Brigade, this contrasts with charity as "a framework that often means rich people giving a little bit to poor people to make themselves look better.... often a strategy for controlling poor people." Educator/activist Antonio Roman-Alcalá describes charity as aid that flows in one direction, from haves to have nots, while solidarity refers to aid flowing

horizontally. The New Orleans Mutual Aid Society works from Dom Helder Camara's famous quote, saying "we want to feed the poor, but we also want to ask why the poor have no food."

Solidarity happens in many ways. The "pod" has become the organizing unit of choice for many mutual aid groups. In earlier times this structure may have been called an affinity group, and in much earlier times a cell. For Rebel Sidney Black the pod is usually a small group of people who have made a mutual commitment to help each other out. In New York City, where both the pandemic and the community response expanded like in no other U.S. place, groups like Mutual Aid Medford and Somerville (MAMAS) have literally mapped pods across their neighborhoods. For Big Door Brigade, political education is another path to solidarity, helping all those involved in a mutual aid group to understand how the failings of the social system, not the individual, are the true causes of people's problems.

Another solidarity strategy occurs through groups offering services but not through a typical service organization structure. Dean Spade describes organizations organized so that, when people approach the group for services, they are then invited to participate in the group itself. The people showing up for assistance also bring with them diverse identities and backgrounds. And that means that mutual aid groups need to explicitly theorize and practice inclusivity to keep diverse people involved, by definition pushing them in progressive directions. As an example, the Mutual Aid networks of Massachusetts are developing a statement of solidarity on anti-racism and solidarity with Black Lives Matter. Big Door Brigade goes a step further in requiring that governance of a mutual aid group must be inclusive of those receiving the aid.

Other groups do explicit outreach. While "apps" have become the most-promoted means of organizing mutual aid groups, such technology doesn't find everyone who needs, or can contribute to, a mutual aid group. Groups such as Austin Mutual Aid have developed protocols for safe neighborhood flyering under pandemic conditions. For researcher and organizer Embry Wood Owen, that outreach is about "asks and offers"--not just seeing people as needy but also able to contribute.

Cooperation, Not Competition

A strong principle that shows up in many of these groups, such as Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, is "cooperation, not competition." Far from the bomb-throwing anarchist stereotype, in the context of COVID-19, this principle emphasizes the understanding that "we can literally save each others' lives." These groups do not see mutual aid as a fleeting engagement appropriate only in times of crisis but as part of a long-term community-building practice that includes a deep critique of the current society. This principle also shows up in Big Door Brigade's emphasis on consensus, not majority, decision-making, and Antonio Roman-Alcalá's principle of egalitarianism.

An increasing number of mutual aid groups have also supplemented or even supplanted the anarchist anti-state analysis with theories of how white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, ableism, and colonization produce or exacerbate the crises we are experiencing. James

Goodman writes about how STL Mutual Aid in St. Louis came together with members of Solidarity Economy St. Louis, bringing sustainability values into the mix. But there tends to be overall agreement that wholesale change, not piecemeal reforms, are necessary for true social justice. Mutual aid groups, in the way they theorize and practice leadership development and decision-making, gather and redistribute resources, and organize for dramatic substantial policy change, attempt to live the world as it should be.

Mutual Aid as a Social Movement?

For so many mutual aid organizers like Antonio Roman-Alcalá, mutual aid is a direct action social change project. So have we reached a moment in history where mutual aid can gather enough power and momentum to be considered a social movement? The question is more difficult than it might seem. Academics have been trying to decide what counts as a social movement for as long as there have been social movements. I will combine the language of Charles Tilly's 1984 definition with that of Mario Diani's 1992 definition:

A social movement is a sustained series of interactions between powerholders and networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and or organizations with a shared collective identity who engage in political or cultural conflict, make publicly visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations of support.

In other words, a social movement needs to express unified goals for change, act publicly against power, and engage over the long haul. Does mutual aid hold the promise of a movement?

It is already clear that much of the apolitical informal mutual aid that rose up in the early days of the COVID-19 shutdowns has already waned. The informal grocery shopping groups have been replaced by supermarket services, children's birthday parties are increasingly celebrated with clandestine face to face parties, and people have forsaken the socially distant happy hour for returning to reopened bars.

But many of the groups that have consciously adopted the label of mutual aid have sustained themselves through the long haul. Many existed before the pandemic, many quickly and nimbly shifted to demonstration support in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd, and then Rayshard Brooks and Andres Guardado. Camila Domonoske reported that the Minnesota Freedom Fund, a mutual aid-style bail fund organization, increased its budget from about \$150,000 in 2018 to \$31 million in the weeks following the protests.

As the pandemic exposed the brutal realities of racial oppression manifested in virus deaths, and the protests exposed the outright fascism rising in the state, people's analysis of the world as it is, and their vision of the world as it should be, grew ever clearer. "Defund the police" became not just a rallying cry, but a developing policy proposal. Mutual aid became infused

with anti-racist and anti-capitalist theorizing not just among the core members but across the society with calls for eviction moratoriums and collective income supports. Networks of mutual aid groups developed in New York City, across nations, and between nations, maintained by groups such as the Mutual Aid Hub and the COVID-19 List.

There are, then, many signs of at least a nascent movement building across the U.S. and even internationally. Beyond demands to defund the police, however, it is unclear what other goals mutual aid groups can coalesce around and continue to build mass support for. Will the movement grow to include more issues and demands for more justice? Can it develop enough street power and electoral power to eject the rising fascist influences from local, regional, and national governments around the globe? Can it create the world as it should be, based on solidarity and cooperation? Stay tuned.

Resources

Big Door Brigade, <https://bigdoorbrigade.com/>

COVID-19 List, <https://www.covid-19list.com>

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, <https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org>

Mutual Aid Hub, <https://www.mutualaidhub.org/>

Dean Spade, <https://www.deanspade.net/tag/mutual-aid/>