

Words Mean Things

Mutual Aid

Anathema

January 21, 2021

Ever since the start of the pandemic I've seen a lot of projects pop up that claim to be mutual aid projects. They do all kinds of nice things like give out food, provide masks and gloves, or give away warm clothes. These are really helpful, especially since corona has messed a bunch of people up financially. Most of them aren't mutual aid though.

When I think of mutual aid I try to keep it real simple; I think "is it mutual?" and "is it aid?". Giving useful stuff away during a crisis is definitely aid but most of the stuff calling itself mutual aid isn't mutual. The people giving stuff away don't get stuff back; who is the giver and receiver doesn't change. The project just gives and the people it provides to just take. It's nice but it's not mutual.

I feel like we've taken the term mutual aid and made it into something it's not. It seems like it's been blown up into this word that means some high visibility showing up to give things away. Not everything needs to be mutual aid. There are lots of reasons to just give stuff away – for propaganda, to start conversations, to lessen suffering, because stuff should be free, the list goes on. An anarchist project that gives things away can achieve a lot, and just because something isn't mutual aid doesn't mean it's not worth doing.

So what does doing mutual aid mean then? I think a good start is to think of mutual aid less as a thing you do and more as a way you have relationships. Imagine helping and sharing with someone and them also sharing with and helping you. How does it look to have that kind of relationship with someone? Can you imagine scaling it up to a group? There's no set formula for a mutual aid relationship, it will look different with each person you relate to because the aid we can give and receive from each person is different.

For me mutual aid is helping each other. It's more about living in a way where I help people and they also help me. It doesn't need to be flashy. I help a friend with their event and they give me a ride a week later; we aid each other, mutually. I'm not keeping track of how many favors I'm owed or anything but if things are one-sided then I want to be real and it's not mutual aid.

As anarchists, a goal is to get away from hierarchies. Relying on our horizontal relationships to co-create the lives we need and want, instead of the powers that be, is a way to move away from those hierarchies.

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