

Rhiannon Firth on Disaster, Mutual Aid and Anarchism

Rhiannon Firth & The Final Straw Radio

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TFSR: I'm really excited to be talking to Rhiannon Firth today, the author of *Disaster Anarchy*, which came out through Pluto Press this year. Can you introduce yourself with any pronouns and whatever affiliations that you'd like to mention?

Rhiannon Firth: Yeah. Hello, I'm Rhiannon Firth, my pronouns are she/her. I live in London at the moment. I'm a lecturer in sociology at the Institute of Education. That's me.

TFSR: Awesome. I'm really excited to get into the book because I think it's a really important contribution to thinking about mutual aid and disaster and anarchism. So to open up, your book is making an anarchist contribution to something that's called disaster studies. You propose this idea of disaster anarchy, I wonder if you could give a little background on what disaster studies is, and the different fields within it: a state-based one and a critical one, too.

R: Okay. It might be worth giving a bit of personal history into how I ended up writing this book in the first place. So I've been interested in anarchy and anarchism since well before I went to university. So my studies and interests aren't— I'm totally an academic geek. I've mostly been at university either studying or working in some form since I started doing my undergrad. But the book itself started when I was working on a research project. I was working as part of a research team. I was on a precarious contract. And I've always been on precarious academic contracts until very recently. But my boss at the time had a bit of money left over at the end of a project and asked me if there was some way I could use it. It was a project about disasters, and I didn't know anything about disasters at the time. And he said, "Well, you're into anarchy and social movements, why don't you go and study Occupy Sandy? And obviously, I knew about Occupy Sandy, this was about three years afterward. So it was in 2015, and the hurricane itself and the relief movement were in 2012.

So, I had this money and this offer to go to New York and interview some people involved in this cool movement that I was already really inspired by so I said "I'll definitely take you up on that!" I didn't have a lot of time to prepare, because it was this money at the end of a project that needed to be used quite quickly. Otherwise, you have to give it back to the funder, I think. So I went with very little preparation and interviewed people and met some really wonderful, inspiring people through the Occupy Sandy mailing list. Obviously, that movement grew out of

Occupy Wall Street. I've managed to get in touch with some people and interviewed about seven people. And it was actually the third anniversary of the hurricane when I visited.

That was all really awesome and inspiring. But I came back with all this data, and I had no idea what to do with it. I was supposed to write an article or something. And I couldn't figure out how to theorize what I was interested in, because the main thing that I found that I was interested in was the fact that the movement had initially been quite radical. Occupy Wall Street was an anti-austerity, anti-capitalist movement with large anarchist strands, and then Occupy Sandy also had many of the same people involved. But the Department of Homeland Security in the US commissioned this report that very much praised the movement and talked about how fantastic they were, and how we incorporate this youthful energy into our official disaster response, and so on. It's quite a patronizing document. And it's very hard to find online anymore, actually. Because when Trump got rid of loads of documents online, that was one of the things that went, so. There are some anarchist archives that it's still on, but it's no longer on the government web pages like it used to be.

I was fascinated by this document and why it was commending Occupy Sandy so much. It also caused splits in the movement. There are a lot of splits in the movement between those who wanted to not be radical or to accept funding or also who were quite pleased, they saw it as a recognition from the state and the government that their actions were more effective than the official relief effort, which was very much the case at the time. So I needed to figure this out and I felt I needed to know stuff about disasters and how disasters are defined and I went down this huge rabbit hole. Instead of writing an article, which was what I was supposed to do, I actually found it impossible to write that article because I needed an anarchist theorization of disasters and so on, and it didn't exist. So, to me, that was a huge gap.

Also, what was even more difficult was a lot of the mainstream literature says things that sound quite anarchist. Like this government report that praises Occupy Sandy, there's this huge valorization of autonomous responses and community response and so on in a lot of the mainstream disaster studies literature. Sometimes you read it, and it's hard to find anything to criticize. So it took me a long time. And then finally, I got this theorization together and started to write the book. And it took me five years. I was writing this book, and then COVID happened in the UK, well, globally. But I'd never expected to live through a major disaster in my lifetime. And suddenly, this disaster happened all around me. And then also, the discourse that our government here was using and then the splits that were in the movement completely echoed and even magnified what I already started to theorize and I was writing about with Occupy Sandy. So I was like, "Well, I'm really onto something here. My theory is playing out all around me". I ended up taking an extra two years to incorporate interviews and work on this COVID response here as well. That's how the book came into being. And I think that partly answers your question about disaster studies as a field. I could go into more detail about that. But I feel we've been talking for a while.

TFSR: No, I think that would be interesting. I want to get into the two movements that you looked at. But I would love to hear you talk a little bit more about specifically what your theorization of an anarchist disaster response is, but also how that differs from the ways that the state or other academics talk about it, because those differences seem really important and interesting, even when, as you mentioned, there are places where it sounds similar. But ultimately, you're saying there's something very different at play with the anarchist response.

R: Yeah. I suppose the anarchist response to me is very much based on Kropotkin's idea of a social principle and the idea that in the absence of a state or a hierarchical coordinating authority, people can cooperate and solve problems and organize themselves without an overarching authority. And in fact, that's a much better way for people to respond even in disaster situations. A lot of people might accept that people can cooperate in normal times. But maybe a disaster is an exceptional circumstance where people need a coordinating authority, even if temporarily. What we see instead usually is when there's a disaster, it takes a while for bureaucracies to figure out what they're doing because they're quite rigid structures. But what happens immediately is people start cooperating and helping in the recovery effort. And people have been writing about this for a long time. Rebecca Solnit is very well-known for writing in *A Paradise Built in Hell* about the way people step in and roll up their sleeves to help in the recovery effort. Interestingly, the mainstream disaster studies approach very much accepts that. They accept that people, grassroots movements, and people in community groups are much better in the immediate aftermath of a disaster than states who take a lot longer. Naomi Klein, who wrote *Disaster Capitalism*, talks about how there's this assumption that there's a need for specialized bureaucracy to then step in and coordinate this effort. And that's very much the mainstream disaster studies approach. It says autonomous groups are great, but they need someone to come in, and then, as Naomi Klein shows, that's often a power and resource grab that happens. It's often people that come in and vampire of the energies of movements.

An anarchist approach to me is something that's consciously anarchist and tries to fend that off, in a sense. It's first accepting that non-hierarchical movements are better at organizing disaster relief and better at organizing almost everything I'd say. But then also, it needs to be a denial of the idea that there is a need for someone to then step in and coordinate them. And then that means having to fend that off because people will try and do that.

TFSR: It's really interesting because both of these beliefs are widely held that we know from experience and reports that when disasters happen, people come together and work together. And, as you said, that goes back to Kropotkin, in terms of talking about it as an anarchist principle, and then the state also recognizes this in its official documents. But then there's also this widely held belief that we need the centralized authority to take care of us. I guess a lot of it's about security. There's the fear of that Mad Max thing. There is a disaster, and then you have complete lawlessness, and people are killing each other over scarce resources. Why do you think those things both stand in our general understanding of these things of how we respond to disaster? Do you have any thoughts on that?

R: Yeah, it's really confusing. And I think it's very much about what people think human nature is. And I think anarchists have quite a coherent view of what human nature is, or at least what it's capable of, which is that humans are probably malleable. And if you set them up to fail and compete, then they might do, but they're perfectly capable, at least, of cooperating. I think I stated this role of contradictory view of people, it sort of sees them as these Hobbesian brutes that compete and battle each other to the death for scarce resources. But then it also sees them as these kinds of easily manipulatable people with so-called rational choices that can be nudged through technocratic control. So, it's a manipulative view of human nature. But maybe, the state also views human nature as malleable, but that they ought to have the right to mold it themselves for their own purposes, whereas anarchists prefer people to make a more ethical choice.

TFSR: Yeah, the way you talk about the neoliberal responses to disasters, to use that as an opportunity rather – to force people to fend for themselves. So that has the sound of autonomy

or decentralization, but at the same time, the neoliberal state will increase its order and control through police functions. So that's the response to the brutish understanding of human nature. They're doing both things. You refer to the response to Katrina, which, Scott Crow writes about: mutual aid and self-defense are going on from the community perspective, too. They are dealing with people coming together and people trying to hurt each other. So, there's a different way that anarchists respond to that, the fact that both of those things can coexist. That wasn't really a question. I'm thinking about that.

This gets to this other point that you make, which is that anarchists define disaster differently than the state, specifically in relation to how a capitalist state creates disasters. Can you talk a little bit about those differing definitions of disaster that you encounter?

R: The mainstream disaster studies, as well as mainstream consciousness or public consciousness, as well as the state and state policy, always see disaster as a temporary rupture that needs to be fixed. So, in a way, they like anarchist groups or any groups coming in to help. They like Occupy Sandy coming in to help so long as they help get back to normal or, as we had during COVID, this even more terrifying "new normal." So if anyone wants to help get the wheels of capitalism moving again, then they're welcome. It's only when things become non-state or anti-state that the state sees them as a threat. As long as mutual aid is helping people do their shopping or keeping people alive while the neoliberal state withdraws its welfare functions, but continues to profit off people and communities then it seems to be fine with it.

The difference in the anarchist response is that they see capitalism as an ongoing disaster. And then the injurious effects of a disaster are not injurious if the state would see it. For the state, they're not problems of order, and order needs to be restored. They are problems of humans, and capitalism is already inhumane. And the people that are hurt most by the disaster are the people that are already barely surviving the everyday disasters of capitalism. So, the effects of disasters are always racialized and gendered, with people who are more marginalized and more precarious or the people that are more likely to die or lose their livelihoods in a so-called natural disaster or a pandemic or whatever. It's the people that are already struggling that are going to suffer the effects most. Anarchists tend to see these disasters as constitutive of capitalism. Rather than a rupture in capitalism that needs to be plastered over to get back to normal, they're actually revealing the very nature of capitalism, in a sense.

TFSR: One of the benefits that an anarchist response to disaster brings is that it has this long view both of capitalism and the state as ongoing disasters, but also specifically in relation to the climate catastrophe that we're facing, that's getting worse and worse.

Sorry, I am pivoting. One of the things that I think about a lot with anarchists' response to mutual aid is it seems often, we're in the reactive position. Like when fascists come to town, and we want to drive them out. But this long view that you mentioned is maybe really helpful to think about how anarchists can understand that disasters aren't continuous within this current social order. Do you have thoughts on that? What that long view offers us in relation to the future disasters that we know are coming?

R: It's not only anarchists, I think it is Walter Benjamin who had this idea of the "Angel of History", where history is this pile of ruins that accumulates and things are getting worse and worse. And it offers this reverse perspective on the idea of progress. And the idea that things are continually progressing and getting better. A long view is more about reversal of perspective and seeing the— I suppose mutual aid rather than simply being "let's fix things", it's prefiguring a different way of being that also, hopefully, in a sense, addresses the climate crisis. Anarchists

disagree with people who think that we need a strong state, people like David Harvey and George Monbiot— He's writes in *The Guardian*. He puts forward these arguments that anarchists are playing games with climate change because they're messing around and causing disruption. After all, we really need a strong state to address capitalism. It is this state versus capitalism view where the state is the only thing that can save us from capitalism. As an anarchist, I see the state as absolutely essential to capitalism. It's the state that provides the security and the monopoly on violence that keeps everyone in this capitalist system. Anarchism offers radical alternatives to that, which is about people and communities and ecosystems working more cooperatively, at a more down-scaled level. And mutual aid is something that hopefully prefigures that because the state is this alienating impulse that alienates people from each other by turning them into these nodes of this capitalist machine.

There are very individualizing discourses. One that we had in the UK was at the height of the crisis community, this idea of community was deemed desirable. And we even had conservative politicians advocating mutual aid, and there was a call for NHS volunteers, the National Health Service. It's in pieces after decades of austerity and the idea that people should volunteer for it, and work for it... People were banging pots and pans for the care workers, but they don't get fair wages and things like that. But there was this idea of community and helping us being desirable at the height of the crisis and then the discourse became more and more individualized as they started to encourage people to go out. There was this ridiculous poster we had: "Stay alert, control the virus". The idea is that you go out into the world and on an individual level, you have to be alert, you have to make sure that you keep your distance and have your mask and wash your hands and do all these very individualized aspects. And this is a commandment from the state. Also, the idea that everybody has to do the same thing – the stay-home-stay-safe thing, for so many people home is not a safe place. This is generic advice.

And I talk about that a lot in the book actually, about how this neoliberal approach to disasters treats disasters as generic and it treats people as generic. And the idea is that the same policies can apply in every disaster. So things like staying home and lockdown, people see as specific to COVID. But they're not at all, they've been used in all sorts of disasters from the Grenfell Tower where people were told to stay put and burned to death, and several other things were "stay put, stay home" – it's been advice in planning for nuclear war. It's about maintaining social order, but it doesn't consider differences between people and people's different needs. So, home might not be safe for some people. People might be experiencing domestic violence, or they might not have a safe home to go to. This generic instruction is very alienating. The anarchist alternative is that people and communities on a much less alienated level have to come to an agreement between themselves about how to keep themselves safe. And the idea is that they can cooperate to do that.

TFSR: That's interesting, also thinking how capitalism is based on universal exchange. The state looks at all of us as exchangeable items that they plug into their systems of efficiency.

On the other hand, the experience that you talk about in the case studies, but also it's widely recognized. I think you called this term "disaster utopia". People acknowledge that this is a feeling that people have, when you are faced with a disaster and you come together with the people around you, you feel like you're doing something important for the first time in your life. This is something I think about a lot: similar to the experience of being in an action with people, there's a thing that happens that feels real and present and important in a different way than most of our

alienated lives. The demand to return to normal after you've been working together with people is really depressing.

Is there hope in introducing an idea of disaster anarchy that we could somehow normalize anarchism – that experience beyond the disaster?

R: I'm less optimistic than some other people. And, in fact, I'm really pessimistic. And people think that I'm going to be really optimistic, because I'm interested in utopianism and utopian studies, and I'm interested in anarchism and so on.

But actually, when the pandemic hit, there were a lot of people that seem to somehow think that it was going to be the basis for some new anti- or postcapitalist order. The fact that people weren't able to go to work as usual, people thought this was some radical thing. But I saw the lockdown as pretty draconian from the start, and then you get typecast as some libertarian, who wants everyone to catch the virus, like you don't care. And you are like "No, no, it's not that. I think there are alternatives to this very securitized lockdown thing, how about people cooperating? And I didn't see that happening at all. People were doing mutual aid, but a lot of it was WhatsApp groups, and people weren't seeing each other in person. And a lot of it was helping people do shopping. And it felt incredibly alienating from the start. But there's this huge mutual aid movement. And I think it was incredibly inspiring. Sections of it certainly, I heard some really inspiring stories. Unfortunately, I wasn't involved in one of the more inspiring movements. I think there were sections and movements and people that I interviewed, and certainly, in my book, there were people that were involved in really radical, interesting anarchistic groups. I wasn't at the time, I did a bit of delivering meals on a bicycle around my area, which I really enjoyed because I love riding around on my bike, but I didn't feel like I was part of a radical movement. I felt I was doing social services for free, basically.

TFSR: I was asking about whether there's an opportunity to normalize – not return to normal – the experience of collectivity that can happen in disasters. I'm thinking about that also, because in the book, you caution against making the argument or defensive anarchists responses as being better or efficient than the state because that fits into the state's logic, makes it co-optable by them. How are we talking about anarchist responses that get outside of that logic?

R: I guess it's about people relating at a human level and seeing how the disaster is affecting different people differently at a human level and helping people at a human level and forming a community in a desalinated way. And there definitely was some of that. I had several interviewees I spoke to, people in anarchist circles who say that they met people they wouldn't have met in their local community, that they probably walked past every day, but they've never spoken to. Some people even had conversations about anarchism with these people and were received quite sympathetically. And then there were other things, and they sound quite dark. And it's easy to be pessimistic about them. Some people wanted to call the police on a group of racialized youth who were hanging around on the street corner because they should have been at home. This was obviously some less radical, more middle-class people that wanted to be involved in mutual aid as an altruistic do-goodie-type thing or something. But, they were tucked out of that by the anarchists in the group who persuaded them that these young people might live in overcrowded housing, or they might not have a safe home to go to, and they are less at risk from the virus than some other people, and they're not really doing anyone any harm, they are just hanging around together, and calling the police on these black young people, when the police historically are awful to black people is probably not the best idea. And they did talk them out of it.

So I think useful things, that can even be seen as an intervention, that's a form of community self-defense. It's about forming communities and defending communities from the police and the state and so on. So even though it's a little thing, and there was someone else that wanted to call the police on a window cleaner, apparently, because he was out cleaning windows, they got talked out of it, too. So there were these little micro-interventions that are about defending communities from being used as the crowd-sourcing of policing during the pandemic.

TFSR: I initially had this response. Like people are gonna see the contradictions that we're forced to live under, where we can't work, but we have to pay rent. And so something big is gonna happen. And something big did happen in terms of George Floyd's uprisings in the US and how that reverberated around the world, too. But it wasn't the direct response to COVID that brought that out.

It's not hopeful, because we live in a disaster world that's falling apart, and people are really suffering, but you talk about how people are increasingly seeing the state as irrelevant to them. I guess this gets us into another huge thread in your book – the idea of recuperation. Because if the states were irrelevant, we, therefore, need to do mutual aid to survive. But then the state can use that as a stopgap measure or increase its austerity because we're doing that. We don't make it revolutionary. That's a problem. So I wonder if you could talk about recuperation and how you think about it in terms of disaster response, and how that can be resisted?

R: That is the major thread that is running through my whole book is I do think the state is increasingly irrelevant to more and more people. I think mutual aid is necessary for more and more people to survive as the welfare state retreats, and the oil economy is collapsing. And then, also, the state has this survival instinct of its own that it seeks to recuperate anything, it seeks to capitalize on all social relations. To me, the state is another capitalist enterprise, but it has a monopoly on violence, rather than having a monopoly on a particular product, rather than being Amazon, and having this monopoly on logistics. It's got a monopoly on violence and territory. So everything within it, it sees as its territory, and it seeks to capitalize on social relations. So mutual aid helps the state because it keeps people going and keeps people alive. But then at some point, the state and mutual aid are going to come into conflict, because the state will seek to dispossess people and exploit them.

And there's this idea of social capital, that a lot of people see as this fluffy, maybe even left-wing term to encourage social capital, but with the word capital in it, it's about how the state seeks to capitalize on the social. So social action is only useful in terms of the state if the state can mobilize it in its own interests. And if it can't, then it becomes a threat, and it seeks to repress it. So, in a sense, the reason the Department of Homeland Security was so happy with Occupy Sandy was that it was doing the state's job for it and saving it money. It was doing a relief effort that FEMA and the Red Cross were quite managing to do. But when Occupy Wall Street occupied Wall Street, that's not the social action that the state wants to see, because it's disrupting profits for capitalists that are within the state. That's why it was violently dispossessed, and then also this whole thing's racialized. And we saw Katrina was heavily militarized and securitized. In the book, I look at the fact that if social action is only valuable in the terms of the state, that can change on a whim, if you see what I mean, whatever the state's interests are can change on a whim, and it can separate people and split movements unless people decide that their action has a meaning and value beyond what the state labels it, and then they're willing to defend that, I suppose.

TFSR: There's been a lot of critique about the mutual aid projects that have happened since COVID. And you mentioned this in terms of the interviews with people in the UK, that there's a feeling like "Are we doing anything that's actually different than charity?" Or is it really breaking down the hierarchies? Or is it a threat at all to the state? There's a way that when we have these programs that have us have bare survival without mounting that threat, then we have to question those actions.

One of the things that you bring up in the book as an important location of possible resistance to that recuperation is the use of space. In the examples in London, there are different people squatting spaces. Can you talk about that, and how having space functions in terms of making that extra possibility of resistance?

R: Yeah, it's something that I noticed. Actually, when I look back at all the work I've done, my Ph.D. was on intentional communities as radical spaces. When people live together every day and talk about stuff every day, they do form bonds that go beyond the thing that you form from seeing your neighbor every so often. But also, I found that various mutual aid groups in London were associated with squats and with social centers, and they were the ones that seem to ward off state power. There was this thing called the local councilor issue that I talk about in my book, which was the elected representative for certain wards and stuff.

For some reason, the mutual aid movement in the UK, and I identify this in the book as being really problematic, organized itself according to the electoral districts, which are territorial categories of the state. So the elected representatives of those districts would be, "Oh, well, that's my ward. So that's my mutual aid group." They'd go in, and in some instances, they'd be quite nice people who take a backseat. And a lot of these things were WhatsApp groups, so they joined the WhatsApp group, and then they try and take control of this whole initiative, and there were some incidences of people giving out fluorescent hi-vis jackets and saying, if you're doing mutual aid, you have to wear the hi-vis jacket. One of them tried to get people to do DBS checks, which are security checks to make sure you don't have a criminal record, which obviously goes against the anarchist ethos. It shows how recuperating the mutual aid movement became in some ways in the UK, but some places managed to stay radical, and they were the places that themselves had a squat or something like that. And I think this idea of territory and space is interesting. So you can have someone trying to rule over this abstract space of their elected ward. But then the way to resist that seem to be people that had a space or hub that was alternative space or scale, that could be a hub, and it had a physical presence in the neighborhood, and it had people that interacted with each other and lived together. That seems to be a really powerful presence that helps to ward off this recuperation.

TFSR: The vision of expanding that contesting space would be a way to ramp up mutual aid towards something more confrontational and less bare survival.

In the so-called US, we have to think about also occupying space as part of the settler state, as another layer to that, which was a big critique of Occupy Wall Street that it didn't have that framework. Wall Street is already occupying territory, right? And so occupying occupied territory without the liberationist perspective for indigenous people was a problem. It's another complication that we think about here often how we take space and what that means.

But in the New York example, what do you think the relationship was between having Occupy Wall Street as a private predecessor and what Occupy Sandy was able to do? Because that's different than the COVID mutual aid example in the UK, which just sprung from COVID?

R: I've got a chapter on my interviews, I always find it very difficult talking with Americans about an American movement, because I know that, with my cultural differences from my background, I don't understand a lot of stuff. I definitely feel an anthropologist going in. I didn't have enough time to be a proper anthropologist, if you see what I mean, whereas, in the UK, I feel more like a sociologist who's looking at things.

I felt Occupy Sandy as a whole, as a movement, wasn't completely radical. A lot of people I spoke to bemoaned the fact that there was this split between people that were becoming a bit NGOish and people who were quite staunch. And then they're anti-capitalist and anarchist critique. I spoke to people from both of those sides, really, and they did seem to be a split in the movement, which was echoed in the COVID movement here, I think. But the COVID movement here was mostly non-radical. And I spoke to the radical people but it was mostly non-radical. From what I can gather, in Occupy Sandy, there was definitely still a very radical element to it. And I don't know if that has to do with the time and when it was, as well but it was obvious that it grew out of Occupy Wall Street, and people were still talking about anti-capitalism and Wall Street and things like that. And from what I can gather, it grew out of their social networks and social infrastructure that was still going. There was still this vibe of people who had been involved. And there is still this coolness to the idea of occupying that people were willing to mobilize under, I suppose.

TFSR: I was interested in thinking about reading their case study, because on the other hand, thinking about space and movement, there was a space that started with Occupy Wall Street, but that created infrastructure that could be mobilized during Occupy Sandy and go elsewhere. And that's what I saw in my region during COVID. We had networks and connections that were in place because of hurricanes and the hurricane response. And people who would go around and do work were – I lived in the mountains, and we didn't get a lot of hurricanes – but we'd be nearby communities that were wrecked by it. And so people were doing that. And from that network, we started doing mutual aid in our town when COVID hit. I'm thinking about the mobility of those networks also. We also ran into the problem that it seems in those responses, often it's not radicalized, even if it's all anarchists doing the work. It doesn't necessarily mean that it's taken that way.

But that's also something you write about in the book that one of the benefits of mutual aid seems to be the ability for people to plug in. And people use that word specifically, which I think is interesting cuz I always hear it. One of the issues with anarchism is how we get people to understand and engage with it. So I wonder if you had any thoughts about mutual aid as an entry point, rather than some of the other ones, like subcultural, punk, or whatever.

R: Something that is really good and really cool and really useful about mutual aid is the fact that you can turn up as yourself, and like you say, plug in, rather than, with more rigid organizations where there's a role, and you have to fit the role, you have to be the spreadsheet person or you have to have the qualifications for that role, you have to like it like a job. That's how more traditional relief agencies work, which are professionalized. You can't turn up as you, you have to turn up as the role and persuade that you are the role. And then, sometimes in a disaster situation, things arise that are unexpected. So, a rigid role might not be able to do that thing. And also, that means that there's not a lot of redundancy.

The idea of having a system with lots of people that maybe aren't doing a lot, but they're there, allows for more flexibility if there's another shock, and having the idea that you can turn

up as you are and plug in. Having infrastructure for that is really useful and important. That is the strength of anarchism and mutual aid.

TFSR: Definitely. It felt like a generational shift during COVID, where all these new younger people came in doing all the work in the area where I was living, all these new anarchists. And when we were faced with the murder of George Floyd, there were these networks already in place that can do other things, like jail support or go show up on the streets. The great resignation or people refusing to work in various ways. I wonder, to what extent these kinds of things echo one to the other, even if we're not still doing the same COVID response. That experience and the entry point for people seem to have led to other things.

One of the lines that you say, and maybe this is part of it. I love this: "The state needs the grassroots to survive. The opposite is not the case." I think that's so important to hammer home. First of all, that first part is really interesting to think about – the state needs the grassroots. Because I don't think we always think that when we're doing grassroots stuff, but it's also really important to keep in mind that we don't need the state to do what we're doing.

One thing that might be interesting to hear your thoughts about is the way technology and social media played a role in that. That was part of Occupy Wall Street, but it became essential during COVID, because of the need to distance or whatever. Technology is obviously an ambiguous tool. Could you talk about that?

R: When I interviewed the Occupy Sandy people, this idea of social media and stuff was really central. And they saw it as pretty much a fundamental part of their movement. And certainly, when in terms of the publicity that Occupy Sandy received, what it was known for was mobilizing social media and managing to mobilize this movement via social media and managing to mobilize resources and donations on a massive scale, getting torches [flash lights] and blankets and things to communities using the Amazon gift list that's usually used for people's weddings. Where they put all the presents they wanted for the wedding, they'd have a list of things, and people from all over the world could donate a torch to them or a blanket or a dehumidifier or whatever. And they saw that as fundamental to that movement. But then they were also quite critical because they realized they were using Amazon and making profits for [Jeff] Bezos.

Obviously, we need our own systems and infrastructures and things in place. But these were useful in the interim. And there was a lot of optimism about creating open-source alternatives, and that being seen as this thing that had momentum that was going to happen. When I spoke to people, that was still the case, there was still this idea that open-source software is going to develop. I don't feel that's happened in a way which– There are open-source alternatives, but they don't seem to be being used as much as the mainstream things. And the people in the COVID movement in London at least, there wasn't a lot of discussion about technology at all. It was taken for granted or seen as a normal backdrop thing. Everyone was using WhatsApp for their groups to communicate. Some of the more radical groups had alternative Signal groups and things that. But the community-based things had to be WhatsApp, because there were a lot of non-anarchist people and it's a thing that everyone had. People had meetings, and it was always on Zoom. And some people tried to use Jitsi, which is a more ethical alternative, but they found it was a bit buggy, and it crashed and it didn't work. And some people didn't have it, and they didn't know how to use it. So everyone reverted to Zoom in the end. But there wasn't a lot of technological optimism anymore like I saw in Occupy Sandy. And there weren't a lot of critiques, either. It was seen as a thing that was there and taken for granted.

TFSR: Yeah, I've definitely experienced this time, too, being forcibly integrated more into my technology. It's been accelerated over the last number of years, because it became a tool for the work that I had to do, for the organizing that I was doing it now. And now it feels too pervasive in my life.

R: You forget about it until you lose your phone and realize that you're literally disabled, you can't do anything.

TFSR: It's interesting because people always try to retain some hope in it. This whole Twitter debacle is going down where Elon Musk bought Twitter, and everyone's like "This is gonna be garbage, because nazis will have a platform", which has happened, but then people are doing this weird disruptive thing on Twitter that I don't think anyone anticipated that has potentially had real consequences in terms of stocks for certain major corporations, or impersonating politicians and saying weird stuff, which I think that's cool. I don't know if it's revolutionary, but it's cool, at least. I'm confused to see that it's a tool that gets used in interesting ways, but then seems to end up tying us back into the corporations.

I want to get back to another strand. Your book also functions as an overview and introduction to anarchism, which I really appreciate, because you give a lot of really interesting and important background to piece all these things together. But you also have a really unique take on it that I'd love to hear a little bit more about. You say that anarchism is an epistemology and ontology and ethics. And I wonder if you could explain what you mean by those different things because I thought that was really a nice contribution.

R: Okay. Something that gets to me a little bit and also this came out through this study, was that a lot of people who are anarchists are anarchists because they see as effective or efficient some organizational panacea that if we are organized this, we can solve problems, we can organize disaster relief more effectively and we can solve climate change, which I agree, I think that organizationally, it is a better way to solve climate change. And I completely agree, but I think there's more to it than that, as well. That's almost saying "if that could be disproven, and then if we found that a different way, if we found that fascism was a better way to organize disaster relief and solve climate change, then because we're only interested in organization, then we should go with that."

So I think it goes beyond that. There's an ethical imperative to care for each other on a disalienated level, and not in a utilitarian sense. It's an ontology in the sense that it's a reversal of perspective. So instead of seeing things, people, or social action from the perspective of the state as useful, it's about seeing things from a human and ecosystems approach is what is meaningful here right now, in the relationship I'm involved in right now, rather than from a top-down perspective. So it's a different way of seeing and understanding the world.

TFSR: Another really inspiring moment in the book for me is when you say, from an epistemological anarchist – or using anarchist epistemology, I think it's how you say it – we can see insurrection in daily life. I love that, and I wonder if you could say a little bit more about it. It goes unseen so often. Can you talk a little bit about how we can look at the world through an insurrectionary lens?

R: What you were talking about with the people on Twitter, you could see them as naughty little school children playing up against daddy Elon, or you could see it as a mini insurrection. If you see human cooperation and caring and the ability to relate beyond an instrumental sense, as always there, then you see actions like that as insurrectionary. As you were saying, it seems like a radical moment. And I think it is, it's people seeing this illegitimate authority that's trying

to break up the communities that they formed on Twitter and break up their relationships, and they're resisting that. It is insurrectionary in a sense. It's probably not going to be the basis of a huge revolution. That happens all the time. If you see anarchism as an ethical relationship between people that's more real, more authentic, and more caring, and resists the urge of the state to slot us into these cybernetic nodes and roles and things like that, then it's all around us. Then you see, when it's being suppressed more as well, rather than seeing this urge to be ordered as natural.

TFSR: Right. Maybe this is my last question. But the other arc through your book is thinking about utopia, which is also something you've worked on before. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you understand that term. Another thing that comes up is desire. How that fits into your theory of disaster anarchy, and whether we need disasters to try to create alternative worlds?

R: Disasters, do we need them? We're in one, and the things that capitalism calls disasters are revealing the nature of what's already there or magnifying it.

But to me, utopia is— The term means the good place that is no place. It's a pun on three Greek words: eu – good, ou – no, and topos – place. So it often seems like people make utopian novels where they imagine a different society in a lot of detail. But to me, it's about the human impulse to imagine and desire socio-political arrangements, and people can either do that in fiction or sometimes they do it in these social experiments or utopian communities. And you can get totalitarian utopias, for sure. So, I'm not for totalitarian utopias. I'm for grassroots utopias and anarchist utopias where people come together and try and imagine a different world without hierarchy and without the state. And it's an expression of that desire, but then a conscious bringing into being of it through either someone can write a novel, like Ursula Le Guin's novels are absolutely fantastic anarchist, utopias, or people can come together and try and make Utopia through their practice. And it is about saying, "We desire something different. And we're going to consciously try and put it into place." And I think that utopian impulse of imagining how things could be different and trying to put it into place is a step that's needed beyond the insurrection I was talking about on Twitter, for example, where you can see an anarchist insurrection in a sense, but it's maybe lacking that utopian elements of articulating an alternative society. To me, an anarchist utopia is tied almost completely with the idea of prefiguration.

TFSR: Which is the disaster utopia experience when you are in the moment, you can see that there's another world possible, and you're living it, even though you're still in the context of the horror world that we live in. There's a glimpse of it, it's there for that period of time, at least.

R: I guess the connection to disasters is to really desire a utopian society, you have to see how really bad the one that we're in is. Some people naturally feel the world is shit. Since I was a kid, I've always been fighting against authority in the world and what's given, but some people aren't like that. Some people may be quite comfortable and accept it, or they may be completely downtrodden, but also see that as their fate somehow, not feel like there's a beyond or something. But often, disasters will either reveal the shitness of things to people who perhaps didn't realize it, or they might also show that something else is possible in this coming together of people in recovery, it might be an ontological break that reveals that something else is possible. And so it gives people an experience of an outside that allows them to be more utopian.

TFSR: In that line, one of the things that you say, I don't know, if you see this as what should happen or what can happen or does happen, but you write that in disaster times, norms ought to be loosened and there should be a higher tolerance for deviance or deviation. I loved the way

that you put that: that's another space where the conformity that we are expected to live in can be torn apart a little bit. Although it depends on other people also not punishing you for that.

R: That was a thing I found during COVID that a lot of the social response was heavily moralized, and if you didn't agree with everything to the letter, then you were some COVID denier. You have to understand that people react differently in these situations, and people's normal coping mechanisms aren't available, and people were being treated like these generic subjects that all ought to be ordered and stay in order. But people's actual conditions vary significantly. There has to be some allowance for the fact that people are really suffering mentally. You can acknowledge these things without being a COVID denier, or you can have empathy without being a COVID denier.

TFSR: That's been a really hard line and really confusing, especially now where it's ongoing, and there's no general agreement on doing precautions. I'm a chronically ill person. I navigate the world from that perspective, which is exasperating because there's nowhere I can be. But also, we have to keep in mind that the mental health aspect that you were mentioning, we were all traumatized by this in a way that there's been no space to recover. It's too hard to even understand the mass death and disabling, and then our lives have utterly changed and they're not going back.

R: And that's the thing because there's no communication or agreement, and that's not the anarchist thing. That's because of the state. People expect to be told what to do by the state. And then once the state stops being interested in COVID, people seem to lack the capacity to say, "Is there someone chronically ill who's going to be here, who has different needs? We need to discuss who's going to be in the space and what their needs are." Because the state had a very strong response and then it just withdrew that...

TFSR: There's that anti-authoritarian response when the state tells you to do something, too, which vibes with certain kinds of anarchist responses: to be like "I'm not going to do what the state tells me." But there's a weird overlap of there was important information, a lot of it was actually contradicted and confusing. And now we're in this place where there's no clear line or information at all.

R: I think health was securitized rather than treated as a community and resourcing issue that we need to educate communities about how to protect each other and themselves. And there need to be resources for all these things. It's more like "These are the rules that you have to follow. And let's not question. And now they've changed."

TFSR: That's maybe a whole other discussion. I loved our conversation. I wonder, is there anything else that you would want to say or that we didn't cover that you want to bring into this space?

R: I'm really interested in thinking through— I start on this in my conclusion. It's something that was underdeveloped in my book. Thinking about how anarchists deal with climate change, rather than the disasters of climate change, the whole scale infrastructural change that's going to be needed. How do we degrow? How do we occupy spaces that are smaller and build infrastructure? That's what I'm interested in doing more. So if any of your listeners or you want to get in touch with me and continue those kinds of conversations?

TFSR: That seems so important because, again, it's this issue of so many people by default thinking that there needs to be a centralized authoritarian response. You do talk about this in the book, too, that that re-ups the state's power, or re-ups capitalists' process of extraction and resource wasting. But it's very hard to see the other, there's not a lot of room given in most of the conversations to the possibility that it would be something else than that, except for some

anarchist spaces. And then there's also the pessimism that a lot of people have, like "There's not really much we can do." So it's going to be in pockets of places of resistance.

Do you want to say how people can find you or find your work?

R: Find me on Facebook and Twitter and all the usual capitalist platforms that we were criticizing earlier. I'm either Rhiannon Firth or RhiFirth, I use those interchangeably. And then the book, you can buy from the Pluto website. And I think you can get 30% off with the discount code "Firth30". And there's an open-access version available as well, which you can see if you search for Disaster Anarchy open access, you should be able to find it or get in touch with me and I'll send it. People are welcome to follow me or befriend me on any of these things on the internet. Or email me at rhiannonfirth@gmail.com.

TFSR: Cool. Anyway, I will put all that information, too, in the notes that go with the show. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk.

R: Thank you. I really enjoyed it. And hopefully, we'll be doing an event together in London at some point.

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Rhiannon Firth on Disaster, Mutual Aid and Anarchism
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