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What is Mutual Aid?

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Mutual Aid is a guiding factor behind anarchist practice, and an essential framework for understanding anarchist views on social organization more broadly. So... what is it, exactly?

Well... in its simplest form, mutual aid is the motivation at play any time two or more people work together to solve a problem for the shared benefit of everyone involved. In other words, it means co-operation for the sake of the common good.

Understood in this way, mutual aid is obviously not a new idea, nor is it exclusive to anarchists. In fact, the very earliest human societies practised mutual aid as a matter of survival, and to this day there are countless examples of its logic found within the plant and animal kingdoms.

To understand anarchists' specific embrace of mutual aid, we need to go back over 100 years, to the writings of the famous Russian anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin, who in addition to sporting one of the most prolific beards of all time, just so happened to also be an accomplished zoologist and evolutionary biologist.

Back in Kropotkin's day, the field of evolutionary biology was heavily dominated by the ideas of Social Darwinists such as Thomas H. Huxley. By ruthlessly applying Charles Darwin's

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famous dictum “survival of the fittest” to human societies, Huxley and his peers had concluded that existing social hierarchies were the result of natural selection, or competition between free sovereign individuals, and were thus an important and inevitable factor in human evolution.

Not too surprisingly, these ideas were particularly popular among rich and politically powerful white men, as it offered them a pseudo-scientific justification for their privileged positions in society, in addition to providing a racist rationalization of the European colonization of Asia, Africa and the Americas.

Kropotkin attacked this conventional wisdom, when in 1902 he published a book called *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, in which he proved that there was something beyond blind, individual competition at work in evolution.

Kropotkin demonstrated that species that were able to work together, or who formed symbiotic arrangements with other species based on mutual benefit, were able to better adapt to their environment, and were granted a competitive edge over those species who didn't, or couldn't.

In today's metropolitan societies, people are socialized to see themselves as independent, self-sufficient individuals, equipped with our own condos, bank accounts, smartphones and facebook profiles. However, this notion of human independence is a myth, promoted by corporations and states seeking to mould us into atomized, and easily controlled consumers, concerned primarily with our own short-term well-being. The truth is that human beings are incredibly interdependent. In fact, that's the key to our success as a species.

Do you ever spend time thinking about where the food you eat, or the clothes you wear come from? What about the labour and materials that went into building your house, or your car? Left to fend for ourselves without the comforts of civilization, few among us would survive a week, let alone be able to produce a fraction of the myriad commodities we consume every day.

From the great pyramids commissioned by the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt, to today's globe-spanning production and supply chains, the primary function of the ruling class has always been to organize human activity. And everywhere that they have done so, they have relied on coercion. Under capitalism, this activity is organized through either direct violence, or the internalized threat of starvation created by a system based on private ownership of wealth and property.

Capitalism can inspire people to do many amazing things, as long as there is a profit to be made. But in the absence of a profit motive, there are many important tasks that it will not and cannot ever accomplish, from eradicating global poverty and preventable diseases, to removing toxic plastics from the oceans. In order to carry out these monumental tasks, we require a change in the ethos that connects us to one another, and to the world that sustains us. A shift away from capitalism... towards mutual aid.

Glimpses of the Anarchist ideal of mutual aid can be seen today in communities of open source software developers, and in programmers coming up with new forms of encryption to thwart NSA surveillance. They can be seen in neighbours coming together to organize a daycare collective, and in the aftermath of disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, when in the absence of state institutions, perfect strangers rush to one another's aid. It can be seen in the bravery of the white helmets of Aleppo, who risk their lives to pull children from the collapsed ruins of buildings hit by Assad's barrel bombs.

Imagine a world in which human activity was not organized on the basis of ceaseless competition over artificially scarce resources, but the pursuit of the satisfaction of human needs... and you will understand a vision of the world that anarchists seek to create.