

Anarchism in the Mainstream

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In March 2020, when the virus raged across the globe but before we in the UK realised how serious and tragically lethal it would become or how much of a long-term problem it would be, Freedom Press published its first Covid-related update on its news site. Titled *Covid Mutual Aid Groups: A List*, the text came out ten days before the first UK lockdown and stated:

“As the global Covid-19 pandemic is upon us, a number of mutual aid groups have started forming across the country. (...) It is estimated that 2–3 people out of a hundred [infected by Covid] will die. We must do everything we can to prevent this from happening. (...) The Tory government is apparently more concerned with making sure the economy won’t collapse than with saving people’s lives. (...) Remember: that old lady you see on your grocery shopping and that comrade you know who is suffering from a long-term illness: it is your job to protect them as much as you can.”

This was followed by a listing, initially very short, of mutual aid groups formed in the previous few days by anarchists who wanted to mitigate the potential hit of the pandemic in their communities rather than rely on the state to do it for them.

While the Freedom text, inspired by a single such group forming in South London with the involvement of a Freedom Collective member, was intended for an anarchist audience, it quickly became the flavour of the day across the entire country. Despite its rattled-off style, it ended up as one of those rare pieces of anarchist writing that broke into the general population milieu. And it broke into it hard, quickly becoming an anarchist text with a pretty spectacular reach. Soon, hundreds and then thousands of people started forming mutual aid groups, offering their details to Freedom, which in turn created the messiest and most stereotypically anarchistic of listings. It was a busy time in Freedom’s various inboxes, with people who would typically never have thought of contacting an anarchist organisation getting in touch to learn how to form such a group, to find out more about the concept of mutual aid, and about anarchism itself. Or just to ask for help.

I had the privilege of penning the intro to this text, although I don’t consider myself its author. This credit should go to those who contributed to the creation of the whole listing by taking matters into their own hands and organising a mutual aid group for their community to help protect it from the virus and the government. The need for this community response was urgent:

this was after a decade of Tory government in the UK, a government that introduced budget cuts resulting in (as of 2019) 130,000 preventable deaths due to the underfunding of the healthcare system, a government that used ideologically motivated performative cruelty, aka “austerity,” against the most vulnerable parts of the population. Nobody could reasonably claim that, when faced with a healthcare and social crisis of the scale of the Covid-19 pandemic, it would suddenly change its ways and rise to the challenge of tackling it.

Many people who contacted Freedom had no idea about the prominent place the concept of mutual aid has in anarchist politics and the general way of making things happen. Rather comically, some praised us for coming up with a captivating “marketing” term in such a short period since the pandemic started, and in one case, some rather uninformed individual accused us of “hijacking the concept of mutual aid for our extremist leftist agenda.” They had to be schooled by our social media admin on anarchism, Peter Kropotkin, and what Freedom Press is. Businesses, some NGOs, and political party activists (I’m looking at you, Corbyn’s Labour) were also getting in touch, frantically attempting to figure out how they could capitalise on and take credit for something that soon started to look like a huge grassroots movement. They were all told where to go.

But who can blame people for not immediately linking a basic human practice that anarchists call mutual aid with this particular politics, given how universal it is? Loads have been written about the concept of mutual aid by people far more capable than I am, so I’m not going to do it here. However, it is important to note that while the term “mutual aid” is strongly associated with one of the founding fathers of anarchism, Peter Kropotkin, this model of community organising and self-defence is far from our invention. Throughout human history, various communities used similar models they independently developed. Many of these communities designed practices that anarchists would call mutual aid to defend themselves from the oppression they faced—especially of the racialised, gendered, or classed forms, but not limited solely to these. For example, in the UK, a group called UK Mutual Aid was formed in 2018, two years before Covid. The group, now operating under the name Co-Care Project, describes itself as a “Black-run, activist-forward intersectional support network for marginalised people.” Another such group is the Aborcynjny Dream Team (“Abortion Dream Team”), a women-led network formed to bypass the stringent anti-abortion laws in Poland, offering peer support, advice, and access to safe abortion for all who need it, regardless of the potential legal dangers its members face. Queer communities are also no strangers to forming mutual aid-like groups, ensuring that community needs, such as trans healthcare and access to HIV medication, are met. Cooperation Town, a self-organised network of food cooperatives in the UK, is another group that uses the mutual aid framework, providing groceries to its members for a fraction of the price—all within the context of the cost-of-living crisis.

Contemporary anarchism took this organising model and used it to create a network, a secret dimension even, where we as a movement organise our internal affairs and all that comes with it. It is the foundation of how we run our projects and spaces, based on non-monetary informal exchanges and high levels of trust in each other and our intentions. And, with glitches, it works for us. In the UK, the popularity of Covid-19 Mutual Aid was likely the greatest injection of an anarchist-associated concept into mainstream society, at least since the Poll Tax, if not ever. It has changed the general image of an anarchist, and what anarchists do, for large parts of society. It also came with its own problems and fuck-ups and clashes, and overall, anarchists did not manage to take long-term advantage of the sudden popularity of one of their more basic concepts. But is

this inability to take political advantage really a problem? Or was it something that just had to happen, given the very nature of anarchism?

There is this term I see online, “Big A Anarchism.” “Big A Anarchism” is used in discussion to complain about things not being anarchist enough, expressing a longing for pure and proper anarchism, as opposed to things the person using it does not consider anarchist enough. The problem is, this “Big A Anarchism” is effectively a myth that is being used to stop us from relevance in the complicated modern world. Often, what’s complained about as not being “Big A anarchist” enough are community projects, such as the aforementioned Cooperation Town or Covid Mutual Aid groups, or in other words, projects that involve reproductive and care labour. The irony is that these very projects—the ones focusing on reproductive and care labour—are much more likely to serve as a gateway to anarchist politics than any puritan anarchist approach ever would. That’s because if we are to reach the general population, we must address the issues and problems faced by them and present solutions and practices that would actually present a compelling practical alternative rather than allow ourselves to get stuck on ideological purity. It is also these not “Big A anarchism” projects that are proving themselves to be a great, accessible and fast-acting solution to a situation of community crisis, be it a pandemic or other disaster, and disasters we will experience plenty, with last stage capitalism collapsing, the global heating increasingly affecting our daily lives and governments of all spectrums unable or unwilling to tackle it all.

We live in a perma-crisis world, where states continue to prove themselves to be utterly useless as forms of organisation, unable to adapt to situations that aren’t just business as usual, and unable to respond to actual community problems—instead enhancing these problems while serving capital and those who try to divide us. This is both a precarious and often tragic predicament and an opportunity for movements such as ours to use what we preach in practice and demonstrate that what is being presented to us as impossible is indeed very much possible. But we can’t do it without working in cooperation with other groups, and this will involve compromise and flexibility on our side. Politics, baby!

Now and going forward, there will be an increasing need for community self-defence organising in its glorious diversity of forms and tactics, which may or may not appeal to anarchist puritans. We, as a movement, have two options: 1) embrace it and become part of it, or 2) remain in our niche network. It’s up to each of us to decide what we will do.

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