CONCEPT
THE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY EDUCATION PRACTICE THEORY

Vol. 13, No. 3, Winter, 2022

Covid-19 and Mutual Aid: prefigurative approaches to caring?

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Introduction

The growth of mutual aid has been amongst the more positive outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic. So much for the neoliberal view of humans as rational individuals, focused on the pursuit of their own self-interests, whatever the needs of others. The phenomenal growth of mutual aid initiatives has not been confined to Britain either. On the contrary, in fact. Tens of thousands of mutual aid networks and projects have emerged throughout the world. Whilst recognising and warmly celebrating their achievements, this article sets these within the framework of wider debates about civil society and the future of the Welfare State, within the context of increasing marketisation.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been highlighting the failures of market-led approaches to meeting people's needs, demonstrating only too clearly the need for *more* rather than *less* public provision. The voluntary and community sectors have been facing increasing pressures too, however, struggling to fill the gaps between shrinking public services on the one hand and growing social needs on the other – against the background of increasing marketisation within the Third Sector itself (Milbourne, 2013; Kenny et al, 2015; Milbourne and Murray, 2017).

Despite these pressures, mutual aid groups have been making potentially significant contributions, promoting values of mutuality, co-operation and care within these contemporary constraints. The lessons from their experiences may have wider relevance in the contemporary context, as communities face a perfect storm of economic recession, rising inflation and falling real wages, accompanied by the effects of cuts to the Welfare State over more than a decade. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of such prefigurative community-based initiatives more generally;

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their contributions as well as their inherent limitations as component parts of social justice movements, more widely.

In and Against - and for - the State

Civil society has been an arena of contradictions and struggle in general, and so has the Welfare State more specifically. This has been the site of numerous conflicts in the past, reflecting the history of class struggles in Britain more widely. These struggles continue in more recent times, alongside movements of resistance, including movements with visions for more caring alternatives.

'Be careful what you wish for', critics of the Welfare State might have been warned, in the Sixties and Seventies. The group that had written the much-quoted book *In and Against the State* had recognised the tensions inherent in their criticisms of state welfare provision themselves, however, understanding the need for public services and being involved in providing them, as well as being only too aware of their evident deficiencies (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1979) - being 'In as well as against the State', in other words. 'The state is not neutral' they argued, 'It does provide services and resources which most of us need' whilst going on to point to the functions that the State was actually performing for capital, on the other hand, reproducing labour power for employers on the cheap (London Weekend Return Group, 1979, p2).

By the eighties and nineties, critics were adding that they were also *'for the state'* (Shaw, 2017), whatever its shortcomings and inherent contradictions. Neoliberal strategies to roll back the state were increasing poverty and social inequalities, disempowering rather than empowering individuals and their families in the process. It was time to defend the state, as well as to critique its inherent contradictions along with its legacies of discrimination on the basis of class, race and gender. As the state was being colonized by the market, it was argued, 'there may be a necessity to work *for* the state (if we are not to lose it) by helping to construct an authentic settlement between policy agendas and the aspirations and needs of communities' (Shaw, 2017, p17).Since then, the processes of marketisation that the Thatcher government unleashed have been going way beyond the reduction of expenditures on public services (if not the reduction of expenditures on the more coercive functions of the State). Civil society has been deeply affected as a result, including the voluntary and community sectors.

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This is in no way to deny the voluntary and community sectors' contributions, however, especially their contributions to the promotion of innovation and change, along with their contributions in terms of providing advocacy and advice. These were contributions that could - and did in the past - support campaigns for progressive changes more widely: campaigns against poverty, homelessness, discrimination and oppression. These were also precisely the functions that were to come under increasing pressure from marketisation, however, along with pressures to act in increasingly 'business-like ways' - the growth of the 'New Managerialism' in other words (Perri 6 and Kendall, 1997; Clarke et al, 2000). This brings the discussion to the contributions of mutual aid initiatives more specifically, and their potential for meeting people's needs in innovative ways, developing co-operation and social solidarity in the process.

Mutual aid

Mutual aid has been set in the context of the failures of capitalism, described as 'producing desperation, destruction, alienation' (Solnit, 2020, xii) – outcomes which anti-capitalist initiatives have their own histories of challenging. Social solidarity initiatives have existed long before the pandemic, in fact. They have been described as meeting survival needs and building shared understanding, as the basis for addressing social injustices (Spade, 2020), from the Black Panthers' free breakfast programmes for children through to feminist health clinics, child care collectives and community food projects, just to cite a few examples from the USA. There are numerous examples of such projects to meet people's immediate needs, including initiatives through which people have built shared understandings as the basis for developing strategies for social justice for the longer-term.

These types of initiatives mushroomed in response to Covid-19, as Solnit went on to point out, to do the 'work that was necessary because of the failure of governments to limit the impact of the virus and meet the needs of people in this crisis' (Solnit, 2020, xii). Significantly too, mutual aid projects have included pre-figurative initiatives, making 'manifest the sort of society we could have, and in fact already have', (Sitrin, 2020, xxiv) – even if only in pockets.

In the British context, people came together to help each other out in practical ways: shopping for people who were shielding, picking up prescriptions for people who were

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sick, sharing information and advice about where and how to get other forms of support, and promoting well-being initiatives such as yoga and pilates, online. People were also providing a listening ear for each other, combatting the sense of isolation that has affected so many, during the lockdowns. Those who were in need of support were making contact via telephone helplines and WhatsApp chats, for example, organised in ways that preserved people's confidentiality, making sure that their personal details were only shared on a need-to-know basis. Whilst the need for mutual aid may have been reducing since the end of the lockdowns, Covid-19 has by no means disappeared; there are still support needs to be met, just as there are potential lessons to be shared, in the face of newly increasing needs, as inflation cuts into the real value of wages and benefits, with rocketing demands for food banks, as a result.

On the basis of my own limited experience, the following aspects have seemed particularly striking. First of all, mutual aid has been clearly distinguishable from traditional forms of charity. The focus has been on mutual support and social solidarity. There have been absolutely no distinctions between the volunteers who provide services to others and those who receive services themselves. Organisers were taking turns on the telephone rota whilst shielding themselves in their turn, having other volunteers delivering their shopping and/or collecting their prescriptions, for example.

Most importantly too, mutual aid services were being provided on the basis of need – as expressed by the people concerned, themselves. There were absolutely no value judgements to be made about who deserves what, from what I have seen. This commitment stands in sharp contrast to the type of traditional do-gooding that the Welfare State had determined to eliminate. And it stands in sharp contrast to more recent public policy discourses about 'strivers and skivers', the deserving versus the undeserving poor, who need to be shaken out of their reliance on benefits. Mutual aid has been far closer to the socialist principle of 'from each according to his (sic) ability, to each according to his (sic) need'.

One of the other distinguishing features of mutual aid groups that I've personally encountered has been their commitment to direct forms of democratic decision-making. This may or may not be typical of mutual aid groups more generally. When they met online to organise the work, volunteers took it in turns to facilitate the discussion just

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as they would volunteer to take notes of the meeting's conclusions. And these decisions were generally reached by consensus. There have been no formal leaders, although particular individuals could and did o take responsibility for specific tasks, such as organising food collections for people who needed these on a regular basis, or liaising with the local authority to pass on information to the rest of the group.

There is not the space here for further discussion about the respective merits of direct versus representative forms of democratic decision-making, debates between horizontalism and verticalism that have featured in reflections on social movement mobilisations in recent years. Both have their limitations as well as their strengths, varying according to the specific circumstances involved. Decision-making by consensus most certainly has its limits. There are very good reasons for the trade union movement's use of decision-making by majority voting on industrial action, for example. But decision-making by consensus can be very effective in the context of small mutual aid groups, already committed to working collaboratively to meet shared needs.

Whilst mutual aid groups have emphasised the importance of mutuality, well-being and social solidarity, this has absolutely not been about substituting for public services. On the contrary, in fact. The mutual aid groups with which I have been familiar have had constructive relationships with service providers including the relevant local authority, working in complementary ways. This is in no way to suggest that such constructive relationships have represented the norm. They almost certainly haven't. So many local authorities have been struggling with financial crises themselves, even if they have had the political will to work in different ways. But there have been examples of progressive local authorities that can and do develop such relationships, providing very practical support as well as facilitating contacts with other relevant services. Some of those who requested support with shopping and other practical tasks turned out to have complex needs, way beyond the scope of mutual aid groups' volunteers. Being able to refer people to the relevant services, including specialist advice and support services, formed an important aspect of the work. Local authorities can also provide regular information and advice about what's available, along with training sessions and opportunities for volunteers to share their experiences and their concerns. Without such back up, volunteers would probably have felt even more pressured. They have been experiencing

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pressures enough already, especially when juggling competing demands from their own caring responsibilities and paid work, whether they are back in the workplace or still working from their own homes.

So, what motivates people to do this in the first place? People seem to have come together through their shared commitments to the promotion of mutuality and social solidarity in response to the pandemic, whether such commitments come from their politics, their faiths, their interest in promoting well-being – or some combination of the above. This is a subject for further exploration, beyond the scope of this particular article. Whatever members' varying motivations and allegiances though, mutual aid groups have been firmly non-party political, in my experience.

Whilst my experience of mutual aid groups has been that they have been non-aligned, however, this hasn't meant that they have been non-political in the widest sense. Mutual aid involvement brings you face to face with so much unmet need, illustrating the appalling extent of food poverty and precarious living, along with the cruelty of the benefits system, just to mention some of the most obvious lessons to be learnt. Such experiences can be politicising for those involved, increasing people's awareness of the need for longer term strategies to tackle the underlying causes of poverty, inequality, discrimination and oppression. There would seem to be considerable scope for building coalitions here, engaging people in wider movements for a more caring society for the future.

Conclusions

Caring has emerged as a major issue on the political agenda, in the current context. As *The Care Manifesto* points out 'It has tragically taken a worldwide pandemic to remind us of just how vital robust care services are' (The Care Collective, 2020, p2). The crisis of care has long roots in neoliberal cutbacks in publicly funded provision, exacerbated by a decade of austerity - not to forget the longer-term devaluing of roles that have been traditionally performed by women and those in the most vulnerable sections of the labour force more generally. There is an urgent need for investment in care services provided by workforces that are better trained and, most importantly, better paid. As the Women's Budget Group has clearly demonstrated, investment in care services could

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also create jobs more cost effectively than jobs in construction, for example, and in ways that would also be greener.

The Care Manifesto shares this commitment to the provision of public resources to create better quality jobs in the care sector. And the Manifesto goes on to ask what would happen if we were to put care at the very centre of life? This would involve building on the achievements of the post war Welfare State whilst working to eliminate what they describe as 'the inherently sexist, racist, hierarchical premises and manifestations of that time, and combating the anti-immigrant xenophobia still so evident today' (Care Collective, 2020, 62). This is not just about promoting investment in public services, then. The Care Collective argues the case for community and user-led services, helping to build social solidarity in the process. Mutual aid groups have their place in such a scenario, the Manifesto concludes, alongside public sector providers, public sector trade unionists and social movement activists for change. There would seem to be genuine possibilities for building progressive alliances here.

The future of mutual aid groups remains to be seen, however. There have been increasing pressures on people's time, set against the context of wider economic and political changes, including the growth of Far-Right populism. The pressures that have been generated by the pandemic may be expected to change, in any case, even if the underlying problems can be expected to remain, in the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, Britain faces the prospect of economic recession in the coming period, accompanied by galloping inflation, cutting the real value of wages and benefits in the process. Too many people face horrifying choices about whether to eat or whether to heat their homes. The need for food banks can be expected to increase proportionately, in response, with increasing recognition of the importance of building alliances of resistance – 'Enough is enough' as trade union and community organisations are increasingly recognising. Whether or not particular mutual groups survive, in whatever form, in this rapidly changing context, they would seem to have potentially significant legacies to pass on to these burgeoning social justice movements for the future.

Mutual aid participants will take their experiences with them, whatever they go on to do subsequently, whether as volunteers and/or as activists in other ways, in years to come. People take their learning from their experiences with them, as individuals. And

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people reflect on the experiences of others, over time, asking questions about what they might learn by reflecting on previous attempts to construct more positive alternatives. For example, what might the different components of a socialist society begin to look like in practice?

Mutual aid groups have demonstrated the importance of solidarity as the basis for community action in the voluntary and community sectors, providing services on the basis of need, without the judgementalism that has too often characterised the provision of services in the public sector. They have illustrated the potential for organising themselves democratically, promoting co-operation and mutuality in the process. And they have shown that it can be possible to collaborate with public service providers (at least in *some* circumstances) without abandoning their roles as advocates, within wider social justice coalitions. This is absolutely not to idealise mutual aid groups – simply to point to some of the possibilities that have been raised for alternative futures.

Young people who have been politicised over the past few years have become increasingly clear about what they are against, in contemporary capitalist societies. But this still leaves them with questions about the possibilities for alternatives, promoting social solidarity as part of wider movements for social change, working towards more caring societies for the future. William Morris concluded *News from Nowhere* with exhortations to 'go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness', in the hope that if others could see the vistas that he had envisaged in his novel, 'then it may be called a vision rather than a dream'. (Morris, 2004 edition, p.228).

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(An earlier and longer article on this subject previously appeared in *Theory and Struggle*, 2021, Number 122, journal of the Marx Memorial Library, published by Liverpool University Press)

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