# A paradigm shift: Anarchism has entered the chat

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**Introduction**

Responding directly to Mayo's (2022) article Covid-19 and Mutual Aid: prefigurative approaches to caring? published in Vol.13(3), this reflection seeks to further the conversation on the ways that 'mutual aid' has entered community development discourse in the aftermath of the global pandemic. It does so by drawing on the extensive legacy of the practice to suggest some of the limitations of sharing individual experiences, stressing the ways in which mutual aid rejects capitalistic self-importance (Roxburgh, 2021; Spade, 2020b).

But why mutual aid, and why now? The urgency of Covid-19 has, undeniably, broadened discourse, and Mayo (2022) recognises that mutual aid constitutes a significant part of this. Whilst buzzwords frequently come into fashion - particularly from those in positions of power - for them to become part of daily vernacular is less guaranteed. 'Wellbeing' and 'resilience' are examples of recent formations that have become part of the community development and public discourse (eg Bestor, 1948; Ife, 2013). As Mayo (2022) observes, mutual aid 'initiatives mushroomed in response to Covid-19'. Perhaps Mould et al. (2022) are right to suggest that 'the time is ripe for a reconceptualisation of mutual aid', making this the perfect moment to expand the literature, better to understand the legacies we're building on. Shaw (2008) and others stress the urgency of understanding the history of concepts such as 'empowerment' as it faced co-option in state policy; a similar premise is offered here.

Mayo (2022, p.1) recognises that 'promoting values of mutuality, co-operation and care' have been commonplace for far longer than merely during the pandemic. Indeed,

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with more than a decade of austerity globally, such 'survival work' (Spade, 2020a) is the very reason many are still with us today (see also Bellebono, 2022 and England, 2). There's also an entire body of literature dedicated to understanding what's been termed 'Mutual Aid Societies, Associations, and Groups' (MASAGs), Srinivasa et al. (2022) proposing that these associations see people with 'common concerns, needs, and interests forge themselves into such collectives to support one another to find solutions to their common problems'. Pre-pandemic, Firth (2020) identified the Common Ground Collective and the Occupy Sandy movements as examples of 'anarchist-inspired relief efforts' in recent years, yet the practice is far older.

Mayo (2022) details the emergence of new mutual aid networks amongst the public (with similar reports from Mahanty and Phillipps (2020), Sanders (2020); Solnit (2020) and BBC News (2020) but, as Domínguez et al. (2020) stress, many of those engaging in the most effective practices were already doing so. The absence of any specific context makes it difficult to localise Mayo's example, but non-forced-hierarchical practice is, historically, a tenet of mutual aid. Illustrating their past prevalence, Srinivasa et al. (2022) suggest that 'every year approximately 10 million people [in the US] make use of MASAGs'. Thus, there is a clear modern history of mutual aid groups (never mind the centuries of history recounted by Kropotkin [1902] or Graeber and Wengrow [2022]). Let us explore that history, then, to extend our understanding and improve our praxis.

## Conceptualising 'Mutual Aid': '[C]ompassion, [C]oncern, [R]eciprocity, [S]upport, and [A]id'

> Mutual aid is a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations. (Spade, 2020a)

According to Spade, mutual aid involves undertaking acts of solidarity, rather than charity. Indeed, this served as the title for Spade's (2020b) essay *Solidarity Not Charity:*

*Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival*, in which mutual aid is considered as 'the most effective way to support vulnerable populations to survive, mobilize significant resistance, and build the infrastructure we need for the coming disasters'. Grubacic and Graeber (2020) have argued that mutual aid interventions 'are themselves events, in the philosophical sense; [...] reveal[ing] aspects of reality that had been largely invisible but, once revealed, seem so entirely obvious that they can never be unseen', demonstrating this perspective's alignment with critical pedagogy in the community development literature.

Similarly, Firth (2020) sees '[m]utual aid [as] something that happens in communities [...] during disasters and during the ongoing disaster of capitalism'. Alongside Spade's (2020a) analysis of practice stemming from 'mutual aid projects in movements for queer and trans liberation and prison and border abolition', these arguments for mutual aid may extend or challenge Mayo's arguments. For example, whilst she expresses the need for what essentially amounts to state and policy reform as a means of addressing many of the issues further entrenched during the pandemic (arguing that 'it can be possible to collaborate with public service providers') Spade (2020a) contends that mutual aid traditions have consistently 'raised the concern that reforms emerge in the face of disruptive movements demanding justice but for the most part are designed to demobilize by asserting that the problem has been taken care of'.

From our own experience as community development practitioners, researchers, educators and citizens, we know that reform rarely lasts. For example, Labour might lead at Westminster for a term or two, making their various 'socialist' reforms to care, the welfare state, and housing policy, only for a Conservative government to come into power and make their own reforms. The reality of how different these actually would be in the current context is a separate conversation, but one explored by Jones (2021), Beckett (2022), and Zaheer (2021). Reformism, then, leads to short term solutions, bringing new precarities, limited safeguards, and different exclusions (ableism, racism, pro-prison, anti-bodily autonomy, etc.). Whilst Mayo expresses her advocacy for a socialist state, without radical action beyond that discussed in the article, this would seem to be inherently unachievable. I would argue that positioning mutual aid as akin

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to "the socialist principles of 'from each according to [their] ability, to each according to [their] need'" (Mayo, 2022, p.4) is somewhat distanced from the DIY and counterhegemonic culture of anarchist organising of mutual aid.

Spade (2020a) was amongst those emphasising pre-pandemic that, 'mutual aid work is one of the least visible and most important forms of work that social movements need to be developing right now'. Stemming from explicitly anti-capitalist anarchist practices, Zola (1972) traces it specifically to the US, though others boast the origins elsewhere in the world (see also Gelderloos, 2011; Roxburgh, 2021). Anarchism, as an ideology, recognises that 'people know how to live their own lives and organize themselves better than any expert could' and argue that what core texts (including those used in sectors like community development) rarely recognise is that government is inherently and often coercively hierarchical and deeply paternalistic. Despite endless examples throughout history (Graeber and Wengrow (2021) providing one of the most comprehensive modern histories on the topic, though Kropotkin's (1902) anti-Darwinian detailing of human history as a tale of co-operation and biological mutualism remains the foundational text on the subject) Gelderloos (2011) observed that 'the belief persists that humans are naturally selfish, competitive, warlike, and male-dominated'. He contests that this argument 'is founded upon a misrepresentation of so-called primitive peoples as brutal, and of the state as a necessary, pacifying force', something that the pandemic, largely, demonstrated to be true. Others, such as Gächter (2012) and Marsh (2013), have similarly proposed that co-operation is instinctive, arguing that capitalist culture fosters individualism through coercion rather than any actual desire to dominate others.

**Radicalising Community Development**

Spade (2020a) suggests that, in practising mutual aid, we urgently need to employ the following strategy:

(a) work to dismantle existing harmful systems and/or beat back their expansion

(b) work to directly provide for people targeted by such systems and institutions, and

(c) work to build an alternative infrastructure through which people can get their needs met

In practice, what might this look like? If we stick with an example Mayo explores in her article, let us consider food poverty. The topic has been covered in *Concept* several times previously, including by Drew (2020) who examined the ways agency and autonomy can become stripped due to the power dynamics within a Foodbank space, as well as my own paper (Di Marco Campbell, 2020) which explored the limitations placed on participants involved in community-based organising and social movements premised upon state and sectoral-imposed principles. Practices such as foodbanks require intensive, and frequently invasive, forms of 'bureaucratic violence' (Firth, 2020), whereby a specific authority (housing officer, social worker, GP etc.) holds absolute power over whether someone *deserves* support. This stripping of agency comes in absolute contrast to those sectoral values in community-based practices such as 'empowerment', and to those spaces that recognise the individual as an authority in their own lives - a staple of anarchist practice (see Di Marco Campbell, 2022).

By way of contrast, the work of the Glasgow chapter of Food Not Bombs (an explicitly anarchist organisation; McHenry and Butler, 2000) addresses immediate hunger, whilst community shelves afford a greater level of autonomy than might otherwise be possible. Essential to this endeavour is avoiding inadvertently creating our own silos. For example, if community meals like those run at the Kinning Park Complex in Glasgow were to start implementing specific requirements for entry, then the immense benefits and autonomy of adopting pay-what-you-can-down-to-zero models might bring both official and unofficial forms of gatekeeping. If we are trying to break away from the state's ward-by-ward funding models, why would we introduce new boundaries and barriers to access?

As has been chronicled in the wider community development literature (see, for example, Beck and Purcell, 2010; Cox, 2018; Sakolsky, 2012), when social movements have been successful, the world over, governments consistently work to co-opt them. Rather than altering their own practices, the state seeks to integrate radical activists and practitioners into the systems that led to the problems in the first place. Green activists

who have sought successful election, for example, can spend decades advocating for reforms which, in the end, lead to wider political impotence. In other instances, community-run organisations can reach a point where the capacity of members to sustain the movement on a voluntary basis is tested to the point where they face the choice of folding the initiative, or seeking government funding. As Srinivasa et al. (2022) put it:

> People at the front lines have the most awareness of how these systems harm and are essential strategists because of their expertise. Directly impacted people and people who care about them often join movements because they want to get and give help. Mutual aid exposes the failures of the current system and shows an alternative. It builds faith in people power and fights the demobilizing impacts of individualism and hopelessness-induced apathy. [...] In the context of nonprofitization, organizations are incentivized to be single-issue oriented, aligning with elites rather than with targeted populations.

Ultimately, as Spade asks, when mutual aid builds 'from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them' (2020b, p.67 ), how can we then argue that becoming the state and joining the system whose inadequacies and 'incompetence; (Katie H, 2020) allowed the very issues we're addressing to arise in the first place, is any real solution? This criticism has been levied against governments by mutual aid groups worldwide, including in the Philippines (Karapatan, 2021; Umali and Kuhn, 2020) and the U.S. (Hastings, 2021; Tolentino, 2020; Gammage, 2021):

Around the globe, people are faced with a spiralling succession of crises, from the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change-induced fires, floods, and storms to the ongoing horrors of mass incarceration, racist policing, brutal immigration enforcement, endemic gender violence, and severe wealth inequality. As governments fail to respond to - or actively engineer - each crisis, ordinary people are finding bold and innovative ways to share resources and support the vulnerable. (Spade, 2020)

**Conclusion**

I would agree with Mayo's observations during Covid-19, that 'mutual aid groups have been making potentially significant contributions, promoting values of mutuality, co-operation and care within these contemporary constraints'. But the extensive legacies demonstrate (at minimum) a century of mutual aid practices documented in the literature (from Kropotkin in 1902 to Spade in 2022). Contemporary advocates of mutual aid have unarguably brought an important practice into public discourse, but re-inventing the practice through a lack of historic awareness risks making the same mistakes that have been learned from previously.

As Spade (2020a) stressed, 'slight procedural change in how people can be evicted, deported, lose their benefits, or be expelled from school will fail to reach the root causes of how these processes target particular populations and shorten their lives'; reformism hasn't and doesn't work - not in meaningful and lasting ways. It's largely irrelevant who creates the legislation, the outcomes are frequently the same, with boundaries merely shifted but never eliminated:

> 'Reforms […] reproduce cultural norms that mark some people as
> disposable by dividing the targeted population into deserving and
> undeserving categories' (Spade, 2020a)

Though it is my hope that this article may make some contribution to how readers come to understand - and perhaps engage in - mutual aid practices, let me close by looking at how we might consider our practice and activism, and how we might think about policy reform, given that we will not see the abolition of the state any time soon. Spade encourages us to consider four specific questions about mutual aid which may be useful:

> Does it provide material relief?
> Does it leave out an especially marginalized part of the affected group (eg, people with criminal records, people without immigration status)?
> Does it legitimize or expand a system we are trying to dismantle?; and
> Does it mobilize people, especially those most directly impacted, for ongoing struggle?

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If we are serious about challenging power, these prompts push us to address the complacency that plagues much of our work. Fighting for social change is hard, but if we are going to encourage and engage in mutual aid, we need to recognise what that means. The emotional, intellectual and, at times, physical labour involved has long fallen to those most affected: the already marginalised, the already precarious, the already at-risk. bell hooks (1994) saw 'multi-dimensional gatherings' as a mechanism whereby those not directly affected in a given context (or impacted to a lesser extent) lend their capacities to support those who are, doing so under their guidance and without decentring them. Mutual aid is guided by a very similar principle.

Finally, we are left with the question: is mutual aid a philosophy, an ideology, or an approach? As with much of critical pedagogy, I would argue that it is praxis. Fundamentally, mutual aid is 'survival work', not charity. I would argue that mutual aid is non-statist, anti-Darwinian, and anti-colonial. Mutual aid is radical, and a sustained commitment that goes far beyond a single moment of crisis. Mutual aid is anarchist.

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