Solidarity Not Charity

Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival

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In the current political moment in the United States, defined by climate crisis, increased border enforcement, attacks on public benefits, expansive carceral control, rising housing costs, and growing white right-wing populism, leftist social movement activists and organizations face two particular challenges that, though not new, are urgent. The first is how to address the actual changing conditions that are increasing precarity and shortening lives. The second is how to mobilize people for resistance. In the face of these conditions, movements might strengthen, mobilizing tens of millions of new people to directly fight back against cops, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), welfare authorities, landlords, budget cuts, polluters, the defense industry, prison profiteers, and right-wing organizations. Or, movement organizations could fail to provide any real relief for those whose lives are most endangered and leave newly scared and angry people to the most passive and ineffective forms of expressing their opinions. This article argues that, in the face of these conditions, expanding use of mutual aid strategies will be the most effective way to support vulnerable populations to survive, mobilize significant resistance, and build the infrastructure we need for the coming disasters. Based on my observations participating in policy reform work, public education efforts, and mutual aid projects in movements for queer and trans liberation and prison and border abolition and my study of related and overlapping efforts, I argue that mutual aid is an often devalued iteration of radical collective care that provides a transformative alternative to the demobilizing frameworks for understanding social change and expressing dissent that dominate the popular imagination. I examine the benefits of mutual aid, its challenges, and how those are being addressed by contemporary organizations mobilizing through mutual aid.

Reformism Is Often Demobilizing

Resistant intellectual 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, meanwhile making as little material change as possible. Many reforms provide no material relief and change only what the system says about itself, such as when institutions pass antidiscrimination policies but nothing about the behavior of participants or the outcomes of their operations change. Many reforms, if they do provide any material relief, provide it only to those who are least marginalized within the group of people who were supposed to benefit from the reform. For example, immigration reforms that cut out people with criminal records or who are "public charges," or that make military service or college graduation conditions for relief, are likely to be accessible only to those least targeted by police, those who can pay tuition, those not pushed out of school by ableism and racism. Reforms often merely tinker with existing harmful conditions, failing to reach the root causes.[1] For example, police departments might begin to hire cops of color or gay or trans cops, but the functions of police violence remain the same.[2] A 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. Reforms also sometimes expand the capacity for harm, such as when police reforms include increasing the number or equipment of police.[3] Reforms also reproduce cultural norms that mark some people as disposable by dividing the targeted population into deserving and undeserving categories, such as by lifting up "good" immigrants and arguing that they deserve relief that other immigrants do not deserve.

Social movements have developed criteria for evaluating reforms because of awareness of how they can be inadequate, harmful, and demobilizing. These criteria are not a simple checklist for determining a beneficial reform. Rather, they are bases for engaging in debate and speculation as organizations and coalitions evaluate campaigns and demands. Prison abolitionists, for example, ask, Does the reform in question expand the criminal punishment system? Based on an analysis that prison reforms have tended to expand the reach of policing and criminalization, abolitionists evaluate reforms based on whether they move toward the goal of eliminating the system. Police abolitionist Mariame Kaba offered the following questions as criteria for evaluating police reforms emerging after Mike Brown's murder in Ferguson: "Are the proposed reforms allocating more money to the police? Are the proposed reforms advocating for MORE police and policing? . . . Are the proposed reforms primarily

technology-focused? . . . Are the proposed 'reforms' focused on individual dialogues with individual cops?"[4] These criteria address the dangers of police expansion and legitimization through reform.

Peter Gelderloos offers questions for assessing whether a tactic is liberatory: Does it "seize[] space in which new social relations can be enacted"? Does it "spread awareness of new ideas (and . . . [is] this awareness . . . passive or [does] . . . it inspire others to fight)"? Does it "ha[ve] elite support"? Does it "achieve any concrete gains in improving people's lives"?[5] Gelderloos wants to assess how the tactic might allow people to practice new ways of being, such as practicing solidarity across movements, collectively meeting our own needs rather than relying on harmful institutions, making decisions by consensus rather than by following authority, or sharing things rather than hoarding and protecting private property. These criteria suggest that how movements structure participation can give people new skills for practicing democracy, redistributing material resources, and self-defense. Gelderloos's second question focuses on participatory rather than passive awareness. He is not simply asking, Have people heard of it? Rather, he is asking whether people have practiced it, started their own local chapters, or otherwise replicated it. This distinction is important in the context of the demobilizing aspects of social media, where we can be encouraged to solely participate by liking, sharing, declaring, or debating our views within our media silos, without otherwise engaging with others toward change. Further, Gelderloos asserts that "if part of the elite supports a movement it is much more likely that that movement appears to achieve victories, when in fact that victory is insubstantial and supports elite interests."[6] This provides a provocative question about what the interests of any strange bedfellows in a given fight might be, and what that might reveal about the limits of a particular tactic or demand.

In my own work studying and participating in queer and trans liberation projects and in organizations centered on border and prison abolition, I have relied on four primary questions as criteria for evaluating reforms and tactics: Does it provide material relief? Does it leave out an especially marginalized part of the affected group (e.g., people with criminal records, people without immigration status)? Does it legitimize or expand a system we are trying to dismantle? Does it mobilize people, especially those most directly impacted, for ongoing struggle? The first three questions track primary points in the critique of reforms I laid out above. The final question is about how various approaches to political organizing might build greater capacity for the next fight and the next fight. Reforms, especially those forwarded by elite nonprofits with staff invested in lawsuits, policy reform, and lobbying, are often won through conversations behind closed doors with elected officials and heads of

administrative agencies or corporations. These "wins" are more likely to be compromised by carve-outs that protect existing arrangements and are more likely to be inadequately or selectively implemented. Reforms won through mobilization, rather than granted through reasoning with elites, are more likely to meet the other criteria described here.

Bottom-Up Strategies for Change

Systems of domination produce routes for channeling dissatisfaction that are nonthreatening to those systems. We are encouraged to bring our complaints in ways that are the least disruptive and the most beneficial to existing conditions. Voting, filing lawsuits, giving money to causes we care about that are properly registered as nonprofits, writing letters to the editor, posting our views on social media, and maybe occasionally attending a permitted march that is flanked by cops and does not disrupt traffic are forms of dissent (as opposed to disobedience) that are tolerable and mostly nondisruptive for existing arrangements. Some of those things can be done as tactics within larger strategies for transformation, but taken alone they are unlikely to cause significant change to existing distributions of wealth and violence. Most of these approved methods of expressing concern are designed to lead to the kinds of limited policy and law reform critiqued in the previous section of this article. However, also by design, most people cannot imagine raising concerns in any way besides these. The central US national fiction about justice and injustice, the story that racism was resolved by civil rights, also rewrites the histories of resistance movements, including the civil rights movement, to tell us that approved tactics are and have been the correct and effective ones for resolving concerns.

Resistant left movements seek to reignite people's imaginations about not just what they can demand but also what tactics they can use to win. Such movements model three kinds of work that change material conditions rather than just winning empty declarations of equality: (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. Dismantling work includes campaigns to stop the expansion of surveillance, policing, imprisonment, and deportation, to close precincts and prisons, to stop privatization of schools and utilities, to terminate gentrification, pipelines, fracking, mining, and more. This work includes such tactics as pipeline sabotage, direct actions at building sites, training people not to call the cops, divestment campaigns, blocking deportation buses, disrupting city council meetings, door knocking, and working to change state and municipal budgets to defund

police and jails. Work to support people impacted by harmful systems can include prison visiting and pen pal programs, rapid response systems for ICE raids, ride sharing, reentry resources, eviction defense, medical clinics, childcare collectives, food distribution, disaster response, and court support efforts. Work to create an alternative infrastructure based in left values of democracy, participation, care, and solidarity includes many of the prior activities, which establish community connections and put in place structures for meeting needs. It might also include things like creating food, energy, and waste systems that are sustainable and locally controlled, building methods of dealing with conflict and harm that do not involve the police or prisons, and building health, education, and childcare infrastructure controlled by the people who use it.

The balance of these three elements is particularly important because of the boldness of working to end capitalism, white supremacy, colonialism, and borders.[7] The three-part framing avoids a purism that would suggest only the most overtly militant actions are valuable, discounting work that directly cares for people made vulnerable by current conditions now, while also avoiding becoming solely focused on providing for people without getting to the root causes of what produces vulnerability. Similarly, building alternatives without also dismantling current systems can lead to utopian projects that can sometimes become exclusive, building a new way of life only for the few who access such projects disconnected from frontline struggles. Acknowledging the necessity of immediate care and defense work alongside work to get at the root causes of harmful conditions and work to build alternative structures allows for a complex, nuanced, and developing imagination of coordinated short- and long-term strategies.

Even within this strategic framework, however, some forms of participation are more valued and more visible than others. In the context of contemporary culture, certain activist and social movement activities align with imperatives of external validation and elitism. Reproductive labor, such as cooking; cleaning; caring for sick people, old people, and children; maintaining one-on-one relationships; visiting prisoners and people in hospitals; providing emotional support to people in crisis; making sure people have rides; and making sure people are included and noticed, is devalued and mostly uncompensated. Social movements reproduce these hierarchies, valuing people who give speeches, negotiate with bosses and politicians, get published, get elected, and otherwise become visible as actors in ways that align with dominant hierarchies. Forms of celebrity similarly circulate within movements. It is glamorous to take a selfie with Angela Davis, but it is not glamorous to do weekly or monthly prison visits. The circulation of dominant hierarchies of valuation inside movement spaces shapes how people imagine what it means to participate

in work for change, who they want to meet, and what they want to do and be seen doing. This is especially true for people who have not yet gotten to participate in social movements and have been fed obscuring fictions about social change from misrepresentations of the civil rights movement circulated in school curricula and media. Such representations center charismatic individuals and hide the realities of mass participation and coordination that does not produce careers or notoriety for most participants.[8] For these reasons and others, mutual aid work is one of the least visible and most important forms of work that social movements need to be developing right now.

Mutual Aid

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 that are more survivable.[9] There is nothing new about mutual aid—people have worked together to survive for all of human history. The framework of mutual aid is significant in the context of social movements resisting capitalist and colonial domination, in which wealth and resources are extracted and concentrated and most people can survive only by participating in various extractive relationships. Providing for one another through coordinated collective care is radical and generative. Effective social movements always include elements of mutual aid. The most famous example on the left in the United States is the Black Panther Party's survival programs, including the free breakfast program, the free ambulance program, free medical clinics, a program offering rides to elderly people doing errands, and a school aimed at providing a liberating and rigorous curriculum to children. The Black Panthers' programs mobilized people by creating spaces where they could access basic needs and build shared analysis about the conditions they were facing. J. Edgar Hoover famously wrote in a 1969 memo sent to all FBI offices that "the BCP [Breakfast for Children Program] represents the best and most influential activity going for the BPP [Black Panther Party] and, as such, is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for."[10] The night before the Chicago program was supposed to open, police broke into the church that was supposed to host it and urinated on and destroyed all the food. The co-optation of the program, with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) starting a federal free breakfast program that still feeds millions of children today, is evidence of the significance of this mutual aid tactic.[11]

The Black Panthers' survival programs have inspired many other

organizations to organize mutual aid efforts to attract people to movements and to build shared analysis of problems as collective rather than individual. People often come to social movement organizations because they need something, such as eviction defense, child care, social connection, health care, or advocacy. Being able to get help with a crisis is often a condition of being able to politically participate. It is hard to be part of organizing when you are struggling with a barrier to survival. Getting support through a mutual aid project that has a political analysis of the conditions that produced your crisis also helps break stigma and isolation. In capitalism, social problems resulting from maldistribution and extraction are seen as individual moral failings of targeted people.[12] Getting support in a context that sees the systems, not the people suffering in them, as the problem can help combat the isolation and stigma. 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.

Mutual aid projects also build solidarity. I have seen this at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, a law collective that provides free legal help to trans and gender-nonconforming people who are low income and/or people of color. People come to the organization for services but are invited to stay and participate in organizing. Members may have some things in common—being trans or gender nonconforming, for example—but also differ from one another in terms of race, immigration status, ability, HIV status, age, housing access, sexual orientation, language, and more. By working together and participating in shared political education programming, members learn about experiences that are not their own and build solidarity. Doing explicit work around difference within the group builds the skills of members to practice solidarity and build broad analysis. In the context of nonprofitization, organizations are incentivized to be single-issue oriented, aligning with elites rather than with targeted populations, and use palatable tactics.[13] Solidarity is disincentivized, yet solidarity is what builds and connects large-scale movements. Mutual aid projects, by creating spaces where people come together based on some shared need or concern but encounter and work closely with people whose lives and experiences differ from their own, cultivate solidarity.

Mutual aid projects also build skills for collaboration, participation, and decision making. People engaged in a project to help one another through housing court proceedings will learn the details of how the system does its harm and how to fight it, but they will also learn about meeting facilitation, working across difference, retaining volunteers, addressing

conflict, giving and receiving feedback, following through, and coordinating schedules and transportation. They may also learn that it is not just lawyers who can do this kind of work and that many people have something to offer. This departs from expertise-based services systems that connect helping one another to getting advanced degrees. Mutual aid is antiauthoritarian, demonstrating how to do things together in ways that we were told not to imagine and how to organize human activity without coercion.[14] Most people in the United States have never been to a meeting where there was not a boss or authority figure with decision-making power over others determining the outcomes. Most people work inside hierarchies where disobedience leads to punishment or exclusion. Of course, we bring our learned practices of hierarchy and (de)valuation with us even when no paycheck or punishment enforces our participation. However, experiences of being in groups voluntarily motivated by shared transformative principles and a sincere effort to practice them can build new skills and capacities.

For example, in Occupy encampments that emerged in 2011, people engaged in skill building about how to resolve conflict without calling the police. Occupy mobilized many people who had never participated in political resistance before, introducing them to practices like consensus decision making, taking public space, and engaging in free political education workshops. Many who joined Occupy did not already have a developed critique of policing. Participants committed to police abolition and antiracism cultivated conversations about not calling the police. This was inconsistent and imperfect, but it introduced many people to new skills about responding to harm, which they took with them in their work after Occupy encampments were dismantled by the police. Mutual aid lets people learn and practice the skills and capacities we need to live in the world we are trying to create—a world shaped by practices of collective self-determination.[15]

Mutual aid can also generate boldness and a willingness to defy illegitimate authority. Taking risks with a group for a shared purpose can be a reparative experience when we have been trained to follow rules. Organizers from Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR), a network organizing to provide mutual aid in the context of disasters, share this story in their 2018 workshop facilitation guide to emphasize their argument that "audacity is our capacity":

> When a crew of MADR organizers travelled to Puerto Rico (some visiting their families, others bringing medical skills), they found out about a government warehouse that was neglecting to distribute huge stockpiles of supplies. They showed their MADR badges to the guards and said, "We are here for the 8am pickup." When guards replied that their names were not on the

list, they just insisted again, "We are here for the 8am pickup." They were eventually allowed in, told to take whatever they needed. After being let in once, aid workers were able to return repeatedly. They made more badges for local organizers, and this source continued to benefit local communities for months.[16]

MADR asserts that by taking bold actions together, "we can imagine new ways of interacting with the world."[17] In the face of disaster, mutual aid helps people survive and builds new social relations centered in solidarity and resistance to illegitimate authority. When dominant social relations have been suspended, people discover that they can break norms of individualism, passivity, and respect for private property above human need and collaborate to meet their needs. MADR asserts that "saving lives, homes, and communities in the event and aftermath of disaster may require taking bold action without waiting for permission from authorities. Disaster survivors themselves are the most important authority on just action."[18] Courageous mutual aid actions of disaster survivors occur against a backdrop of injustice, where government agents primarily show up to lock down cities while failing to provide aid or support recovery.[19]

Mutual aid projects providing relief to survivors of storms, floods, earthquakes, and fires, as well as those developed to support people living through the crises caused by poverty, criminalization, housing costs, endemic gender violence, and other ordinary conditions, produce new systems that can prevent harm and improve preparedness for the coming disasters. In the context of Hurricane Maria's devastation of Puerto Rico, it was the existence of food justice efforts that made it possible for many people to eat when the corporate food system that brings 90 percent of the island's food from off-island was halted by the storm. Similarly, it was local solar that allowed people to charge medical devices when the electrical grid went down. The mutual aid projects that exist before the acute disasters become the alternatives that help people survive when disasters arise. By looking at what still works in the face of disaster, we can learn what we want to build to prepare for the next storm or fire. Naomi Klein argues that locally controlled microgrids are more desirable for delivering sustainable energy, given the failures of the energy monopolies that currently dominate energy delivery.[20] In the wake of the 2018 fires in Northern California, Klein's descriptions of how large energy companies work to prevent local and sustainable energy efforts offer particularly compelling support for her argument that in energy as in other areas of survival, we should be working toward locally controlled, democratic structures to replace our crumbling and harmful infrastructure.[21] In the wake of those fires, as the public learned that they were caused by the mismanagement of PG&E and the state government immediately offered PG&E a bailout

while failing to support people displaced by the disaster, Klein asks us to imagine getting rid of the undemocratic infrastructure of our lives and replacing it with people's infrastructure. For social movements working to imagine and build a transition from extractive "dig, burn, dump" economies to sustainable, regenerative ways of living, mutual aid offers a way to meet current needs and prepare for coming disasters.[22]

Pitfalls and Challenges of Mutual Aid

Charity and social services frameworks dominate mainstream understanding of what it means support people in crisis. Mutual aid is not charity. *Charity*, *aid*, *relief*, and *services* are terms used in various contexts to denote the provision of support for survival to poor people where that support is governed by rich people and/or government. Charity models promote the idea that most poverty is a result of immorality and that only those who can prove their moral worth deserve help. Charity comes with eligibility requirements that relate to these moral frameworks of deservingness, such as sobriety, piety, curfews, participation in job training or parenting courses, cooperation with the police, or identifying the paternity of children. The determination of deservingness and undeservingness is based in cultural archetypes that pathologize Black families, frame poor women as overreproductive, and criminalize poverty.[23] The conditions of receiving aid are made so stigmatizing that they discipline everyone into taking any work at any exploitative wage or condition in order to avoid the fate of people who must seek relief. Charity makes rich people and corporations look generous and upholds and legitimizes the systems that concentrate wealth.[24]

Charity is increasingly privatized and contracted out to the massive nonprofit sector. Nonprofits compete for grants to address social problems. Elite donors get to decide what strategies should be funded and then protect their money from taxation by storing it in foundations that fund their pet projects, most of which have nothing to do with poor people. Even nonprofits that do purport to address poverty are mostly run by white elites. Nonprofitization has reproduced antidemocratic racist and colonial relationships between the winners and losers of extractive, exploitative economic arrangements.[25]

Mutual aid projects face the challenge of avoiding the charity model. A member of North Valley Mutual Aid, a group working to support people displaced by the Camp Fire in Northern California, described how narratives of deservingness drove the attacks on the tent city that emerged in a Walmart parking lot after the fire.[26] In the days following the fire, as displaced people with more resources began to leave the tent city, city officials and media portrayed the people still living there as not displaced fire

survivors but ordinary homeless and itinerant people who did not deserve to remain. The eligibility processes of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) exclude people who cannot confirm an address before the disaster, such as homeless people or people living in poor communities where individual dwellings are not given an individual mailing address. The distinction between deserving and undeserving disaster survivors rests on the idea that suddenly displaced renters and homeowners are sympathetic victims, while people who were already displaced by the ordinary disasters of capitalism are blameworthy.

Mutual aid project participants replicate moralizing eligibility frameworks inside mutual aid projects when they require sobriety, exclude people with certain types of convictions, or stigmatize and exclude people with psychiatric disabilities for not fitting behavioral norms. Myrl Beam traces the tension that emerged in an organization founded to support queer and trans youth, and to operate by and for youth, as the organization formalized, diverging from its initial mission and commitments to youth governance. The organization began to participate with the local police to check warrants for youth.[27] This example of departure from mutual aid principles and toward the implementation of eligibility requirements that enforce deservingness highlights the relationship between governance practices and the slide toward punitive charity models. A MADR participant tells a related story:

> After Hurricane Irma, a local sheriff announced that, "If you go to a shelter for Irma and you have a warrant, we'll gladly escort you to the safe and secure shelter called the Polk County Jail." [This] . . . essentially weaponizes aid against the most vulnerable and put numerous lives in danger. . . . There is always a shocking number of guns that show up after a disaster. A dehydrated child without access to electricity or air conditioning in the blazing Florida or Texas or Puerto Rico sun, needs somebody carrying Pedialyte, not an M16. Both the military or police and the nonprofit industrial complex often serve to reestablish the inequitable dominant social order rather than leverage their resources to assist disaster survivors in leading their own recovery.[28]

Mutual aid projects must also be wary of saviorism, self-congratulation, and paternalism. Populations facing crisis are cast as in need of saving, and their saviors are encouraged to use their presumed superiority to make over these people and places, replacing old, dysfunctional ways of being with smarter, more profitable, more moral ways of being. Politicians, nonprofiteers, and business conspire to remake these places, implementing devastating "innovations" that eliminate public housing, permanently displace residents, privatize schools, and destroy public health infrastructure.[29] Mutual aid projects and their individual participants

must actively resist savior narratives and find ways to support participants to build shared analysis about the harms of saviorism and the necessity of self-determination for people in crisis.

Mutual aid also faces the challenge of neoliberal co-optation. Neoliberalism combines attacks on public infrastructure and public services, endorsing privatization and volunteerism. As public services are cut, neoliberals push for social safety nets to be replaced by family and church, assuming that those who fail to belong to such structures deserve abandonment. Philanthropy and privatization are expected to replace public welfare, and public-private partnerships are celebrated as part of a fiction that everything should be "run like a business." The cultural narrative about social justice entrepreneurship suggests that people who want change should not fight for justice but should invent new ways of managing poor people and social problems. This raises the question, How do mutual aid projects remain threatening and oppositional to the status quo and cultivate resistance, rather than becoming complementary to abandonment and privatization? In the wake of Hurricane Harvey, corporate media news stories on volunteer boats for rescues followed this pattern, neither criticizing government relief failure nor interrogating the causes of worsening hurricanes and whom they most endanger.[30] Stories of individual heroes obscured the social and political conditions producing the crisis.

This danger of becoming a complementary structure to harmful systems pervades debates about restorative justice programs and other alternatives to incarceration. These kinds of programs, including drug treatment programs, programs that divert some arrestees from the criminal system to social service programs, and restorative justice programs where people who have done harm go through a mediated process with those they have harmed, all have the potential to be disruptive mutual aid programs or to be nondisruptive adjuncts and/or expansions of carceral control. Most such programs emerge from communities impacted by racist systems of criminalization, but many formalize and transition to become funded and shaped by police and courts. Minnesota's restorative justice program, one of the earliest examples of a state incorporating a restorative justice approach statewide, has become another site where the same populations already targeted for arrest are processed through a system. Its emergence did not change who is criminalized or disrupt the way policing and criminalization operate; it only added to the existing system and provided legitimacy through the cover of innovation.[31] In Seattle, throughout a seven-year fight to stop the building of a new youth jail, public officials have relentlessly used the small, minimally publicly funded diversion programs operated primarily by people of color as cover to suggest that the county has already addressed concerns about

youth incarceration and that the jail construction is actually in line with a county's commitment to "zero youth detention."[32] The co-optation of grassroots projects aimed at supporting criminalized youth to rationalize further investment in caging youth exposes the real dangers facing mutual aid projects.

Mutual aid projects may appear to overlap with neoliberalism in that their participants critique certain social service models and believe in voluntary participation in care and crisis work. But the critiques of public safety nets made by mutual aid project participants are not the same as those of neoliberals. Mutual aid projects emerge because public services are exclusive, insufficient, or exacerbate state violence. Neoliberals take aim at public services in order to further concentrate wealth and in doing so exacerbate material inequality and violence. The difference is visible comparing the trend of privatization of fire services to the work of the Oakland Power Projects (OPP), which seeks to build an alternative to calling 911. Increasingly, public firefighting services are inadequate and also face cuts; meanwhile, the private firefighting business is growing, with wealthy homeowners paying insurers who come to seal their homes, spray fire retardants on the premises, and put owners in five-star hotels while less affluent people struggle in shelters and fight FEMA for basic benefits. The shift toward eroding public firefighting and creating private, exclusive, profit-generating fire services typifies the neoliberal attack on public services that exacerbates the harms of fire and the concentration of wealth.[33] The OPP's critique of public emergency services and efforts to create an alternative differ in origins, aim, impact, and implementation. OPP emerged out of antipolice and antiprison movement organizations that observed that when people call 911 for emergency medical help, the police come along, endangering people who called for help. In response, the OPP is working to train people in communities impacted by police violence to provide emergency medical care for treating conditions such as gunshot wounds, chronic health problems like diabetes, and mental health crises.[34] This strategy is part of broader work to dismantle policing and criminalization, and it works to both meet immediate needs and mobilize people to participate in building an alternative infrastructure for crisis response that is controlled by people with shared commitments to ending racist police violence and medical neglect.

Feminist and antiracist movements building mutual aid projects have disseminated insights gleaned from this work about how co-optation of mutual aid projects happens and what practices might help resist it. In the written resources produced by mutual aid project participants, as well as at gatherings where activists share their work, discussion of the necessity of maintaining community control of mutual aid projects and the dangers of accepting funding that limits activities or eligibility and of

collaborating with law enforcement are prevalent.[35] Feminist scholars and activists have traced how the anti–domestic violence movement shifted from centering mutual aid projects, such as community, volunteer-run shelters and defense campaigns for criminalized survivors, to formalizing and taking government money that required collaboration with police and that increased criminal penalties and made arrests mandatory on domestic violence calls. These shifts increased the criminalization of communities of color, made the services less accessible to the most vulnerable survivors of violence, and provided good public relations for police, prosecutors, and courts as protectors of women.[36] This history and others like it highlight the necessity for mutual aid projects to cultivate autonomy from elite institutions and government and accountability to the populations made most vulnerable by the existing systems. Mutual aid projects also work to maintain community control by structuring decision making to avoid concentration and hierarchy. Co-optation of projects and organizations often happens through co-optation of individual people, often charismatic leaders or founders of projects who get bought off by elites through access to increased funding, influence, job security, or other forms of status.[37] When one or a small number of people have the power to shift the direction of a project, it can be hard to resist the incentives that come with co-optation. Often, charismatic leaders are people who are not the most vulnerable inside the participant group, because being regarded as charismatic, persuasive, important, or authoritative relates to hierarchies of valuation and devaluation that also determine vulnerability. As a result, a single individual or small group running a project may not be the same people who would have the most to lose if the project veers toward elite interests. It is those most vulnerable within the participants who are most likely to have objections to the shifts that come with co-optation, such as new eligibility requirements that cut out stigmatized groups. To return to the example of the queer youth center described earlier, the adults who had the power to make decisions about accepting additional funding and agreeing to run warrants on youth were people who would personally gain (with job security and leadership status) from those decisions, while the youth who would no longer be able to use the space without facing arrest were excluded from the decision-making processes that led to the changes. Given these dynamics, many mutual aid organizations work to create horizontal, participatory decision-making processes and to utilize consensus decision making to cultivate meaningful collective control and prevent co-optation. Relatedly, some establish explicit criteria or guidelines about making sure certain perspectives that are often left out or marginalized are heard, including by agreeing that decisions that break down around identity lines will be reevaluated to assess alignment with the group's transformative principles. Some groups establish quotas about members

of decision-making bodies within the group, ensuring that groups particularly likely to be left out are well represented in those bodies.[38]

Consensus decision making, in addition to avoiding the problem of having majorities vote down minorities and silence vulnerable groups, establishes an ethic of desiring others' participation. Decision-making systems focused on competition—on getting *my* idea to be the one that wins—cultivate disinterest in other people's participation. Consensus decision making requires participants to bring forward proposals to be discussed and modified until everyone is sufficiently satisfied that no one will block the proposal. This means participants get to practice wanting to hear people's concerns and their creative approaches to resolving them, and not needing the group's decision to be *exactly* what any one individual wants. If the goal of our movements is to mobilize tens of millions of people, we need to become people who genuinely want others' participation, even when others bring different ideas or disagree with us. Most people will not stay and commit to intense unpaid work if they get little say in shaping that work. We need ways of practicing wanting one another present and participating, not just going along with what one charismatic or authoritative person says. Most people have not gotten to practice this, since the institutions that run our lives, like schools, jobs, and governments, are hierarchical. Instead, we get a lot of practice either going along or trying to be the dominant person or people. MADR says, "We all have something to offer."[39] This is a radical idea in a world where help is professionalized and most people are supposed to stay home and passively consume and occasionally make a donation to a nonprofit or volunteer at a soup kitchen on Thanksgiving. To argue that in the context of crisis everyone has something to offer, that we are all valuable and we can work to include us all, is a significant intervention on the disposability most of us are taught to practice toward one another and the passivity we are encouraged to feel about direct engagement to remake the world. MADR offers the slogan, "No Masters, No Flakes."[40] This simultaneous rejection of hierarchies inside the organizing and commitment to build accountability based on shared values asks participants to keep showing up and working together not because a boss is making you but because you are working together on something that matters.

Conflict is part of all groups and relationships, so mutual aid projects need methods for addressing conflict. Working and living inside hierarchies deskills us for dealing with conflict. We are taught to either dominate others and be numb to the impact of our domination on them, or submit with a smile and be numb to our own experiences of domination in order to get by. We learn that giving direct feedback is risky and that we should either suppress our concerns or find sideways methods to manipulate situations and get what we want. We are trained to seek

external validation, especially from people in authority, and often have minimal skills for hearing critical feedback, considering it, and acting on what is useful. To survive our various social positions, we internalize specific instructions about when and how to numb our feelings and perceptions, avoid giving feedback, disappear, defend, demand appeasement, or appease. As a result, we are mostly unprepared to engage with conflict in generative ways and instead tend to avoid it until it explodes or relationships disappear. Mutual aid organizations often work to build shared analysis and practices that recognize and address racism, ableism, sexism, classism, and other systems of meaning and control that produce harm between participants and structure interactions, in order to be better prepared to address conflict. Some provide skills-building activities for giving and receiving direct feedback and avoiding gossip. Ensuring that organizations have a clear approach to decision making and that participants understand it can prevent conflicts that tear projects apart. Creating transparency, especially about money, can prevent destructive conflict. Using transformative justice and mediation frameworks for addressing conflict and harm between participants can help address immediate crises and build skills for preventing and addressing harm in the future.[41] Work to address conflict and harm within organizations and projects, like mutual aid work in general, builds infrastructure and capacity for collective self-governance and survival.

Transition to Collective Care

The most visible mutual aid work in contemporary movements for justice is happening on the front lines of storms, floods, and fires. In those locations, people experience failures of dominant infrastructure and the power of helping and sharing with one another. These disasters are, of course, anything but natural. The profound loss, trauma, and violence occurring at their front lines are created by the ways that access to survival is already organized to support exploitation and extraction. MADR writes:

> Neoliberal capitalism and colonization is daily disaster—the meaningless drudgery of the work, the loss of authentic social relationships, the destruction of the water, the air, and everything we need to survive. Even though a hurricane or a fire or a flood is immensely devastating, it also in a sense washes away the unnamable disaster that is everyday life under neoliberal capitalism. Without the coercion from above, most disaster survivors default back to meaningful relationships based on mutual aid. After the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Dorothy Day said, "While the crisis lasted people loved one another." We want that love to last. We want to stretch out these temporary autonomous zones, where people are able to share goods and

services with each other freely, where we reimagine new social relationships outside of the dictates of the market, where we work for something real and build something together.[42]

MADR's understanding of disaster relief as a moment of production of new social relations is actually not entirely different from that of disaster capitalists, who seek to remake populations and regions in crisis according to neoliberal imperatives. We might understand mutual aid projects as frontline work in a war over who will control social relations and how survival will be reproduced, especially in the face of worsening crises. Will neoliberals come in to further privatize and extract, or will mutual aid projects based in collective self-determination and local control and dedicated to meeting human needs determine emergent social relations in the wake of disaster? MADR writes,

> Think of all the things we rely on our opposition to do for us. Our food, water, energy, transportation, entertainment, communications, medical care, trash pickup. If the political establishment takes care of people's survival needs, they maintain power, but due to capitalism eating itself, the political establishment seems increasingly disinterested and unable to meet those needs. If instead corporations or fascists meet people's needs, people will probably look to them for leadership. But if grassroots movements for collective liberation facilitate the people's ability to meet their own needs, the better world we dream of very well may become a reality.[43]

Mutual aid work is mostly invisibilized and undervalued in mainstream and left narratives about social movement resistance, despite its significance as a tool for opposing systems of domination. The marginalization of care work as uncompensated feminized labor, the mystification of law and policy reform, and the demobilizing liberal mythology of moving hearts and minds that keeps people busy expressing themselves online all impede a focus on mutual aid. However, mutual aid projects are central to effective social movements, and as conditions worsen, mutual aid projects are becoming an even more essential strategy for supporting survival, building new infrastructure, and mobilizing large numbers of people to work and fight for a new world. It is through mutual aid projects that we can build our capacities for self-organization and self-determination.

> There are enough spare rooms and empty houses for everybody who is homeless. There is enough food produced to feed anybody and everybody who is hungry. . . . In order to face the resource depletion and other climate change realities that are just around the corner, we need to be experimenting now with alternative ways of relating to each other that are based on humanity and generosity, rather than self-interest and greed. It is imperative for our collective survival.[44]

Notes

1. Peace, "Desire to Heal."

2. Tan, "NYPD Unveils Rainbow-Themed Vehicle."

3. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 22–39.

4. Kaba, "Police 'Reforms' You Should Always Oppose"; Critical Resistance, "Reformist Reforms vs. Abolitionist Steps."

5. Gelderloos, *Failure of Nonviolence*, chap. 3.

6. Gelderloos, *Failure of Nonviolence*, 15.

7. Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*, 12–15.

8. Flaherty, *No More Heroes*, 11–33.

9. Big Door Brigade, "What Is Mutual Aid?"

10. Collier, "Black Panthers."

11. Ealey, "Black Panthers' Oakland Community School"; Nelson, *Body and Soul*, 17; Heynen, "Bending the Bars."

12. Neubeck and Cazenave, *Welfare Racism*, 15–38; Piven and Cloward, *Regulating the Poor*, 3–37.

13. INCITE!, *Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, 21–39, 53–62, 129–49; INCITE!, *Color of Violence*, 53–65, 208–21.

14. Levine, *Resisting Illegitimate Authority*, 5–21.

15. Gitterman and Schulman, "Life Model," 30–31; Caffentzis and Federici, "Commons against and beyond Capitalism," 95–105; Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, "Workshop Facilitation Guide," 26–31.

16. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, "Workshop Facilitation Guide," 36.

17. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, "Workshop Facilitation Guide," 36.

18. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, "Workshop Facilitation Guide," 29.

19. South End Press Collective, *What Lies Beneath*; Banuchi, "Llueven las denegatorias de asistencia."

20. Klein, *Battle for Paradise*, chap. 1.

21. Morris, "California Regulator."

22. Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project, "From Banks and Tanks to Cooperation and Caring."

23. Neubeck and Cazenave, *Welfare Racism*, 15–38; Piven and Cloward, *Regulating the Poor*, 3–37.

24. Bowman, "Flip Side to Bill Gates' Charity Billions"; Eisinger, "How Mark Zuckerberg's Altruism Helps Himself"; Rhodes and Bloom, "Trouble with Charitable Billionaires"; Savage, "Privatizing Morality."

25. INCITE!, *Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, 21–39, 53–77, 129–49.

26. It's Going Down, "Autonomous Disaster Relief Organizing."

27. Beam, *Gay, Inc.*, chap. 4.

28. Staufer, "Mutual Aid Disaster Relief," 2.

29. Klein, *Shock Doctrine*, 3–25, 409–84, 487–512.

30. Jervis, "Citizens with Boats."

31. Peace, "Desire to Heal"; Minnesota Department of Corrections, "Restorative Justice."

32. Spade, "Faux Progressive Arguments"; King County, "King County Zero Youth Detention."

33. Smiley, "Private Firefighters."

34. Critical Resistance, "Oakland Power Projects."

35. Sylvia Rivera Law Project, "From the Bottom Up," 1–17; Munshi and

Willse, "Navigating Neoliberalism"; Barnard Center for Research on Women, "Queer Dreams and Nonprofit Blues."

    36. INCITE!, *Color of Violence*, 1–24, 208–26.
    37. INCITE!, *Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, 129–49.
    38. Sylvia Rivera Law Project, "From the Bottom Up," 1–17.
    39. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, "Workshop Facilitation Guide," 68.
    40. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, "Workshop Facilitation Guide," 68.
    41. Sylvia Rivera Law Project, "From the Bottom Up," 1–17; Alatorre, "From Drama to Calma."
    42. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, "Workshop Facilitation Guide," 81.
    43. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, "Workshop Facilitation Guide," 81.
    44. Staufer, "Mutual Aid Disaster Relief," 3.

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