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April 2, 2014

Mutual Aid and Distribution in Occupy Sandy

This is the manuscript of a guest lecture I gave in MIT 3874G: Disaster Capitalism, a course designed and delivered by Dr. Warren Steele of the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario. The theme for the day's lecture was 'Exit Strategies.'

The following lecture is derived from the third chapter of my thesis, of which the overall focus is capitalist food production and distribution, and the connections I make between food's inequitable distribution and ethics. In predominantly service and information-based economies, the pivotal role food plays in the maintenance of life has arguably become neglected as an object of ethical and political contemplation. We often fail to realize that the incarceration of food by the commodity form degrades the food object itself as well as guaranteeing continued dependency on the wage. In a generalized commodity society, labour power is the only thing a person has to sell in order to buy her bread.

The global division of labour and production that forms the totality of capitalist relations leaves individuals divided by the wage and without direct access to the means of subsistence. I think of this totality as ideological and physiological, and emphasize food as primary to the reproduction of capital, because it is a significant branch of production, and therefore, value creation, as well as one of the necessities that we sell our labour power in order to purchase. Food production was one of capital's first strongholds, as the progressive enclosure of common land delivered the means of production for our subsistence to capitalists, and made way for the wage as the principle mechanism by which we feed ourselves. There is no worker without the food she needs to reproduce

herself, so food is significant to the overall capitalist mode of production, and yet, capital cares not what shape a commodity takes, the labour conditions under which it was produced, or the effect it will have on bodies that consume it. Whether the food is being grown by hungry people, but sold in countries where it can earn a better price, or whether it is nutritious or safe, is of no matter to capital. This is one of the many contradictions of capital that issues from the divorce of value from and its total indifference to the materials through which it circulates and accumulates, including human bodies. For this reason, Marx called capitalism an inhuman system.

The way in which life's necessities are distributed in the capitalist mode of production forms the limits of possibility for humans and other beings. My thesis argues that, without direct access to the means of subsistence, the subject is limited in her movement and interactions with others, except where the universal equivalent grants her access to go. With food production and supply distributed on a global scale, as well as being increasingly concentrated in industrialized, rural settings, access to food is further mediated by physical distances. Again, it is the universal equivalent that moves commodities and is what draws food into cities, not the needs of its citizens. The chapter I have based this lecture on is a case study on mutual aid and the organizing efforts of Occupy in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. The connection I have made between the impoverished and inhuman aspects of our food supply chain and disaster is the subsequent catastrophe that may follow on an environmental crisis because we do not have direct access to food sources. And more generally, because we do not know how to access each other outside of the commodity relation. As the anarcho-communist Peter Kropotkin observed over a century ago, our communities have become "loose

aggregations of individuals, connected by no particular bonds, bound to appeal to the Government each time that they feel a common need" ([1902] 2006:187), and, I would add, bound to the commodity form for every need. It is also from Kropotkin that we get the concept of mutual aid.

Mutual aid is entirely centered on needs and providing for those needs in ways that strengthen communities, while capital divides us and sets us into competition with one another. Money may be used in a mutual aid scenario, but people do not enter a mutual aid relationship as merely a holder of money, and leave the relationship still yet a stranger. Within the confines of a commodity society, the ability to create sustainable, interpersonal bonds through non-capitalist means, which supports the ethical organization and distribution of resources, is severely limited or even impossible. As I will discuss, mutual aid is antithetical to capital because it is predicated on sharing and collective work and is in itself a movement towards local autonomy that global capital cannot abide. In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, however, while capital's circulation was interrupted, mutual aid became a necessary and widespread practice in devastated areas. While I would never wish a catastrophe of this magnitude on anyone, this event prompts us to ask what potential for alternative, anti-capitalist organization may follow on crises like these and what must be done in the interim to develop practices and organizations that will bear us through these disasters according to more ethical, equitable principles of distribution. As things stand, individuals simply do not have the wherewithal to face crises and must rely wholly on external, national institutions for aid, unless there already exists a community infrastructure that the crisis activates.

Arguably, this is what occurred among a network of activist organizers, first mobilized by 2011's Occupy Wall Street movement, who became part of the Hurricane Sandy recovery effort in late October, 2012. Occupy Sandy, as the volunteers came to be called, formed one of the strongest and far-reaching responses to the devastation of Sandy, earning a reputation comparable if not better than national organizations like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Red Cross. Occupy Sandy's efforts have aimed, in part, to ensure that communities are not doubly devastated: first by disaster, and second, for lacking a local infrastructure of skills and materials. In other words, in the wake of a hurricane, Occupy Sandy has begun to establish a network of community relations alongside and opposed to the vast network of capitalist relations.

Literature on revolutionary responses to disaster has become more prevalent since the 2008 financial crisis, spawning an antonym for the theme of this class, disaster communism. However, I found an earlier reference to an anti-capitalist struggle that grew out of a disaster in a single-line reference in John Walton and David Seddon's *Free Markets and Food Riots* (1989) to the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. The earthquake came on the heels of an economic crisis in Mexico driven by the austerity conditions imposed on the country by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Walton and Seddon observed that "[d]espite the dismal economic record" in Mexico, "popular protest was episodic and easily controlled by the state until natural disaster…provided moments of opportunity (1989:124). This led me to a brief, but informative text by Harry Cleaver called "The Uses of an Earthquake" (2005), first published in 1987.

Cleaver argues that environmental disasters offer unique possibilities of intervention for people oppressed by the state and exploited by capital because the flows

of domination are rendered temporarily immobile. Residents of the Tepito neighbourhood

of Mexico City mobilized amidst the temporary disruption to government bureaucracy,

including the destruction of buildings containing legal paperwork. While capital's

domination exists in the circulation and accumulation of money (and other material

forms), a government's power exists in the circulation and preservation of documents, for

example, contracts, censuses, and other biopolitical instruments. In particular, the Mexico

City earthquake afforded residents the ability to pressure the government to seize

thousands of apartments neglected by landlords and sell them to the tenants. Cleaver

says,

> When landlords and lawyers arrived on the scene the very day of the quake, the people in the community quickly realized that the greatest threat to them would come from these owners trying to take advantage of the situation by tearing down their homes and rebuilding more expensive, higher rent properties from which the former tenants would be excluded…Anticipating such actions, thousands of tenants organized themselves and marched on the presidential palace demanding government expropriation of the damaged properties and their eventual sale to their current tenants. By taking the initiative while the government was still paralysed, they successfully forced the seizure of some 7,000 properties. (Cleaver 2005:np)

We see in Cleaver's description the opportunity that crises often afford for greater

exploitation of vulnerable people, which may have happened in Mexico City had capital

been left to pick up the pieces. However, there already existed a strong network of

community relations among the Tepito people that held fast in the face of disaster and

spurred them to action.

Not only did "the earthquake caus[e] a breakdown in both the administrative

capacities and the authority of the government…the ability of people to organize

themselves [also] grew out of a long history of autonomous struggle" (Cleaver 2005:np).

According to Cleaver, this established history of autonomy in the Tepito neighbourhood

"allowed the people…to move quickly and effectively to help themselves in an emergency and to deal with a much more inefficient, partially paralyzed government" (2005:np). Cleaver is not being paranoid when he tells us to heed the example of the Tepito residents; he is not drawing our attention to the increased threat of environmental crises, or suggesting that we follow the example of Doomsday Preppers and begin stockpiling food. He is pointing to the difference it makes when a community has developed autonomous means of organization and response. He says,

> For those of us outside of Mexico, the people of Tepito have an important lesson to teach, not only about the uses of an earthquake, but about the use of crisis more generally…We should always be ready to take advantage of any crack or rupture in the structures of power which confine us. (Cleaver 2005:np)

But being ready requires some sort of framework or point of reference from which to build on that initial advantage, as the Tepito people had developed after decades of self-organization. For Occupy Sandy, that framework is being developed now with a view to the future, and its first principal is mutual aid.

What follows is a description of the methods of organization Occupy Sandy used to distribute food and volunteers to Hurricane Sandy survivors, followed by a discussion of the logistical applications employed in the relief effort. However, first, I take a theoretical detour in order to position Occupy Sandy's organizing methods in terms of Kropotkin's concept of mutual aid, Murray Bookchin's theory of direct action, and as an example of what a post-capitalist, revolutionary subjectivity could be. In conclusion, based on my observations of Occupy Sandy's organizational ethics, I discuss how the practice of mutual aid could develop into mystified or fetishized behaviour that is nevertheless ethical.

Mutual Aid and Direct Action

Mutual aid and cooperation, according to Kropotkin, are essential factors of evolution observed in human and nonhuman natures. Kropotkin developed his concept of mutual aid in contradiction to Darwinists like Herbert Spencer who elevated competition above Darwin's own emphasis on cooperation as crucial to the reproduction of a species. Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* ([1902] 2006) contains a zoological study of the cooperative behaviours of a variety of species, and a history of mutual aid in human communities spanning centuries, often expressed through the sharing of food and water or collective work. However, Kropotkin observes that the progressive "absorption of all social function [by] the State" in the modern era "evidently relieved [citizens] from their obligations towards each other" ([1902] 2006:187). The evolutionary tendency of mutual aid is further and most devastatingly impaired by the capitalist modality which likewise "maintains that men can, *and must*, seek their own happiness in a disregard of other people's wants" ([1902] 2006:182; emphasis mine), a philosophy we can easily associate with our readings by Ayn Rand. Mutual aid is suppressed as long as the reproduction of individuals and collectives is determined by capital, though Kropotkin states that the "current of mutual aid" continuously seeks new ways to express itself ([1902] 2006:183).

In the capitalist mode of production, relations formed without the means of its own reproduction, i.e., through money and commodities, are negated. The subject of capital is forced to consider her relationship to capital before all others, as a matter of survival. Murray Bookchin argues that it is only in local, spontaneous movements or 'direct action' that the human claims autonomy and stands a chance of reintroducing more ethical forms of organization into the milieu. He says that the revolutionary's goal

must be to "concretise the management of the collectivity as an authentic mode of self-management" ([1972] 1975:np) or, in my own words, rebuild the social infrastructure to allow individuals autonomy in the way they relate to others and pursue their wellbeing. Direct action refers to the ability of individuals and collectives to respond to the needs of a community without the intervention of the state or by means of commodity exchange. It is most often associated with political agitation such as sit-ins and workplace occupations, as it is intended to draw attention to the systemic dysfunction of the government and legal system, which defer instead of directly serve human needs. With its connotations of immediate, physical intervention in ideological and bureaucratic regimes, a term like direct action may seem to preclude mystification, but I argue that the ideal of self-management would still operate under a sort of fetish.

Under capital, the only way to manage or reproduce the self is through the commodity form. Marx describes the subjugation of humans to the commodity form in terms of a fetish ([1867]1976:166)—a supersensuous relationship that governs but also obscures the material realities of the capitalist mode of production and supports the subject's unconscious participation in the reproduction of capitalism as a totality. However, mystifications in and of themselves are not to blame for the alienated subject under capital. The processes by which humans reproduce their societies are often mystified, whether they be through rituals of a religious or economic nature. The Marxist anthropologist Maurice Godelier says that "social relationships become constructed in such a way that the opacity necessary for them to exist and to reproduce is produced at the same time" (1999:136). Moreover, "[i]ndividuals are not conscious of projecting and reifying the realities that are part of their own social being" (Godelier 1999:169). As Dr.

Steele has said, a fetish can be a set of implicit or unspoken parameters that govern social organization, like a subprogram running in the background of our lives. We are subject to capital's fetish, but a different fetish could govern a post-capitalist society.

As I have said, the dominant relation we exist in is with capital. The Marxist philosopher Anselm Jappe describes the human subject as a site of social reproduction, and in terms of capital, as a substrate for capital's accumulation. He says, "The subject is the substrate, the agent, the bearer that the fetishist system of valorization requires to assure production and consumption" (Jappe 2013:np). If we did not have needs for capital to exploit, like food and shelter, it could not exist. Because we are currently subjects of capital, Jappe argues that any revolutionary subjectivity we may wish to develop out of our current state will never offer us complete emancipation. He says, "The subject is therefore that from which we must be emancipated, and not that through which and in terms of which we must be emancipated" (Jappe 2013:np). Jappe, like Sylvia Frederici (2012) in today's reading, problematizes visions of a new world where subjectivity is still defined by capitalist logic, like the preeminence of productivity—more yield, at higher speeds—over any consideration of the human who makes or consumes a product. Consider how Frederici rather frames revolution in terms of a newfound emphasis on reproduction of daily life, not production. Also problematic is current revolutionary discourse that is still centered on the proletariat, to the exclusion of people who do not fit the nostalgic image of a nineteenth century factory worker, and which still positions subjectivity vis-à-vis our labour.

In this class, in discussions of the fetish, we have asked whether if we were to shuffle off this subject-form, would we still find ourselves taking on other subject-forms

and other fetishes. I will return to Bookchin to expand on this discussion. In his 1975 pamphlet discussing the merits of direct action, called *On Spontaneity and Organization*, Bookchin states that the necessary step to emancipation is to obliterate hierarchy from social organization, like that that organizes the division of labour by class and gender. For Bookchin, the elimination of hierarchical domination could grant us the ability to form multiple subjectivities that are not posited by capital or the state. Bookchin hints at this when he suggests that the worker can give up, what he calls, her factory essence and pursue different modes of being based on the different relations she bares within her community. You are likely a little familiar with Bruno Latour and actor-network theory. The idea of having multiple subjectivities that Bookchin presents is supported by the notion that we are afforded or limited in our being by the myriad relations we have with people and objects; that we are invested in interdependent networks that are moving, shifting things, and manifest different relations from moment-to-moment, day-to-day, or longer time scales. An actor-network describes you, me, Dr. Steele, these tables and chairs as a circulation of potentials and limitations. I use ANT to understand how we move and are moved by bodies in our immediate vicinity, but also how capital operates through bodies, objects, and abstractions that ensures that our subjectivity is filtered almost exclusively through the capitalist relation, precluding other relations from forming. ANT is a horizontal way of thinking, complementary to Bookchin's emphasis on eliminating hierarchy, and one that sees subjectivity defined by varied relations, not simply by a position of dependency to the capitalist order.

Another aspect of Bookchin's argument that is most relevant to our discussions of the fetish, is that he suggests that a sort of mystification is required in order to prepare

people for a post-capitalist subjectivity. He describes a new age of Enlightenment

dawning in the unconscious direction of the antiestablishment identity politics of the

1960s and 70s, a moment we now associate with postmodernism. He says,

> The new Enlightenment is not simply changing consciousness, a change that is
> often quite superficial in the absence of other changes…The significance of the
> new Enlightenment, however, is that it is altering the unconscious apparatus of the
> individual even before it can be articulated consciously as a social theory or a
> commitment to political conviction. ([1972] 1975:np)

While observing, as we have for decades after, the small political strides those

individualist revolutions took, Bookchin sees the small movements as contributing

largely to the dissolution of "the individual's obedience to institutions, authorities and

values that have vitiated every struggle for freedom" ([1972] 1975:np). Again, he

describes the important, relative quality in these forms of resistance as unconscious:

> These profound changes tend to occur almost unknowingly, as for example among
> workers who, in the concrete domain of everyday life, engage in sabotage, work
> indifferently, practice almost systematic absenteeism, resist authority in almost
> every form, use drugs, acquire various freak traits — and yet, in the abstract
> domain of politics and social philosophy, acclaim the most conventional homilies
> of the system. (Bookchin [1972] 1975:np)

Bookchin argues that a latency develops in these moments, a 'precondition' for a

liberatory society that will be made conscious with the explosion of revolution or,

perhaps, natural disaster. Latour also privileges the revolutionary potential of small gains,

like those won in these counter-culture movements, because attacking a totality destines

the individual for 'sure defeat':

> With respect to the Total, there is nothing to do except genuflect before it, or worse
> to dream of occupying the place of complete power. I think it would be much safer
> to claim that action is possible only in a territory that has been opened up, flattened
> down, and cut down to size in a place where formats, structures, globalization, and
> totalities circulate inside tiny conduits, and where for each of their applications they
> need to rely on masses of hidden potentialities. If this is not possible, then there is

no politics. No battle has ever been won without resorting to new combinations and surprising events. (2005:252)

Not unlike the way Mark Fisher (2009) says we speak about capitalism today—an unassailable, atmospheric force that has no true representative, no one to posit as an oppressor or exploiter--Bookchin states that dealing in abstract terms like the "Proletariat" and "Society" puts revolution on a scale that individuals cannot engage and reinforces "the…antithesis between the individual and the collectivity" ([1972] 1975:np) which works all too well in capitalism's favour. Drawing on both Latour and Bookchin, I began to wonder if it is the combination of unconscious, individual-level programming and large-scale rupture that may form the most adequate ground for revolution, clearing the way for fetishized behaviour that is nevertheless ethical, as in mutual aid.

Bookchin says that spontaneity or direct action is integral to "the very dialectic of self-consciousness and self-de-alienation that removes the subjective fetters established by the present order" ([1972] 1975:np). I look at spontaneity in times of disaster, particularly how the relief effort organized by Occupy Sandy responded to the necessity of the hurricane in New Jersey. Spontaneity, according to Bookchin,

> is behaviour, feeling and thought that is free of external constraint, of imposed restriction. It is self-controlled, internally controlled, behaviour, feeling, and thought, not an uncontrolled effluvium of passion and action. From the libertarian communist viewpoint, spontaneity implies a capacity in the individual to impose self-discipline and to formulate sound guidelines for social action. Insofar as the individual removes the fetters of domination that have stifled her or his self-activity, she or he is acting, feeling, and thinking spontaneously. ([1972] 1975:np)

As if predicting the efficacy of spontaneity in Occupy Sandy's relief program, he is clear that spontaneity (and consequently anarchism) "does not preclude organisation and structure. To the contrary, spontaneity ordinarily yields non-hierarchical forms of organisation, forms that are truly organic, self-created, and based on voluntarism" ([1972]

1975:np). Having said all this, we can now proceed to a discussion of Occupy Sandy and how it arguably embodies the principles I have described.

Occupy Sandy

Kropotkin puts the human tendency towards mutual aid in the context of an unexpected crisis:

> Suppose that one of our great cities, so egoistic in ordinary times, were visited tomorrow by some calamity—a siege, for instance—that same selfish city would decide the first needs to satisfy were those of the children and the aged. Without asking what service they had rendered, or were likely to render to society, it would first of all feed them. Then the combatants would be cared for irrespective of the courage or the intelligence which each has displayed, and thousands of men and women would outvie each other in unselfish devotion to the wounded. ([1892] 2007:77)

In the form of a hurricane rather than a military force, such a calamity befell the Eastern seaboard on October 29, 2012, hitting that most 'egoistic' city, New York, and devastating a great many others. The storm covered an area of 820 square miles when it made landfall in the state of New Jersey and affected 17 states in total, from power outages, to flooding, to total devastation (Webley 2012).

One organization that could be characterized by the 'unselfish devotion' described by Kropotkin is Occupy Sandy, who worked tirelessly and without compensation to offer relief to Sandy survivors, taking direct action in the days immediately after the storm struck and who are still working there to this day. Katherine Ramos, a member of Occupy Sandy New Jersey's PR and social media group, is clear that recovery efforts are ongoing, even if more established relief organizations have moved out of the affected areas (personal communication). More than a year after Hurricane Sandy hit the Atlantic coast, Occupy Sandy remains committed to the communities they helped to recover.

Moreover, and most interesting to our discussion today, is the fact that Sandy survivors now look to the Occupy organizers for other political needs, that they are speaking a new language steeped in the anarchist tradition, and have, in some cases, become organizers themselves.

The Occupy movement was born of an entirely man-made disaster, a response to the subprime mortgage crisis that erupted in 2008. Occupy Wall Street, its national, and international counterparts, raised a platform built on the principal of "collective responsibility located somewhere on the spectrum between self-interest and self-sacrifice, otherwise known as mutual aid" (Manski 2013:np). Although Occupy Wall Street identified the "root problem" of the crisis in the economic injustices of Wall Street, Rebecca Manski says the "solution-oriented half of the message got lost" (2013:np). However, Occupy's response to Hurricane Sandy suggests that a latent potential developed during the Occupy movement that was actualized in the relief effort. When Hurricane Sandy hit, Occupy activists were able to practice on a larger scale the potentialities that had formed and circulated within the occupied park spaces.

The surprising thing about Occupy Sandy was that this seemingly disorganized and pluralist platform could be the basis of a successful and efficient effort to get food and other supplies to storm victims before established organizations even hit the ground. Occupy Sandy was running distribution efforts on the first day of the storm; while FEMA only arrived on Day 3, and the Red Cross had only a small presence a week later (Manski 2013:np). Their approach to food was particularly interesting. Ramos described how Occupy organizers took the management of food donations to a different level: preparing, serving, and delivering hot meals to survivors who did not have electricity with which to

prepare any of the perishable or nonperishable items donated to them. At the peak of its service, Occupy Sandy was organizing the delivery of 20,000 hot meals a day (Manski 2013:np).

Manski (2013) suggests that FEMA and the Red Cross's inability to begin on the ground recovery efforts immediately is owed to their strict, hierarchical models. Indeed, one anecdote she relates is about a doctor who began working with Occupy Sandy as soon as he arrived offering help, while working with the Red Cross would have meant waiting several days as he underwent bureaucratic processing. In a similar case, a military cadet instructor who contacted the Red Cross was met with an "impenetrable wall of bureaucracy, even in the face of devastation. When the instructor and his cadets turned instead to Occupy Sandy, they were given an assignment within an hour of first contact" (Ohlheiser 2012:np). The difference between Occupy Sandy and FEMA or the Red Cross, according to Manski, is the former's "unaffiliated, porous, distributed leadership network…able to engage in mutual aid across communities" and "redistribute resources from one place to another according to shifting needs" (Manski 2013:np). Like FEMA, Occupy operated on a hub model of distribution, but one that organized donations, hot food, and volunteers in ways that catered directly to the needs of individual survivors.

Volunteers went as far into devastated areas as they could travel in vehicles and on foot, canvassing door-to-door for two things: to collect real data on the immediate needs of the survivors in that area, and to assemble more volunteers to continue the relief effort. Canvassers would return to their hubs with lists of willing volunteers, and lists of

needs, like diapers and baby food. Ramos explained how organizations like FEMA and

Red Cross would set up in less affected areas and have people come to them.

> For us, we were getting into our cars and trying to get as far into an area as we
> could, and walk the rest of the way. [We would climb] ten flights of stairs, because
> the elevator is broken, and go door to door and see if everyone's ok. And, 1.5 miles
> away, there's a Red Cross station but they weren't allowed to canvass. We did
> anyway.

As a result, Occupy organizers frequently came across neighbourhoods that had never

been contacted or visited by FEMA, where the survivors did not have the ability to reach

the larger organizations, lacking internet access and means of transportation to the hubs.

Ramos also explained that areas with sparser pockets of devastation were neglected by

the larger agencies in favour of areas of concentrated devastation.

Despite the risks involved with this canvassing method, Occupy organizers put

needs first and let it be the guide for their organizing efforts. Kropotkin states that it is a

lack of needs-based thinking in our knowledge-power structures that has allowed ethics

to be become a separate field of concern instead of the horizon of all others. Science,

Kropotkin says, "having lost sight of the needs of man, has strayed in absolutely the

wrong direction, and [its] organization is at fault" ([1892] 2007:203). He called for the

establishment of a new science called Social Physiology and defined it as "'*The Study of

the Needs of Humanity and of the Economic Means to satisfy them*'" (Kropotkin [1892]

2007:94). Although Kropotkin does not explicitly define this science beyond these

references, it is clear that he sees the focus on needs as the science's building block. He

also has difficulty defining it because this science can only mature in a post-capitalist

society, whereas now, the only needs capital serves is its own. Need should be the first

concern in any event. Hence the principal argument in Kropotkin's *The Conquest of*

Bread that managing food as an "object of first necessity" ([1892] 2007:47), must be the primary task during revolution or crisis. In taking immediate needs as priority, as well as their emphasis on face-to-face interaction through canvassing, Occupy Sandy arguably practiced a *Science of Social Physiology* ([1892] 2007:203), even moreso because their interpersonal methods accounted for needs that extend beyond the physical body to the interaction between bodies.

> That was the unique thing [about our method]. They got to see our faces…you get to see someone day in day out, [or] at least once a week, and they realize you aren't going anywhere. [It] makes folks more at ease, knowing that we were going to physically, actually be there to have a conversation and not just drop things off, or send them a cheque or a generalized letter about the situation. (Ramos)

Here, Ramos illustrates the survivors' need for human interaction and the sense of security that familiar faces and the constancy of community provide, something that the commodity form precludes. I think Kropotkin would agree that the methods of Occupy Sandy acted "much more in accordance with science than those of the economists who draw so many distinctions between instruments of production and articles of consumption" and that they understood that meeting needs "is just the point where the Revolution ought to begin" ([1892] 2007:93).

In addition to its canvassing effort, mutual aid and social physiology were employed in Occupy Sandy's methods of organizing volunteers and donations. Distributions of food and skills were managed using tools more commonly associated with capitalist supply chain management, but in ways that maintained the humanity of the transactions between organizers, volunteers, and survivors. In other words, the network of people and objects that forms the Occupy Sandy project supports the formation of

ethical bonds rather than being predicated on division and abstraction, in the vein of capitalist relations.

Occupy Sandy Logistics

In the early days of the Sandy relief effort, a familiar narrative emerged around the donations of unwanted materials. In an article entitled "Vases instead of food," the donation of unwanted items was referred to as a 'second disaster.' From the perspective of relief organizations, donations of anything other than necessities and, more specifically, other than money, take additional time to process. James McGowan, the associate director of a coalition of disaster relief groups stated that,

> Ad hoc relief groups need to make sure they are taking in only items that are requested and can be distributed. Money is the best because organizations don't have to pay to move it and can tailor spending to changing needs…Transporting and distributing a simple donated can of food can be $15 to $25. (Mulvihill 2012:np)

Melanie Pipkin of the American Red Cross also stated that "well-intentioned, yet inappropriate donations can divert relief groups and governments" (Mulvihill 2012:np). Even in moments of crisis, capital aims to reestablish itself, which the focus on monetary donations allows it to do. Since the relief work of government agencies seeks to return devastated areas back to the status quo, which is likely as a site of capital's circulation, they appeal to the universal equivalent as the means of access to necessary items. As a result, collective responses to disaster become divided and dehumanized by the money-form and the atomized nature of capitalist exchange. I should also note that currently, the Governor of New Jersey, Chris Christie, is under investigation for possibly channeling Sandy relief money into political ad campaigns, and threatening to withhold funds from

municipalities whose mayors do not support his projects (Katz 2014; Frates 2014). A can

of food could never be so two-faced as the money form allows us to be.

Occupy Sandy also worked with monetary donations, but preferred to concentrate

their efforts on tangible items, which they redistributed from their central hubs. Ramos

described a previously operating soup kitchen in Newark which became a 24-hour hub

where 50-foot trucks would deliver supplies and donations. "It wasn't that big of a space,

but donations would come in and be gone within the hour…It was really, really important

to have a central location for these deliveries" (Ramos). Occupy Sandy was supported by

transport workers under the Transport Workers Union of Philadelphia, which contributed

warehouse and dispatch services to the effort, likely alleviating the allegedly high costs of

transporting a single can of food to those in need ("Unions begin supporting" 2012:np).

As I mentioned previously, Occupy Sandy took their approach to food donations an

ethical step further by preparing and delivering hot meals to survivors using a donated U-

Haul truck, nicknamed 'U-Hungry,' which delivered over 300 hot meals a day for the

first four months of recovery. Survivors and volunteers would also congregate and eat

food prepared in the kitchens at the hubs. Reflecting on the claim that it can cost $25 to

move one canned food donation, Ramos said,

> If you take that can and put it in a kitchen, in a hub, and you feed not one family,
> but four other ones, it definitely stretches out that particular donation…Yeah, it
> takes effort and energy on the part of the people organizing it, but we're all doing it
> as volunteers, so maybe it costs $25 because you're paying whoever it is to do it,
> which is interesting to me; but we were doing it with no payroll, only the time we
> had to be able to do it.

Here, the mediation of the wage does not organize the relations of organizers, volunteers,

and survivors. The hubs operate on the communist model of 'from each according to his

abilities, to each according to his needs.' Later, I give a more detailed description of how Occupy Sandy's system of volunteer recruitment embodies Marx's popular slogan.

To facilitate donations of nonperishable items for survivors and supplies for relief volunteers, Occupy Sandy made the novel decision to use Amazon gift registries ("Occupy Sandy data project" 2013:np). If you visit the as-yet live links for the registries, you will see amusingly that the requests come as if from would-be spouses. For example, the heading on one page reads 'Occupy Sandy and Staten Island's Wedding Registry.' The 'Occupy Sandy and Occupy Sandy' registry (Figure 1) lists the couple's style as "warm" and "non-perishable." Of course, the requested items on the Occupy Sandy registries were not made by an abstract couple. Rather, they were gleaned directly from the forms volunteers filled out during face-to-face canvassing efforts. The Amazon registry platform is, in Amazon's own words, "universal" because people can add any item available for purchase on Amazon to their wish list ("Registry FAQ" 2013). This mechanism allowed Occupy Sandy to make requests that ranged from infant formula and teddy bears, to insulation and reciprocating saws.
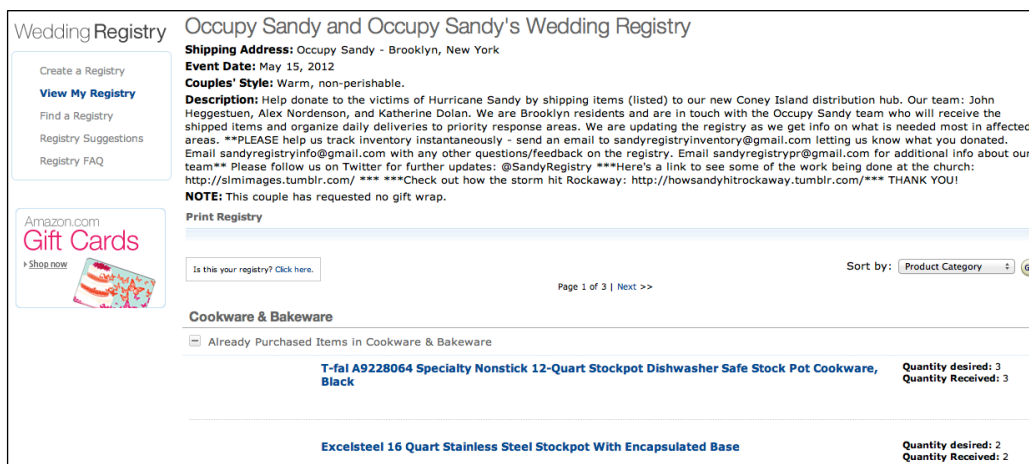

Figure 1. Screenshot of Occupy Sandy wedding registry on Amazon.com.

Whereas a monetary donation may be universal in its equivalent nature, the gift registry mechanism allows people to connect a requested item for donation with the real need it meets: requests for garbage bags, bleach and mold remediation products, kitchen equipment, and other household items tell the story of Sandy's devastation; while requests for baby food remind us of the more vulnerable people among the survivors. In this way, the registry allows something to persist between people which commodity exchange does not. For each person donating, there is a stronger sense of a need, a clearer image of the relationship they have to the survivor. Though a capitalist exchange occurs through the Amazon platform, as a donation and a gift, the use-value becomes a substrate for something more than exchange-value.

In addition to appropriating Amazon registries to its own use, Occupy Sandy made inroads towards adapting enterprise resource planning (ERP) software to their needs. ERPs are used for logistical coordination of resources, production, and distribution of products by for-profit and non-profit organizations alike. Occupy Sandy built its environment using the SahanaEden open source ERP platform intended for humanitarian projects and crisis management, which was developed and deployed following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. I was granted access to the test environment for Sandy Relief, where some of the data is still housed. The logistics of food distribution seems not to have been carried out through the Sandy Relief site, instead being handled on the fly at the various distribution hubs set up throughout the affected areas. However, developers have said that it will be incorporated infrastructurally for future projects, which includes more focus on localized, cooperative food production and distribution.

A far more significant application used by the group was CiviCRM, constituent relation management software, where survivor needs and volunteer abilities and availability were married into more organized and efficient assignments than could possibly be done with phone-to-phone data collection. In both cases, paper canvass forms filled out during face-to-face conversations in the affected areas were important sources of data. Through online and paper canvass forms, organizers solicited information about areas of volunteer ability and would sort tasks among people according to preference where possible. Tasks could include donation receipt and sorting; cooking; canvassing; as well as maintenance and repair, especially mold remediation and 'mucking out' homes. Organizers also ran all of this information through a database that matched skills up with specific areas of need, in specific locations, which made larger scale recruitment and deployment possible. Through this application, people were assigned tasks or aid according to their abilities, and according to their needs, as the communist saying goes. In contrast to the wage paradigm, the mutual aid paradigm potentially allows for the formation of multiple subjectivities, as the opportunity to form diverse relations is greater. For example, the line between volunteer, survivor, and organizer was blurred, as survivors became engaged in the relief effort, first, on their own streets and in their own neighbourhoods, but eventually branching out, and in some cases, becoming a fixture in the organizing effort itself (Ramos). These shifting subjectivities are an aspect of Occupy Sandy's flat or horizontal organization, with numerous actor-networks working in tandem, and through different distributions of skills and resources.

Ramos said that the early days of distribution and volunteer management were very ad hoc, but took on a more systematic fashion as they moved into hub spaces,

mostly churches and veterans halls, and incorporated logistical applications. Surprisingly, social media would be the last site of information exchange in Occupy Sandy's logistical network, where focused donation requests and locations of need were advertised to donors and volunteers. Occupy Sandy is also making the effort to organize data from their relief initiatives in order to benefit other organizations and inform future emergency response. In a call out to programmers and hackers for International Data Day 2013, Occupy Sandy organizers expressed their intent to "collect, digitize and pre-process data that includes canvasing forms, Amazon registry records, and more…so that [the] data can be used to inform civil action, community initiatives and research more broadly" ("Occupy Sandy data project" 2013). As became clear from my conversation with Ramos, Occupy Sandy is a future-oriented project.

Organizers, volunteers, and survivors initially set out to address immediate need on a large, fractured scale. The networks they developed and the transactions that form and sustain them, however, are still in motion. Occupy is still operating in New Jersey, where residents now see the organizers as willing and compassionate aides, whom they can contact for issues directly and not-so-directly related to the hurricane. Homes are still 'mucked up' and rife with mold. Repairs are also still being organized on an in-kind basis, giving out-of-work tradesmen meaningful work—and, of course, hot meals. But while long-term recovery efforts continue, advocacy work has also begun: community gardens have been planted in Keansburg, Gainsbourg, and Newark, and more are planned; organizers are also helping Hoboken renters push back against plans to demolish public housing and replace it with high-rent apartments (Ramos). Sustainability has become a keyword in post-hurricane conversations with residents, but in terms of

community stability and self-organization. "We're having those conversations and talking about food…sustainability of self … of the environment, and sustainability of the community, because it's all tied in" (Ramos). The significance of Occupy Sandy's impact is summed up by Ramos in a new mentality:

> this shift of 'let's call the government' to 'let's call each other; let's build a network with each other…that's been driven home, and people are really really focused on how they did it on their own, with minimal resources…Occupy Sandy has been able to move over 300,000 volunteers with no reliance on a big name, with no reliance on specific funding…it was just a network of people.

When I thanked Ramos for her contribution and expressed embarrassment about turning a recent crisis into an academic subject, she brought the conversation back to the network. Our conversation was just another transfer of knowledge and potential, another transaction that can support the existing network and open it to other networks. In other words, myself and the few people who will hear this can learn from Occupy Sandy. After all, "climate change; we're just getting the first strokes of it; once this stuff happens and continues to happen, this ability to rely on your community members, that's what we're really trying to accomplish more than anything else" (Ramos). The interest in creating post-recovery groups to lay the groundwork for future crisis relief is not surprising given the current state of climate change, with Occupy Sandy providing an excellent example of how successful such a network can be. Ramos told me of at least four groups that had formed in New Jersey since the Sandy relief effort slowed down, showing that the momentum of their autonomous, community-based organization is being carried forward.

Again, to be prepared is not necessarily to be paranoid. Kropotkin imagines a revolutionary scenario where this sort of foreplanning puts power in the hands of the

people to organize themselves and their food supply. He sets the scene in France, a

country whose revolutionary history he made a study of:

> In twenty-hours the revolted town or district will know what Paris has not found
> out yet, in spite of its statistical committees…the quantity of provisions it contains.
> In forty-eight hours millions of copies will be printed of the tables giving a
> sufficiently exact account of the available food, the places where it is stored, and
> the means of distribution. ([1892] 2007:103)

Although couched in the language of revolution, Kropotkin's words still ring true for

crisis recovery: "If the coming Revolution is to be a Social Revolution it will be

distinguished from all former uprisings not only by its aim, but also by its methods. To

attain a new end, new means are required" ([1892] 2007:95). Under the right application,

one can imagine that software like CiviCRM and Sandy Relief could contribute to what

Kropotkin describes as "the most favourable conditions for giving society the greatest

amount of useful products with the least waste of human energy" ([1892] 2007:172). This

is where we must consider the prefigurative aspect of Occupy Sandy. Of course, nation

states prepare for crises, and have the details of food supply, etc., in their possession, but

the majority of people impacted by such crises do not have access to it. "The ideal of

modern industry is a child tending a machine that he cannot and must not understand"

(Kropotkin [1898] 1994:209). Such is the effect of capital's global distribution. Even

when we most need immediate control of our bodies, such as in a survival situation, we

cannot gain access to our own struggle and must be saved. We are reliant on

organizations like FEMA instead of being able to organize ourselves, but movements like

Occupy are beginning to see how building infrastructure for mutual aid could make all

the difference in a future moment of crisis. And the effect is not lost on the hurricane

survivors: "mutual aid, is one of those words that people weren't necessarily using

before, and now I hear it all over the place…it changes the narrative and it also opens

people's perspective" (Ramos).

Conclusion

Cindy Milstein calls mutual aid a social relation (2012). Likewise, Kropotkin

holds that it, more than competition, has allowed animal and human societies to

reproduce ([1902] 2006). While we have been taught, that in the absence of the state or

the market, a vicious battle for necessities will ensue, Kropotkin insists that in the face of

adversity, the human developed and reproduced through "social qualities, which led him

to give and receive aid from his fellow men" (Kropotkin [1902] 2006:91). Occupy Sandy,

the thousands of volunteers it mobilized, and most of us, live in a network of capital

relations that reproduces itself according to the law of value. Events like Hurricane Sandy

break this law by temporarily arresting the network in its distributions, during which time

new relations may form.

The humanist in Kropotkin posits mutual aid almost as a spirit running through

human history, activated at times of crisis. We may think of it as a fetish or kind of

programming, the origins of which are as mystified as human origin itself. Kropotkin

describes a battle going on in the human between this ancient programming and the

'individualistic creed' embodied in capital relations:

> In our mutual relations every one of us has his moments of revolt against the
> fashionable individualistic creed of the day[;] and action in which men are guided
> by their mutual aid inclinations constitute so great a part of our daily intercourse
> that if a stop to such actions could be put…all further ethical progress would be
> stopped at once. ([1902] 2006:189)

The work of Occupy Sandy has shown that ethical potential is not completely lost to us. Moreover, Occupy's attempt to disrupt capital's network of relations in 2011 may have begun another new Enlightenment of the sort Bookchin describes—a latent tendency towards mutual aid which Hurricane Sandy actualized. It would be easy to trace the ethical potentialities embodied in the recovery effort to an actor-network including Zucotti, its global counterparts, thousands of voices and bodies coming into tangible spaces, refusing to be divided by capital and it structures. Yet, the historical origin of such events are impossible to fully map, as there will always be silences or absent narratives among the visual and audible traces of the movement. Mystification forms in these silences and absences, never speaking its name, though it may move us. Indeed this is how the commodity fetish operates.

The Occupy volunteers were versed in revolutionary literature and practices, and so, Hurricane Sandy did not necessarily represent a shift in their thinking, though it was certainly an event drawing their concern and giving shape to the potentials they formed in 2011. The disaster's paradigm-changing force is more aptly represented by the survivor's adoption of anarchist or communist principals, following Occupy's example, but also in the recognition of how a dearth in community infrastructure leaves individuals prone in and to crisis. The subsequent projects Occupy has initiated or assisted with in New Jersey are oriented towards a future where decision-making is not only organized on a national or global level (Hornborg 2010), but brought back to a human scale, one more conducive to autonomous, ethical activity. Such is the goal of projects like community gardens.

Though regional control of food distribution cannot be solved with one or even a few gardens, it is something that the New Jersey experiment could inspire. "What we

want to do is step away from…this national structural thing, and things finally trickling down to the community; it really needs to be rooted in the community," says Ramos. While the gardens are currently bringing people together in physical work and in conversation, to form stronger community bonds, the garden itself may become the mediating object that 'programs' the community towards a more ethical future, in a similar, but completely opposite fashion to the way that capital's material mediation diverts us from one. Ramos stated further, that in her experience, ideas for community engagement or autonomy were more easily adopted in devastated areas than ones where infrastructure was not compromised, confirming the power of disaster beyond its initially destructive aspects.

   If groups like Occupy Sandy succeed in establishing greater networks of community relations, we may find that practicing an ethics will become easier, as the structures around us afford more ability to do so. In the post-capitalist future, if it is an ethical one, we will have forgotten the origins of such structures and will reproduce them unconsciously. For example, regional and sustainable food production will have shed its source in self-reflexive community gardens, having done the work of bonding people and bringing us into a more ethical relationship with our food sources. An ethical fetish may come to oversee social relations as the commodity fetish does now, silently and nameless. I hope we can discuss today how we might prepare ourselves and foster our potentials in pursuit of this future.

   Thank you.

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