

Caring geographies: The COVID-19 interregnum and a return to mutual aid

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Abstract

Mutual aid is the fundamental basis of all human societies, an understanding that is exemplified with striking clarity during times of crises. The coronavirus pandemic has brought the caring geographies of mutual aid into sharp relief with the failings of both capitalism and the state. Beyond fear and uncertainty, this commentary examines the one single theme that has resonated with the COVID-19 pandemic more than all others: care.

Keywords

care, cooperation, coronavirus, COVID-19, mutual aid, reciprocity

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic began to cast its long shadow across the globe, our communities appeared to be spiraling into desperation and doubt. Businesses were shuttered, entire sectors decimated, people were laid off en masse, and essential items like toilet paper vanished from store shelves. Yet in spite of these monumental and in many cases life-changing disruptions, there is significant reason to consider this strange moment of uncertainty as one of possibility and hope. If you look closely at the human spirit, listen carefully to our collective heartbeat as a species, and learn from our shared past, such optimism is not difficult to find. It is illuminated by the everyday acts of care and a proclivity for compassion that radiate in spite of this pandemic (Lawson, 2007), igniting the prospect that this could be the beginning of a great restoration for human societies. Not a return to Keynesianism, to the

Middle Ages, to Classical Antiquity, or even to the Stone Age. The presently unfolding phase is a revisiting of something much older, enduring, and infinitely more integral to our wellbeing than these brief instants of our history.

The resurgence of reciprocity that we are witnessing in every nook and cranny of the planet is a clarion call for change. It serves as a testament to the fact that the selfishness of capitalism was never going to produce a world in which we could find comfort. It was always out to strip us of our humanity, alienate us from all other life on this planet, and serve as a catalyst for conflict. As people reconnect in spite of the lockdowns and social distancing

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between us by lending a hand wherever it is needed most, we are bearing witness to and actively participating in the reconstruction of the unshakable and fundamental basis of all life on this planet: mutual aid (Kropotkin, [1902] 2008).

The heart of all life

Historically, the state and capitalism worked in concert to destroy mutual aid, largely through the imposition of private property (Springer, 2017). Instead of tightly knit community bonds, the state sought to replace these affinities with a nationalist allegiance, a condition not rooted in an ethic of compassion and care, but rather in obedience and othering (Gelderloos, 2017; Scott, 2017). By transforming exchange into a transaction of assumed value relative to scarcity, as opposed to the former practice of reciprocity according to need that human societies hinged upon, capitalism worked to eradicate mutual aid over the course of several centuries. While capitalism and the state appear as the dominant mediators of our everyday lives, and they certainly manipulate our capacities and constrain our thinking in profound and unsettling ways (Barrera and Ince, 2016), they have not succeeded in annihilating mutual aid. It has continued in myriad and mundane forms, such as watching your neighbor's kids, car pooling, caring for a pet, passing the salt when asked, taking a picture for a stranger, and through the conviviality of virtually every friendship that has ever existed (Springer, 2016). Mutual aid is just what we do. Thus the reason for this resilience is quite simply owing to the fact that mutual aid is actually the wellspring of all life on this planet, both human and nonhuman. In times of crises, mutual aid is pragmatic and comes to define our responses at a community level and as a species precisely because it is the most paramount element of our survival. As Peter Kropotkin ([1902] 2008) recognized, mutual aid is promoted through natural selection and is a factor in evolution.

The idea that survival of the fittest alone shapes the trajectory of evolution has always been a willful misrepresentation of Darwin's work, demonstrating how scientific discourse is never immune to politics. Kropotkin was averse to such a reading precisely

because it was used to legitimize capitalism (McKay, 2014). His life's work was dedicated to explaining how cooperation was essential to prosperity within the animal kingdom, pivotal in many Indigenous and early European societies, vital to the organization of medieval guilds, and was routinely practiced among the poor as an essential means to ensuring their survival (Kinna, 2016; Morris, 2018). Kropotkin never denied that competition exists within the natural world or even among humans. Rather, he emphasized that cooperation was equally, and, in point of fact, even more important in the perpetuation of life. When we consider this from a multispecies perspective, it should become obvious. No single species, even an apex predator, can live without a reliance on other species, even if the connection is only as a source of food. Life itself is an intricate and beautifully complex web of mutual aid relations. While individual members of a species may compete over resources in times of scarcity, even for solitary animals, it is more in their benefit to ensure that other members survive since this is the only way to guarantee the continuity of their species (Dugatkin, 1997). In this moment of COVID-19, we are seeing how it is in fact reciprocity that is saving us from complete catastrophe, and we are beginning to understand that we have the ability to expand our circle of care beyond family and friends. Such activity is vital to the functioning of our societies and even our survival as a species. We would have never made it this far into the human odyssey without mutual aid.

Life beyond the metropolis

We could treat COVID-19 as a message from the planet. It might serve as a warning that the scales have been tipped too far in the favor of a single species. Given how much we have taken from the Earth in our attempts to force it to heel to our will, we might even humble ourselves into a recognition that perhaps we should have seen this coming. Capitalism is a system that deliberately destroys the planet to service the hubris of humanity. It produces scarcity as a means to empower some, while disempowering others (Brand and Wissen, 2018). It revolves around the production of deprivation and

desire. It is the creation of inequity and the primary source of all conflict in this world. It treats the natural world not as a source of communion, but as a site of extraction and subsequent disposal (Dunlap and Jakobsen, 2019). There is only so much turmoil we can generate before we inspire revolt, which applies as much to our own agency within existing political systems as it does to the agency of nature within our ecosystems. Through the wholesale destruction of the natural world and the profound intensification of animal agriculture, we laid the groundwork for the virus to make the jump to humans. And through four decades of neoliberal austerity and the fervent roll back of health care (Cahil and Konings, 2017), we created a perfect storm wherein it could proliferate. But what stings the most is that none of this was inevitable. We chose to do this to ourselves. We welcomed it by empowering both states and capitalism, which from their very first breath have worked in unison to beguile us and reinforce our separation from each other and from the natural world. Instead of symbiosis and synergy, we adopted hierarchy and rank order, a gamble that now manifests itself in the form of some arguing that it is better to sacrifice our elders on the altar of Wall Street than it is to stop the madness of capitalist production.

Profit over people is the true pandemic. It is an affront to what has, up until now, ensured our survival. Mutual aid is infused into our DNA (Bowles and Gintis, 2011). It is the glue that keeps human societies together. Every other economic model that has ever been devised fails to understand that ‘the mediator between head and hands must be the heart’ (Lang, 1927). This notion is most strongly evidenced by the love that a mother has for her child and the selflessness of her routines. It is the robust emotional connection of one to another that is paramount to our endurance as a species (Kujala and Danielsbacka, 2018). The outpouring of generosity we are witnessing is simply humanity responding in the best way that it knows how. It is a throwback to time immemorial, and marks a profound revival of mutual aid in our political awareness. Humans are irrevocably social animals (Ostrom and Walker, 2005), which is one of the reasons why this virus hurts so much. It separates us. But the quarantines

will subside and the isolation will eventually end. When the tempest of this virus finally passes, we will look back with bewilderment at the world we left behind. How could we not notice that the decades of disemboweling healthcare under a bad neoliberal dream were only going to leave us vulnerable? How could we not see that our leaders were little more than bumbling fools and talking heads that never had a real plan? How could we not recognize that centuries of plundering the environment wasn’t going to come back to bite us in the most profound way?

Conclusion

In the shell of the old, we are rediscovering that all of the skills, ingenuity, strength, and innovation that we are able to muster as a species depend not upon the state, not upon capitalism, and not upon the command of any authority, but on our collectivity. It is the caring geographies of togetherness that make us who we are, and it is reciprocity that has brought the human journey to the present moment (White and Williams, 2017). The COVID-19 interregnum may well be remembered as the moment that marks the transition toward recovering a world that has always been with us. The silver lining to this virus, then, is that we are reawakening to the possibilities of our fundamental connection to one another. It would seem that the only thing that was needed to bring us back together was something that has threatened to keep us apart.

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