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Solidarity at a Time of Risk: Vulnerability and the Turn to Mutual Aid

ABSTRACT

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of mutual aid was rapidly taken up as an ideal model for solidarity. This paper examines why mutual aid may have found such popularity in this moment by examining the affective underpinnings of risk, vulnerability and the imperative to care. Rather than celebrate the turn to mutual aid as the best path towards justice, however, the paper suggests that we think strategically about the models we use for survival, by considering mutual aid as one strategy among many for generating our responses to the harms that predate, and are intensified through, the pandemic.

KEYWORDS: solidarity; mutual aid; risk; vulnerability; dispossession; care; affect

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours des premiers mois de la pandémie de COVID-19, le concept d'aide mutuel a rapidement été transformé en modèle idéal de solidarité. Cet article examine pourquoi l'aide mutuel serait devenu aussi populaire en ce moment en examinant les assises affectives du risque, de la vulnérabilité et l'impératif de se sentir concerné. Par contre, au lieu de célébrer le virage vers l'aide mutuel en tant que meilleur chemin vers la justice, cet article suggère que nous pensions stratégiquement aux modèles utilisés pour survivre, en considérant l'aide mutuel comme une stratégie parmi tant d'autres pour générer nos réponses aux maux qui existaient avant la pandémie et qui sont intensifiés par celle-ci.

MOTS CLÉS : solidarité; aide mutuelle; risque; vulnérabilité; dépossession; soins; affect

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I. A Time of Risk

> Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming.
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> –Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*

We live in a time of risk. The language of risk has been a ubiquitous feature of life under late capitalism. Risk society, a term coined by German sociologist Ulrich Beck, describes the conditions of insecurity that define modernization (Beck 1986, 21). The backdrop of risk has only intensified into the 21st century as we are reminded of the various threats to human survival, from climate catastrophe, to war, to economic collapse and the countless other ways that we might experience or anticipate an interruption to life as we know it. Notwithstanding the series of crises that have already impacted countless communities over the last decades—such as Hurricane Katrina or the fentanyl crises—that might otherwise signal what Berlant (2011) refers to as the ordinary unfolding of neoliberalism's power to render precarious; the pandemic has featured high on the predictive horizon of crises that will threaten global human life.

The current pandemic is both far more terrifying and more mundane than what we anticipated. From speculative panic over how contagious the virus is, to the necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) of pervasive racial, classed and ableist implications in both mortality rates and spread in communities already vulnerable through overcrowded housing, precarious employment, immigration status and police violence (Lopez and Ndiaye 2020; Luscombe and McClelland 2020; Waldron 2020), these times confront us with both new and long-standing fears over human security and survival. Critiques of systemic and structural oppression have seen a renewed call for justice in the form of universal basic income, the Green New Deal, and prison abolition; but there have also been calls for an array of strategies that range from self-discipline and risk tolerance (Dacker 2020), to destigmatization and harm reduction (Marcus 2020; Wilson 2020), to care collectives and anarchist affinity groups (Boodman 2020; CrimethInc. 2020; Fukui 2020; Shotwell 2020). It should come as no surprise that, faced with the current pandemic, attempts to grapple with risk and vulnerability have turned to models of solidarity. What is perhaps unique in this moment, however, is the rapid shift towards articulations of solidarity through *mutual aid*, a concept describing collaborative human survival, as the foremost model for how best to enact solidarity during this time.

II. Mutual Aid at a Time of Risk

> We are inescapably entwined and entangled with others, even when we cannot track or directly perceive this entanglement.

–Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*

Mutual aid, a term introduced by the Russian anarchist thinker Peter Kropotkin at the turn of the 20th century, outlined a model of natural and human evolution built in collaboration, solidarity and what he called a "Mutual Aid instinct in Nature" (1902: 5). Rejecting Social Darwinist arguments that extended theories of competition in natural selection onto humans through eugenics, Kropotkin outlined his observations and analysis of mutual aid as a foundational evolutionary feature of life across the human/animal divide. Kropotkin's work has long been featured as a core

text in anarchist thinking, and has informed contemporary scholarship on social and political entanglement (Shotwell 2016); however, the concept of mutual aid, applied to 21st-century activism, looks quite different from the model outlined over a century ago.[1] Today, a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic, mutual aid has been mobilized to mean everything from models for social organization in domestic survival clusters (pods, bubbles, affinity groups, care circles, containers, homes, chosen families, etc.) to wide networks of exchange on social networking groups, where strangers are invited to post needs and offers for aid and assistance during the pandemic.

Although the concept of mutual aid has long been in circulation among anarchist and abolitionist political projects, it has been taken up broadly across political and ideological frameworks (Spade 2020), including as a model for entrepreneurial collaboration (Sarkar et al. 2019). Since the start of the pandemic, tensions have also emerged in different articulations of mutual aid, such as in critiques of the mainstreaming of mutual aid projects through the launching of new charitable mutual aid organizations (Tolentino 2020). Reviewing the wave of material published online on mutual aid since the start of COVID-19, the turn to care in articulations of solidarity have been particularly striking. Prompts to care for the self, to care for others, to develop care plans, and to provide community care have been central to attempts to make sense of how to survive both the pandemic *and* social distancing measures. The relational aspect of care of the self, both for oneself and for the good of others,[2] is magnified in a pandemic, where self-management has become a key form of viral containment outside of more authoritarian responses.

We were already poised by the climate of risk to rapidly offer care as the pandemic hit. The call to care illustrates the conditions of vulnerability that the pandemic instills in populations across socio-economic and political divides. However, the atmosphere of vulnerability, rendered possible through the pervasive culture of precarity and insecurity that stages global life under neoliberalism, predates the pandemic. This collusion between vulnerability and care may, in one sense, be a radical act, such as with Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, who argue for what they call "radical care" as "a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds" (2020, 2). Their special issue of *Social Text* illustrates the positive and negative side to care, including how care can be mobilized to reinforce power (ibid.).

III. Vulnerability at a Time of Risk

> We are interdependent beings whose pleasure and suffering depend from the start on a sustained social world, a sustaining environment.

–Judith Butler, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*

If there is one thing shared during this pandemic, it is the feeling of vulnerability, even if such vulnerability is structurally different across those asymmetrically positioned within systems of power. The shared feeling, what scholars of affect

might call the affective attunement of the event (Massumi 2011)—in this case, the pandemic—does not simply render us all equal but reorganizes our affective experiences towards an attunement to vulnerability, what Massumi calls a "*differential* involvement in the same event. A relational sharing of what comes between, from different angles of insertion into a single unfolding" (2011, 112). Thinking about the shared state of vulnerability during these times can help illustrate how our responses to the pandemic signal different collective attempts to recuperate from the loss of autonomy and containment that are undermined by viral contagion. In her work on affect, Teresa Brennan argues that, like the concept of individualism, the concept of self-containment is historically constituted (2004, 2). Brennan's work on affect transmission proposes that the development of the modern Western subject has been predicated on "securing a private fortress, personal boundaries, against the unsolicited emotional intrusions of the other" (2004, 15). The threat of transmission, in the affective sense, is intimately tied to the biological for Brennan, who proposes that "social interaction shapes biology" (2004, 74). Vulnerability, in this way, is as much interactional and social as it is contextual.

Conditions of vulnerability are not solely related to the risk associated with viral contagion; they are also produced by the risk associated with the erosion of social welfare systems (Bird 2020; Waldron 2020), what Eva Boodman (2020) calls "the security discourse for health and care [that] places it squarely within the context of broader formations of power that predate the pandemic." The mix of society attuned to risk (risk society), populations attuned to anxiety over self-containment (the affective state of modernity), economic and social precarity (social welfare erosion and neoliberalization) and viral contagion (pandemic) frames the interactional and social context that serves as the backdrop for the advancement of mutual aid as a model for collective survival. Perhaps compensating for the individualism of modernity under neoliberalism, mutual aid offers some optimism for how to recuperate what Alexis Shotwell suggests "we have lost [in the] forms of collective care, however imperfect, from publicly-funded school to play groups to finding emotional resources in quick contact with acquaintances and beyond" (Shotwell 2020). Predisposed to anxiety over self-containment, the threat of both the transmission of the virus *and* the rendering of the body as vulnerable due to the social ruptures to daily life have made care for the body—both collective and individual—a primary fixation for pandemic survival. Mutual aid, a concept premised on the fundamental nature of collaboration for species survival, speaks directly to the compensation for vulnerability through collectivity, mutuality and interdependency during these times.

As vulnerable groups are made more vulnerable and privileged groups experience the panic of a new kind of vulnerability whereby their freedom of mobility is reduced and restricted in order to "flatten the curve," the contradictions in experiences of precarity and vulnerability offer a confounding landscape for mutual aid projects. In part, the wide appeal of mutual aid simultaneous to the rise of protests opposing social distancing measures illustrates the dual edges of how people respond to vulnerability. Although we might imagine left and right responses as diametrically

opposed (or as differentially high- and low-risk tolerance approaches to viral spread), both signal a parallel attempt to compensate for our shared, yet differential, attunement to vulnerability. We can find similar parallels within the array of appeals to mutual aid, such as the exchange-based social networking systems or the redistributive models of fundraising campaigns (which verge on the charitable model) versus the anarchist models of collective affinity and network formations that call for durational forms of social rearrangement (CrimethInc. 2020). Such contradictions are to be expected as populations are confronted with the shared vulnerability produced by the threat of viral contagion and the differential vulnerability created through the socio-economic conditions of workplace closures, income inequality, housing insecurity, systemic racism, uneven access to health care and basic needs, access to potable water and increased exposure to domestic violence. That vulnerability, while asymmetrical and pre-constituted by structural and systemic inequality, is also a collective experience can be difficult to contend with during a crisis.

In their published conversations on the political, Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou suggest that there is a "double valence" to dispossession: first, as a limit to the autonomy of the subject; and second, as subjugation, through imposed injuries enacted on the subject—although more precisely—on populations (2013, 2–3). In being made vulnerable by a pandemic, the collective experience of vulnerability to the risk of contraction is mediated by the bifurcated vulnerabilities of two different kinds of dispossession. In the first sense, we find those who experience social distancing measures as intolerable, such as in the case of people who parrot the slogan "the cure is worse than the disease" or, more subtly, those who fail at or refuse participation in social distancing imperatives. In the other sense, vulnerability is accentuated by the structural dispossession of mass populations whose subjugation is intensified by the socio-economic conditions shaping state responses to the virus. I put these two forms of vulnerability together for a reason, because to understand what solidarity work entails during a time of risk requires an attentiveness to the collective *and* asymmetrical ways that people are rendered vulnerable by the pandemic. Vulnerability is both a construct and a psychic state. Because, as Butler puts it, "our interdependency establishes our vulnerability to social forms of deprivation" (2013, 5), gestures towards solidarity during pandemic times and requires that we capture both those who are structurally and psychically rendered vulnerable in models of survival. Despite the uneven distribution of vulnerability, times of crisis render urgently the need for solidarity across differences.

IV. Solidarity at a Time of Risk

> Rather than pretend union, we would acknowledge that we are divided and must develop strategies to overcome fears, prejudices, resentments, competitiveness, etc.
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> –bell hooks, "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women"

The turn to mutual aid signals an optimistic attachment to what Berlant calls "the activity of world-making," which entails the "negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, and incoherently" (2010, 14). While mutual aid may be one model for building solidarity rooted in models of care, solidarity is itself a risky endeavour, because our desire for solidarity can exceed our capacity to attend to how power circulates and is mobilized. As hooks (1986) reminds us, the underlying asymmetries of power render solidarity vulnerable to the divisions we may be reluctant to confront. If we take mutual aid as an ideal model for envisioning a way forward through social distancing measures and wide-scale harm caused by the virus itself—and structural injustices that cause premature death—then the hope and optimism that mutual aid provide speaks more to our desires than our capacities to remake the world on the brink of major structural change. This is not to suggest that we abandon mutual aid as a model or political project; rather, I am proposing that we approach our path towards world-making with strategic optimism.

Rather than turn to optimism to hope for a utopian future, strategic optimism might look like a form of motivation or orientation towards different approaches to our movements, tempered by the complexity of how, and with whom, we build solidarity. As an attempt to collectivize the project for "doing good" through inter-dependency, solidarity is also a vulnerable practice within these risky times. This is because solidarity serves two functions: first, to repair the subject's own feelings of vulnerability by acting against the dispossession experienced by the pandemic; and second, to transform the conditions of vulnerability produced through structural dispossession. These two facets of solidarity are necessary to motivate those who mobilize during a pandemic, but they also explain the limits of solidarity as a vector for imagining a world shaped through justice. Because "all attachments are opti-mistic" (Berlant 2010, 23), the turn to visions of survival that promise to recuperate the human capacity to live interdependently during a time when physical proximity makes entire populations vulnerable to rapid viral spread is seductive. The desire to overcome isolation and individualism—two facets of neoliberal modernity—illus-trates why we are thirsty for an encompassing and optimistic model for how to live interdependently, despite the structural and viral threats to life.

Yet solidarity is not such a simple task. Despite our good intentions, deploying the language of solidarity, care and mutual aid does not ensure our projects will not fall into the traps of privatization, competition and individualism, not because solidar-ity, care and mutual aid are inadequate, but because the strength of neoliberal ideo-logical framing persists. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, neoliberal ideologies translate politically resistant discourses and radical critique into consumable com-modities (2013, 974). Because neoliberalism leaves the global majority vulnerable to economic precarity and social isolation through rampant individualism, dislocation through labour migration, and un-unionized workforces of flexible and shift-based labour, even our most idealistic models are at risk of falling into the trap of what Mohanty calls a "politics of representation or a politics of presence" (2013, 972).

The need to figure out how to survive together is both urgent and pressing. As months of social isolation wreak havoc on the emotional and psychic lives of people deprived of human contact, racial and class injustice render the virus more lethal to communities denied proper healthcare, and inconsistent public health policies leave us confused about best practices to contain spread after loosening distancing measures, the turn to mutual aid clearly illustrates the importance of collective and collaborative models of survival beyond those provided by the state. To survive the intensification of vulnerability induced by the pandemic, we need space to play with different ways for how to build solidarity effectively. Mutual aid may be one model for doing so, but regardless of what we call it, at its core this work needs to be adaptive and flexible. To live and survive interdependently, we need approaches that rely more on contextuality, specificity, and positionality than we need to seek comfort in universalizing models.

Notes on the Contributor

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Notes

1. For Kropotkin (1902), mutual aid is a natural evolutionary feature across human history, not a specific set of practices, which he identifies across historic and early 20th-century social formations such as communal land (117) and communal possession (125) to labour unions (129) and "associations, societies, brotherhoods, alliances, institutes" (136).

2. For Foucault, both the care of the self and preoccupation with the idea that people should care for themselves in order to be good members of their society is intrinsically a social relationship between self and other (1986, 53).

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