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Mutual Aid as Disaster Response in NYC: Hurricane Sandy to COVID-19

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In the face of increasingly frequent climate crises, hazard and disaster studies, best practices stress the importance of social resilience and adaptation to changing conditions. Yet critical scholars remind us that the ability to adapt to change hinges on political and economic structures that create and contribute to existing social inequities, thus determining the amount and type of resources different communities can access in times of crisis. Traditional forms of aid from the state and elite funders can sometimes explicitly exclude those most in need of support based on citizen status or requirements around housing and substance use. Mutual aid, which is grounded in anarchist principles and strives to meet basic survival needs of people while delegitimizing harmful systems of injustice, presents an alternative way to understand and engage in disaster response. In New York City, mutual aid disaster responses were documented following Hurricane Sandy in the case of Occupy Sandy, an emergent network that grew from the organizing of Occupy Wall Street. In reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, the practice of mutual aid received a new kind of global attention and acceptance into the mainstream. This commentary piece will provide a brief summary of mutual aid literature, followed by a case study of Occupy Sandy and an overview of the still evolving COVID-19 mutual aid practices in New York City and beyond. Finally, it will propose questions for further research in the context of the ongoing pandemic.

Keywords: Mutual aid; COVID-19; disaster organizing; anarchist geographies.

1. Introduction

In the Spring of 2020, New York City became the U.S. epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic (Thompson *et al.* 2020). The entire city felt the impact of the virus and accompanying terror, but it soon became clear that everyone was not impacted equally. Existing racialized health, income, and workforce disparities that are the product of systemic racism — working through processes like historic housing

discrimination and healthcare inequality — place low-income communities of color on the front lines of COVID-19, as well most climate events and other emergencies (Wilson *et al.* 2020). As the presidential office downplayed the risk of COVID-19, local residents, unburdened by government's red tape and slow timelines, stepped into address the new needs of their neighbors. In addition to their ability to flexibly react, civic actors hold local knowledge that allows them to devise appropriate response and adaptation measures that fit the needs of their communities (Imperiale and Vanclay 2016; Quinn *et al.* 2021). Counter to popular media narratives of mayhem and selfishness after a crisis, individuals tend to act with generosity immediately following disaster. They come together to organize, share resources, and support those in need (Solnit 2010; Aldrich and Meyer 2015; Dawson 2017). This often takes the form of service provision and can build off existing networks and community organizations (Graham *et al.* 2016).

While the civic-level groups can help support local residents in times of need, their ability to address the root causes of uneven impacts is limited by their funding and governance structures. As the groups gain nonprofit status, their ability to access government and foundation funding grows. But, with these resources comes an increase in competition, forcing groups to appeal to the interests of elite funders and spend their time and energy on grant writing, thus taking away from their original mission (Rodriguez 2007). Left unchecked, funders can gain influence over the agendas of the local groups, who, in turn, have to direct their resources toward development in order to support their work (Martin 2004). This process is part of what is referred to as the Nonprofit Industrial Complex, or NPIC, in which progressive leftist social movements are forced to limit the scope of their work in order to match grant proposals and continue to work under their 501(c)(3) non-profit tax status (Rodriguez 2007). Alternatives to this trap do exist, and are often amplified during crises because of their ability to work more quickly and flexibly without requiring overhead approval from funders or lawmakers.

The COVID-19 pandemic, along with the concurrent climate emergency and the growth of social movements shining light on racial injustice, has brought renewed attention to the inadequacy and inequity of current social systems in the US, including healthcare, housing, education, law enforcement, and access to public space. The mutual aid response to COVID-19 represents an increased acknowledgment of these failures, presenting a real opportunity to challenge the hierarchical government strategies that lead to these disparities. In the forward of *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the COVID-19 Crisis*, a collection of essays on mutual aid responses around the globe, author Rebecca Solnit reflects this optimism and hope, writing, "I believe too that this pandemic is the end of

something, a version of postwar prosperity for the global north predicated on exploitation of other regions, of other human beings and of nature itself, of a set of assumptions about our capacity to control that nature, of many orders that are about to become history." (Solnit 2020, p. xv). Yet, in order to harness this potential capacity, we must understand more about these civic networks and the long-term impacts of their efforts. This commentary paper explores some of the ways that postdisaster mutual aid work has challenged more traditional aid streams, providing communities with tools to meet their basic needs, while advocating for a new system that does not rely on historically racist institutions. I will draw on examples from New York City following Hurricane Sandy as well as COVID-19 and will also look into some critiques of the mutual aid narrative. Ultimately, I will propose questions for further research in this area.

2. Part I: About Mutual Aid

While mutual aid practices have been around since early human (and even non-human) societies, the concept and term mutual aid are attributed to the work of anarchist geographer Peter Kropotkin in 1902. His seminal book of the same title recounted his studies of animal and human populations around the world, where he noted that cooperation was not only common between members of the same species, but that it actually increased the likelihood of survival and could be thought of as its own evolutionary determinant, as important as Darwin's survival of the fittest. Kropotkin's understanding of mutual aid was in direct support of his anarchist agenda and he believed that in order to get to a free society, we must begin with the individual, not the state (Kinna 1995). Scholars situating modern mutual aid practices in anarchism have pointed to the commitment of groups to grapple with anarchist principles such as horizontal organization, localism, and congruence of means and ends — which can be traced back to thinkers like Mikhail Bakunin and Emma Goldman (Jun and Lance 2020). Mutual aid can challenge traditional economic structures, replacing them with economies of care or "kindness" economies that emphasize the emotions behind acts of giving (Jupp 2021; Spade 2020). The possibilities for what mutual aid can look like are endless, but they share in common the principles of nonhierarchy and lack of external authority (Springer 2014). Mutual aid is "solidarity, not charity" (Spade 2020) and is inherently anti-capitalist and abolitionist, recognizing that the need for such efforts is a direct result of systemic injustice and state actions that keep vulnerable people from being able to meet their own basic needs. The goal of mutual aid is to build movements led by those most impacted and to create sustainable systems of reciprocity rather than needing to rely on government, private,

or nonprofit sectors whose aid almost always comes with severe restrictions that block access to those most stigmatized, such as undocumented or unhoused individuals. In the ideal mutual aid network, everyone is both giver and receiver, challenging a one-way flow of charity and capital (Spade 2020).

Examples of mutual aid can be seen in early indigenous practices, labor organizing, and almost every immigrant community that has come to America. Some of the most well-known examples are the free breakfast program and the free medical centers of the Black Panther Party (Bassett 2019). In the context of disaster response, mutual aid efforts can be seen every time a group of neighbors comes together to share resources or take care of one another. In fact, it is often these interactions between individuals that are most important in determining health and mortality outcomes in the early aftermath of a disturbance (Klinenberg 2002). Following disaster, relief funds are largely controlled by major private and government entities and can follow a similar pattern to the NPIC. This is sometimes even referred to as the "global resilience complex" (Leitner *et al.* 2018), where the close relationships between private foundations and global consultancies lead to resilience campaigns that claim to encourage participation, while actually prioritizing "expert" knowledge and spreading their own understandings of what makes a city resilient. At the local level, the "green growth machine" brings neoliberal trends and market-based solutions together to privilege the rebuilding and protection of wealthier areas and uses storm damage as a justification to "clean-up" low-income communities of color (Gould and Lewis 2018; Curran and Hamilton 2012). Some activists reject, altogether, the notion that working within this system of disaster capitalism is the only way to protect and care for their communities. This alternative can be understood through the lens of disaster collectivism or "disaster communism, under which people begin to organize themselves to meet one another's basic needs and to collectively survive" (Dawson 2017, p. 236). What mutual aid lacks in funding, it makes up for in people power (Spade 2020). In this way, crises can challenge traditional authoritarian power structures by demonstrating the collective ability of everyday people to collaborate and build community (Solnit 2010). At its best, mutual aid "produces new ways of living where people get to create systems of care and generosity that address harm and foster well-being" (Spade 2020, p. 2).

3. Part II: Occupy Sandy

The emergent response of mutual aid following a disaster is not a new phenomenon in New York City. Superstorm Sandy struck New York in October 2012, taking 44 lives and causing $19 billion in damages and loss of economic activity

(NYC 2015). Following the storm, federal aid poured in from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), triggering municipal leaders to name new offices and departments to handle funding allocation and recovery projects, including the New York Governor's Office for Storm Recovery and the New York City Mayor's Office of Resiliency. At the same time, the civic groups, including houses of worship, community centers, and local nonprofits, organized their own responses to care for their neighbors. Groups of activists from Occupy Wall Street joined forces with the existing groups to gather and distribute massive amounts of food and supplies to those in need. This network became Occupy Sandy. Occupy volunteers brought with them an understanding of the uneven impacts of disaster that fall along class and race lines and concentrated their efforts in marginalized communities, many of which were overlooked by the more official efforts of the Red Cross and FEMA. For example, FEMA did not arrive on site to the working-class waterfront community of Red Hook, Brooklyn, until days after Superstorm Sandy subsided. In the meantime, Occupy Sandy volunteers had already worked with the local groups to establish a network to support community members with food and medical care (Dawson 2017).

Occupy Sandy is a paragon of mutual aid because of their horizontal organizing philosophy (Landau 2017). This meant that no one member held sole decision-making power. Rather than being leaderless — as critics of mutual aid and anarchist organizing sometimes claim — Occupy Sandy was "'leaderful' (i.e., each and every member could step up to a leadership role)" (Ashton 2013). Their creative use of social media and online resources also made them highly effective at addressing needs quickly as they arose. The organizers behind Occupy Sandy were often young and technologically creative, relying on Google Docs, text chains, and eventually their own open source software, Sahana (Dawson 2017). New volunteers were trained by existing volunteers according to a loose protocol outlined in Occupy Sandy resource sheets. Without official budget oversight, Occupy Sandy was not held back by liability concerns or slowed down by waiting for top-down approval. The message to occupiers was "go out, do the right thing, and you'll get supported by the network." (Goldi Guerra, Personal Communication, September 18, 2016).

As an independent entity, Occupy Sandy also had the ability to focus on the areas that needed the most support, and to flexibly relocate based on where they had the right partners. The flexibility of the Occupy Sandy network, along with their ties to local organizations — including the civic groups, faith-based associations, and businesses — allowed them to open hubs and distribution sites throughout the city. Sites were located across all the five boroughs in the

neighborhoods that were hit hardest by the storm as well as in those that had avoided all impact. The initial hubs and sites served primarily as distribution places for donations (e.g., food, baby supplies, clothing, medicine, and other necessities) and as makeshift soup kitchens, making and delivering food to neighborhoods that were still struggling. Eventually, flooded areas dried up and occupiers found spaces to use as collection points, bringing supplies closer to the people who needed them. Occupy Sandy sites filled a wide range of needs. Some served as kitchens, some as donation collection points or donation drop-off points, and some coordinated services, such as providing medical and legal help to residents. Existing relationships were crucial in opening new sites; volunteers relied on the reputation and networks of Occupy Wall Street to convince local organizers, business owners, and spiritual leaders to use their spaces for the cause. The majority of the Occupy Sandy hub sites were located in houses of worship and community centers, but volunteers also utilized schools and even some government facilities and private businesses (See Figure 1). Occupy Sandy's flexible use of community spaces aligns with anarchist approaches to place. Anarchist geographers strive for emancipatory space, the physical realization of anarchist democracy where space transforms into "free space" that is accessible to all and governed without hierarchy (Springer 2016). By utilizing community spaces for mutual aid and
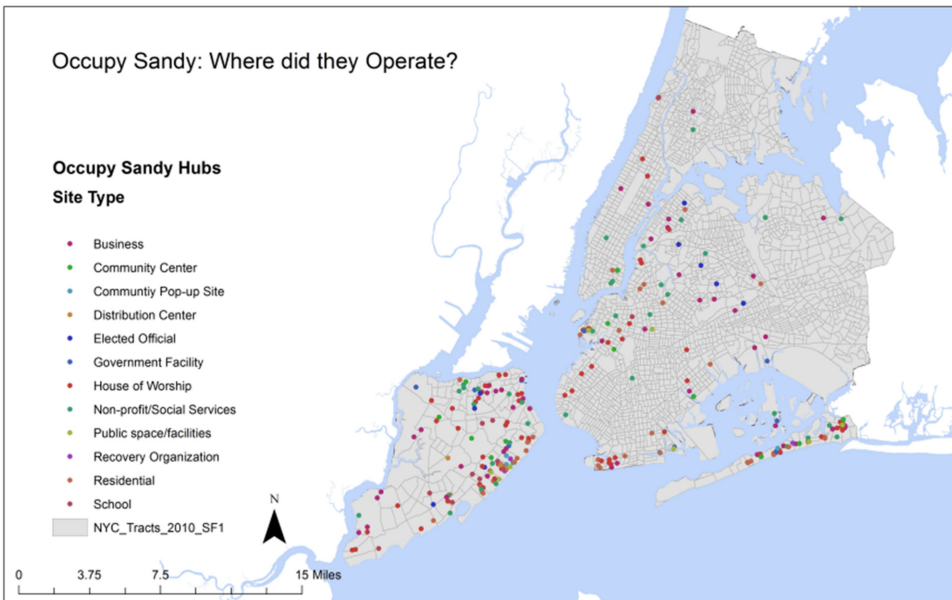

Figure 1. Occupy Sandy Hubs by Site Type (Landau 2017)

organizing them nonhierarchically, occupiers were putting these anarchist ideals into practice.

Occupy Sandy represents both the strengths and the challenges of mutual aid work. Their flexibility allowed them to establish a fast-acting citywide network that filled many of the needs left by traditional aid structures. But, their lack of deep ties to the communities they worked in became a problem. Because many of the occupiers were young, white, and often not from the communities they were working in, some critiqued the movement as a group of outsiders or even interlopers without the proper local knowledge to address the needs of low-income communities. In wealthier areas, locals pointed to the outsider status of occupy volunteers to justify avoiding their social justice messaging (Dawson 2017). Although Occupy Sandy did not become a more permanent organization, their efforts did contribute to the formation of the Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR) network, a national coalition of activists and organizers who approach disaster response with a framework of solidarity, engage volunteers through training and direct action, and provide consultation and resources to the mutual aid groups (Kenney 2019). During COVID-19, the MADR network transitioned to focus on this new form of disaster and supported many emergent mutual aid groups across the country.

4. Part III: COVID-19 Mutual Aid

Early in the COVID-19 lockdown, when quarantines were put in place and older adults were especially fearful of going outside, networks of neighbors in cities across the globe came together to assist each other with buying groceries, making medical appointments, and providing distanced companionship (Sitrin and Sembrar 2020; Bell 2021; Solnit 2020). The political context of COVID-19 and the deep vulnerability felt surrounding the pandemic set the stage for a massive wave of mutual aid organizing. Kouri-Towe (2020) writes that "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" (p. 193). Scholars and activists saw that the social determinants of health that placed some populations at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 are shaped by the marginalization of certain racial and the underprivileged groups (e.g., nonwhite, disabled, LGBTQ, low income, homeless, etc.) (Domínguez *et al.* 2020). The mutual aid groups are well suited to address these disparities because their decision-making — at least

in theory — includes those that are most impacted, unlike many charities and nonprofit institutions whose decisions are made by a few leaders and funders who are often white elites (Spade 2020).

Some of the factors that set this movement of mutual aid apart from historical examples are the mainstreaming of the movement (Tolentino 2020) and the focus on organizing around a specific neighborhood or geography rather than a collective identity (Goldberg 2021). A UK study found that with more people furloughed or out of work during the pandemic, volunteering became possible for a younger demographic, rather than just retirees who are traditionally more likely to volunteer (Mao *et al.* 2021). Volunteers were found to be motivated by a desire to connect with others during a stressful time, to form community, and to find a sense of purpose (Benton and Power 2021). Recent mutual aid groups have engaged and activated a larger volunteer base by focusing on relationship building and bringing in new people. Also, in the UK, the mutual aid groups that initially formed to address immediate and tangible needs of those in quarantine later pivoted to focus on the broader political and systemic issues that cause and promote social vulnerability (Mao *et al.* 2021). In the US, volunteer demographics skewed even younger, with many in their 20s and 30s (Goldberg 2021). Goldberg (2021) also identified three group collective action frames that shaped the work of the mutual aid groups in Brooklyn, New York: A call to action to support your neighbors, an analysis of state failure, and a prognostic of prefigurative politics. Tensions between and within groups, and between and even within individuals exist within each of these frames.

In the two years from the start of the pandemic, at least 100 mutual aid groups were formed in New York State, addressing a variety of needs from food scarcity to mental health (Freytas-Tamura 2021). Altogether, the mutual aid movement in the wake of COVID-19 has accomplished an impressive amount, especially in the context of a lack of national response early on in the pandemic that forced local governments and institutions to voluntarily close their doors and enforce restrictions before they were nationally mandated (Jun and Lance 2020). Their ability to remain flexible and nimble in moments of crisis, rather than needing go through slow bureaucratic processes to change protocol, has made emergent groups able to respond to the quickly evolving phases of the pandemic. In one local example, a city parks department was forced to put a pause on all volunteering in the beginning of the pandemic in the name of social distancing. While they wanted to protect their employees and volunteers, the increased visitation in public parks meant that trash was piling up. The local mutual aid groups that were not accountable to the city government mobilized volunteers to help pick up the trash and

served as an important workforce until the parks department could create their own volunteer trash pickup program (Landau *et al.* 2021).

Despite these victories, some examples have shown that the mutual aid groups can easily succumb to cooptation and privatization and that the label of groups as "mutual aid" does not necessarily indicate a commitment to nonhierarchy or a movement led by the most impacted individuals (Kouri-Towe 2020). Conversely, mutual aid is not the exclusive domain of the "mutual aid" groups and many ongoing community groups, from community gardens to housing coops, regularly practice mutual aid (Spade 2020). This lack of standardization means that mutual aid efforts must be examined on group-by-group basis. Even the self-identified mutual aid groups have a wide range of nonhierarchical organizational structures and each has different rules and protocols for funding and collaboration. For example, some mutual aid groups refuse to cooperate in any form with politicians or police as part of their commitment to autonomy and Black Lives Matter (Jun and Lance 2020), while some groups collectively decide that it is their best interest to partner with law enforcement (Goldberg 2021) or funding sponsors that accept donations from foundations they perceive as problematic (Gates Foundation 2021). While the solidarity and civic mobilization spurred by the pandemic are key ingredients of social progress, some scholars, including political scientist Nancy L. Rosenblum, caution that grassroots movements do not have the resources needed to replace a true social safety net from the state (Tolentino 2020). Studies in the UK have begun to explore the varied relationships between local government and the mutual aid groups, which range from micromanagement to indifference. Tiratelli and Kaye (2020) advocate for councils to play a facilitating role by supporting the mutual aid groups through providing tangible resources such a meeting space and networking, without challenging the nonhierarchical group structure that classifies mutual aid. So far, comparable large-scale studies looking at government and mutual aid relationships in the US are yet to be published.

Because this iteration of mutual aid is still relatively recent, we do not have a big-picture understanding of who formed and operates COVID-19 mutual aid groups in the US. Case studies show that they are sometimes started by existing organizations, such as a Washington, D.C. mutual aid group that was convened by Black Lives Matter-DC (Jun and Lance 2020). Others were started by a few neighbors who put out a call for help through their existing networks and used online platforms to spread the word (Sitrin and Sembrar 2020). Digital technology has improved greatly since the days of Occupy Sandy and Slack has been a particularly useful organizing tool for the mutual aid groups, including the Brooklyn-based group and Bed-Stuy Strong. The founder of Bed-Stuy Strong, writer and Omani immigrant Sarah Thankam Mathews, also utilized Facebook and

traditional paper flyers to engage long-term residents of the quickly gentrifying neighborhood (Tolentino 2020). They maintained a hyperlocal focus, which in the beginning of the pandemic meant recruiting volunteers with personal ties to Bed-Stuy and delivering groceries to those within the neighborhood boundaries. This helped them to facilitate relationships in the community across age, class, and cultural difference, eventually allowing them to evolve their efforts to include work on voter engagement and census participation. Like many grassroots groups, they struggled with the lack of long-term funding and a year or so into the pandemic pause their food delivery program to reassess their goals and priorities as the pandemic evolved (Gates Foundation 2021).

A number of additional case studies of New York City-based mutual aid groups have been captured by journalists, but we are still lacking peer-reviewed citywide studies of the emergent efforts up to this point in the pandemic. Some findings from UK and other international studies of mutual aid seem to match the trends in New York City, but further research at multiple scales is needed in order to be able to better compare the two contexts. More data is needed to find out the extent to which the mutual aid groups are able to avoid the problems of the nonprofit sector and how they cope with the unique challenges of mutual aid work, including organizer burnout, lack of long-term funding, and general capacity.

5. Discussion: Questions for Further Research

In stressing the need to move beyond disaster exceptionalism toward a focus on the daily conditions of the vulnerable groups, Luft (2009) poses the following questions: "What is the relationship between incremental improvement — or meeting people's urgent needs — and long-term structural change? How can lessons learned from disaster mobilization strengthen ongoing movement development through enduring hard times and what must movements do in order to become disaster ready?" (p. 524). Future research should be guided by these questions in order to understand the potential of mutual aid in this moment and should lay the groundwork to determine how disturbances open up opportunities to form new response pathways and rearrange power dynamics between residents and the state.

As we brace ourselves for another uncertain year in the US, balancing the relative safety afforded by the vaccine with the risk of the new variants, it is becoming clear that our new normal measure will include continuous reassessment of care and safety protocols. Further, relief measure such as eviction moritoria, payment protection for small businesses, and loan forgiveness, have been extended to meet ongoing needs but are ultimately still seen as temporary. We need longer-term ongoing communities of care to address our current risk society and the

"collective life" that is the experience of many communities dealing with everyday disasters that are shaped by colonialism, climate change, and global capitalism (Kouri-Towe 2020; Bhan *et al.* 2020). Addressing these root causes will require a move away from the disaster exceptionalism model that only activates response during times of acute change (Luft 2009).

Mutual aid has been presented as a possible solution to this problem. Mutual aid movements stand out because of their work to limit or delegitimize existing harmful systems, their efforts to provide for the people most harmed by these systems, and their goal to build an alternative infrastructure for meeting basic survival needs — one that does not exclude people who are unhoused, undocumented, reliant on drugs, or otherwise stigmatized. Despite these ambitious goals, the mutual aid groups do not automatically center the needs of the most marginalized or bring about true transformation (Tolentino 2020). While much of the mutual aid literature paints a clear line between the mutual aid groups that rely on member labor and resources in contrast to charities and nonprofits that rely on grants and donations, the practice of mutual aid is far more nuanced. In reality, as in the case of Occupy Sandy, the mutual aid groups often rely on their coordination with existing organizations. Some set up shop in public spaces or grow out of nonprofit organizations funded by foundations (Dawson 2017). Examining the increase in the mutual aid groups following the COVID-19 pandemic, Häyry (2020) questions the claims of solidarity as superficial, because while they may center a shared sense of humanity, many lack a true commitment to changing the existing conditions that breed inequality. Still others lift up the potential of the current mutual aid movement to bring about a "resurgence of reciprocity" (Springer 2020, p. 112) and a postcapitalist sense of solidarity. This tension reveals the need for further research on mutual aid as a practice, particularly as it is showing up in this moment.

Research has begun to capture trends in COVID-19 mutual aid work around the globe. Fernandes-Jesus *et al.* (2021) argue that this mutual aid movement in the UK has led to new community bonds and increased perception of community cohesion. They recommend that further research focus on the level of politicization of the various groups and how they can sustain solidarity over time as needs change. A similar study in the US — focusing on capturing new community bonds through network mapping, examining group politicization by understanding the varied relationships with the state, and measuring how group solidarity has evolved over time — could significantly expand the literature on mutual aid.

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