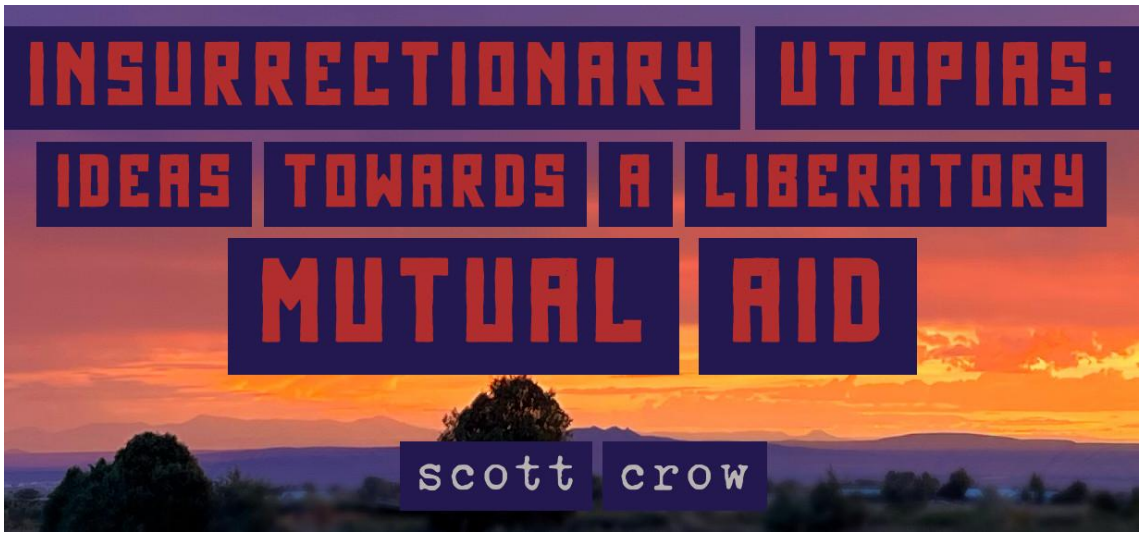
Insurrectionary Utopias

Ideas Towards a Liberatory Mutual Aid

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> *"...years ago, a few people scratched history, and, knowing this, they began calling to many others so that, by dint of scribbling, scratching and scrawling, they would end upending the veil of history, and so the light would finally be seen.*
>
> *That, and nothing else, is the struggle we are making. And so if you ask us what we want, we will unashamedly answer: "To open a crack in history."*
>
> — Subcomandante Marcos, E.Z.L.N.

Despair, grief, and fear color much our days, often challenging our hopes for the future. These emotions have seeped into daily conversations, media portrayals, and the very fabrics of our lives. Our fragile social bonds in civil society have been pushed to the brink due to ongoing disasters, crisis and seeming uncertainity we all face.

Despite the beautiful, historic gains made against Power, and the inspiring uprisings and rebellions since the turn of the millennium — undermining the very foundations of U.S. historical and systemic oppression — a loss for what-to-do characterizes much of our reflections.

Civil society is unraveling due to an unsustainable civilization, the multi-year coronavirus pandemic, an ongoing climate emergency, and the usurping of 20th century "democratic" institutions by right-wing forces with fascistic dreams. Amidst this, unaccountable corporate social media platforms fuel the unraveling,[1] compounding these ongoing, intertwined disasters and crises, revealing the shortcomings of our fragile house-of-cards-like society. What is needed are alternatives not rooted in fear or domination — but in our desires for something better for all of us..

I still find places where hope exists and projects are happening that can open the "crack in history." Places where communities and neighbors haven't given up and are not paralyzed by fear, that offer alternative paths forward that allow for shared visions of something better. We ALL need tempered hope, ideas, and visions to counter the collapse narratives of the media and fascists who want to use it for their own power or control. Rather than sticking our heads in the sand in denial, we can counter the fear and despair that leads to inaction and not give in.

From the Outside In

Current disasters bring my thoughts back over 20 years to the dawning of the 21st century. At the time another national crisis shook our world: planes were used as weapons killing thousands of people and taking down the Twin Towers in New York and hitting the Pentagon in Washington D.C., bringing the U.S. to a standstill.

As the hijacked planes were striking in Manhattan I was already en route to Washington, D.C. from Texas. I arrived to unimaginable disaster that evening: a city darkened from power grid and cell phone failures, shuttered offices and stores, no access to banking systems or gas, all under a massive lockdown, replete with a curfew and restricted areas of travel in the city. The political

[1] As part of Power, corporate media turns every issue and crisis into a spectacle to raise ratings in their twenty-four hour news cycles. This is heightened and gets worse during disasters when people need access to reliable information. The spectacle sells itself. Look at the Trump presidency in the US (political disaster) and the COVID-19 pandemic (ecological disaster). Those who assume to hold Power are more vulnerable to confusion and failure after disasters than their public relations campaigns would have us believe.

and financial centers of the U.S. had gone dark through terrorist attacks. Those who assumed to hold Power in that moment lost systematic control over the country; they were scrambling even as they tried to lock the country down.[2] Government wasn't going to protect anyone from this disaster, so they began working to regain control over the narratives and the population.

I was in D.C. joining coalitions of political organizers for a series of protests against neoliberalism. We were expecting upwards of 200,000 people, building on the energy of the World Trade Organization (WTO) shutdown in Seattle two years prior, and the worldwide anti-capitalist globalization movement that was then in full swing. While still in shock from the attacks, we tried to navigate forward. Small handfuls of us met to grieve, figure out what was happening, and possibly organize. Besides the camaraderie though, my sense from those initial meetings was that as activists rooted in social justice, committed to collective liberation, we actually had little substantial to offer.

Social and political movements that had focused on stopping oppressive systems could only offer empathy, or more protests. But that was it. Gripped in the fear of the unknown, like everyone around us, we had no visions of alternative futures, and few tools and little infrastructure to rely on for creating them. We, like the rest of society, were crushed in that moment. All of our meager movement resources – money, people, and decades of organizing experience – actually added up to very little

I spent days under curfew thinking about our subcultural shortcomings as social and political activists and dreamers. I kept coming back to how we spent generations trying to mitigate the effects of entrenched Power, sometimes successfully. But those same movements spent little time building up our own power through collective autonomy and mutual aid, on our own terms for the long-haul across multiple communities. At the end of the day, 9/11 proved we had little collective power or much to really offer.

Finding Beauty in Our Failures

These kinds of questions about political movements' capacity and orientation have rattled around in my head for decades. Those events, and their aftermath, motivated more me to find hidden histories where others who professed individual and collective liberation had carved out their own futures in the face of ongoing crisis and disasters. By the time the Twin Towers in

[2] I use the term "power" in three ways: power (with a little 'p'): power that is exercised directly by individuals and communities, as part of civil society, working to make changes in the world. It is what grassroots democracy is based on. This kind of power is derived from recognizing that we do have the abilities, creativity, and strength to make the world better. It is the collective power of everyone, from the marginalized to the middle class; b.) Power (with a capital 'P'): concentrations of authority and privilege in economic, political, or cultural institutions that exercise undue influence on the world. In this sense, Power is identical with the state, multinational corporations, or the rich, who are unaccountable to and derisive of civil society. It operates through bureaucracies, executive boards, the military, and transnational corporations and corporate media of all forms. It is exercised through brute force, neglect, and manipulation or corruption of economies, for example. It results in control over resources as well as social and cultural norms; c.) I sometimes use the phrase those who assume to have Power. It is my way of recognizing that such forms of Power do not have legitimate claims of authority over civil society. It is also a reminder not to automatically give legitimacy to those institutions or people who don't deserve it. My underlying philosophy is that once we see past this illegitimacy, we begin to recognize that we have the collective capacities to directly make changes and influence the world ourselves rather than appealing to these coercive hierarchies and bureaucracies that claim this Power over us.

NYC collapsed, there already existed generations of social and political organizers and activists committed to realizing worlds beyond capitalism, but who offered no concrete steps toward creating alternative futures. We all felt some level of vulnerability in those times. This led to deeper questions about what liberatory futures would actually look like: what are the limits of activism, and activist subcultures, in being able to think big picture? How do we keep people from leaning towards fear and fascism? And, can we protect ourselves and each other?

Activists, including anarchists, have not built many lasting counter-institutions, or true autonomy of any kind despite the broader embracement of the ideas at the turn of the century. Creating and building 'institutions,' cooperatives, or ongoing infrastructures has often been derided as "liberal thinking," or largely took non-radical forms through the non-profit industrial complex, or cooperative businesses in activist subcultural circles. The collective focus to create and sustain them never seemed as important as constantly putting out the fires of systemic oppression. This created a vacuum of viable radical alternatives, much less working solutions.

When I started to focus on the concepts and histories of creating or building collective autonomy, that led me to a whole new set of questions and concepts that opened up new paths. I began to look to, and think about, what it would look like if we built autonomous communities? What if we began developing some pre-figurative social and political lives and engagements beyond merely protesting, and those were part of, and integrated with, towns, neighborhoods, and cities? How would we all do it everywhere?

Now More Than Ever

It takes little to bring any "First World" economy or political system to a grinding halt, as we saw after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the 2008 financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, or the fascist takeover of the federal government since 2024. If we, as creatives and radicals — or dreamers of any stripe — don't begin offering viable alternatives, with ideas, proposals, and infrastructure to replace current systems — even as dysfunctional or unevenly distributed as anything we create might be — then centralized, authoritarian, top-down forces will continue to consolidate and to wield power. There exist large numbers of autonomous networks to draw from in this work (e.g. legal aid, mutual aid, street medics, etc.). Thinking of creating more local networks and mapping and networking existing ones — making them accessible, but still liberatory, and outside of activist subcultures, while dreaming of collective autonomy together — can form some of the foundations to deal with ongoing disasters and crisis.\

Why Disasters?

Disasters reveal the vulnerabilities people face from the failures and fragility of governments and corporations, as well as those of cultural and economic systems. Additionally, disasters lay bare the inequalities and shortcomings of supposed safety nets in civil society that are even stressed or non-existent under "normal" circumstances. Most disasters are those we recognize as cataclysmically abrupt. These types activate our *emergency hearts* into community action, with immediate needs escalating quickly.[3]

[3] The concept of "emergency hearts" describes the feelings of compassion and empathy that sustain us in standing up to oppression or amidst disaster. It is the part of ourselves that motivates us to act in the world, particularly in

There is also a form of disaster that we often don't recognize because it is so common. I call this phenomena the *long slow history of disasters.* These manifest in communities through failed governmental policies or neglect, including poverty, failing schools, lack of access to basic healthcare or decent food, environmental racism and destruction, rampant homelessness, the war on drugs, and prisons, among other examples. These are everyday micro-disasters. And when an acute crisis or cataclysmic disaster escalates, these everyday disasters cascade into ever worse disasters for everyone affected, particularly vulnerable populations.

Through disasters we see the inability of governments, large non-governmental organizations, non-profits, corporations and economic systems to respond quickly, effectively, or ethically despite their enormous resources. These entities' monopoly on responses are often exposed after disasters as they try to control who is allowed to respond outside of governmental agencies or their proxies. Governments often see non-sanctioned responses as a problem. This scenario often creates a disaster within a disaster where those who have survived a calamity are left to take care of, and defend themselves or their communities, without any outside support.

Disasters take many forms. We most often think of them as being natural: tornadoes, hurricanes, or fires for example. There are other forms of crisis and disasters that create the same upheavals, including displacement, death, injury, resource shortages, destruction of ecosystems, marginalization of vulnerable populations, and forced migration. These include economic disasters, like the Great Depression; political ones, such as the current electoral choices in the U.S. that have given rise to xenophobia, racist violence, and unfounded conspiracies that target vulnerable populations; and finally war, in all its forms.

After every disaster across the world we see those in Power lose grip, no matter how dominating they may have been before. All of the seemingly powerful institutions, like the police, the military, or even basic government functions, are completely ill-equipped to deal with widescale devastation, outside of restoring "law and order," which is often the top priority. If these institutions that we are supposed to look to, believe in, and recognize as having power won't — or can't — help us or our neighbors, then we should realize that we have to do something together for ourselves.

Mutual Aid Now!

> "*The mutual-aid tendency in man (sic) has so remote an origin, and is so deeply interwoven with all the past evolution of the human race, that it has been maintained by mankind up to the present time, notwithstanding all vicissitudes of history.*"
>
> —*Mutual Aid,* (1902), Peter Kropotkin

Disasters reveal openings for collective liberation due in part to the extreme neglect and failures of governments. Disasters offer opportunities for interventions, a possibility for something else after losing everything, that often could not happen in day to day life. When people are left to die and they see no government entity, no corporation, no non-profit organization is going to save them, by necessity they begin to self-organize for their needs. Openings for liberatory mutual aid do more than just fill in the gaps where established Power fails. Instead, we can use these

times of crisis. For more on emergency hearts, see scott crow, *Emergency Hearts, Molotov Dreams: A scott scrow Reader* (Ohio: GTK Press, 2016)

openings to further advance towards people's autonomy and community self-determination. Mutual Aid is a fancy way to say cooperation. We often do better when we cooperate, especially in disasters.

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in the hot waning summer of 2005, I experienced and facilitated alternative responses to what governments and non-profits were failing to offer. I was fortunate to be involved with the creation of the Common Ground Collective (CGC), a project that responded to the hurricane, and the long slow history of disasters on those communities that lead up to it. We built upon the long histories and practices of mutual aid that already existed. Common Ground allowed us — as an organization, a network, and as self-organized individuals and groups within neighborhoods — to engage in different ways. These examples have provided inspiration for autonomous disaster relief efforts across the globe since.

History has shown us that most people spontaneously react cooperatively when disaster strikes, often in direct opposition to our assumptions and stereotyped beliefs. Small autonomous efforts can do a lot with little resources, are flexible and dynamic due to their smaller sizes, and are most importantly humane. No matter where you are on the political spectrum or rank in life, it all goes out the door after disasters strike, when people become reacquainted with their humanity amidst calamity. People help people because it's wired in us. We can put our politics aside without losing them.

All mutual aid comes from a place of love and caring, our emergency hearts. Our emergency hearts beat with compassion and empathy and reveal the importance of what needs to be done. We ignore all the other BS that interrupts those connections. "Emergency hearts" is a phrase I use to describe the immediacy of our feelings of empathy and compassion that motivates us to act to end oppression, exploitation, and destruction. Our emergency hearts are this beautiful part of us that drives us with both passion and compassion to create more than just for ourselves. Each of our emergency hearts is the spark that compels us to action.

Cooperation or mutual aid among various human and non-human animals has been well documented over the last 100 years in many disciplines, including anthropology, social theory, politics, and evolutionary biology.[4] Despite living under economic and cultural systems that reward sociopathic behavior, such as the self-interest and narcissism that is continually reinforced by the media and mainstream economists, voluntary cooperation for mutual benefit sustains everyday working people. We all care for each other and willingly work together for mutual betterment in a variety of ways. The concept is simple. We all benefit more when we collaborate, even taking our own self-interests into account. As I often say "We each can be better when we ALL do better, instead of some doing better on the backs of others."

Peter Kropotkin's seminal *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*[5] was a starting point for naming cooperative endeavors, giving them a social and political reference, and grounding them in a study of the natural world. Mutual aid, especially within disasters, is the antidote to fear and powerlessness. It gives all of us opportunities to connect with our neighbors, and larger communities, that we may not see in our busy day-to-day lives. It offers us community control as well as community defense. Mutual aid can keep us from giving in to isolation or trying to buy our

[4] For more on this, see Rutger Bergman, Elizabeth Manton and Erica Moore, translators, *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, Little Brown and Company, (New York: 2020) and David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021)

[5] Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin. *Mutual Aid: a Factor of Evolution.* (London: Heinemann, 1902)

way out of crisis. Consciously helping each other can keep fear at bay and give us a path toward collective liberation on our own terms.

A Liberatory Vision for Mutual Aid

Liberatory mutual aid draws upon the histories of mutual aid, as practiced by varying communities worldwide, and from principles derived from anarchist and antiauthoritarian traditions. It opens our thinking to futures where we are individually and collectively in control of our own lives instead of breeding fears of the unknown. Through a liberatory approach and vision, I am not striving to create a new political ideology. Instead, I hope we all seek new ways to see ourselves and the power of our actions in the world before, during, and after the worlds we know collapse. Liberatory approaches suggests a living anarchy, of individuals, communes, and small temporary projects that build for a future where those who have been excluded can make their own ways together. A liberatory foundation is built on ethics that those engaged openly discuss to find agreement, and shared principles that are accountable and adaptable, to serve each community.

Below are some of the principals involved in creating living and dynamic approaches to mutual aid and collective autonomy. Some of these ideas are parallel or cross over with others. These are to be seen as rudimentary foundations for liberatory approaches to mutual aid and beyond:

— Liberatory and Insurrectionary Projects and Institutions

This involves creating dynamic, living organizations and spaces where the movement can have a home and thrive. It's creating a base for developing localized power. These insurrectionary institutions would serve specific needs and would fold once those needs have been met. In creating insurrectionary institutions, we also have insurrectionary responsibility. Burn it down if needs be, but also implement rebuilding, keeping the replacement alive and fresh, and maintaining responsibility to those who use it.

— Dual Power

Dual Power in an anarchist context means resisting exploitation and oppression, while also developing initiatives toward autonomy and liberation as part of efforts in self-sufficiency and self-determination.

It's easier to destroy what we abhor, it is much harder to create, nurture and sustain needed infrastructure. Similar to the Wobblies' (Industrial Workers of the World) slogan that we have to "build the new society in the shell of the old," Dual Power embodies the development of institutions, organizations, collectives, liberated work-places, community gardens, neighborhood assemblies, and all the other elements of a future society created in opposition to the dominant Power of the state, patriarchy, and capitalism. Dual Power provides a framing for our undertakings and approaches.

— Leading by Asking

We should not pretend that we have it all figured out or that we know all the answers. We need to ask questions of those in need instead of dictating to them their desires or our solutions. We struggle alongside folks, making a better world for us all. This method is inspired by the practice of the Zapatistas (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) in Chiapas, Mexico who have taken this approach to autonomous and collective leadership since they were founded in the early 1980s. This doesn't mean we don't bring our resources and histories to the table, but we must always remember that people have ideas and experiences to share.

— Civil Disobedience and Breaking the Law

"Good laws" don't always make us safer, but can sometimes prevent oppression. Sometimes unjust laws are changed or rendered irrelevant by protest. Other times laws can only be broken. Assessing what is ethical in any given situation is more important than always just following the law. Civil Disobedience, in this context, is about more than protesting unjust laws, it is choosing life over always doing what the law says. This is true especially after disasters. Refusal is the first step towards liberation.

— Direct Action

Direct Action is acting without waiting for approval. It involves recognizing that it is essential to act in our lives without waiting for an authority, bureaucracy, or political movement to give us permission. Direct Action can be civil disobedience, but it can also involve creating whole new alternative economic structures. An historic example of direct action is that of the Diggers, in England in the 1600s, who started farming common land to advance their ideals. They did not ask permission, they just did it.

—Solidarity Not Charity

The practice of solidarity recognizes that our well-beings are tied together. It presupposes engaging in solutions *with* those in need, not *for* them. The goal of solidarity is to both alleviate suffering and solve its systemic deep-rooted causes. Conceptually, solidarity links us together across geography, economics, culture, and power. It's framing allows those with more access to resources to truly and deeply support, work with or aid those who don't. It's a practice that enables cooperation, power sharing, and approaching questions and solutions together. Providing solidarity can include sharing resources like knowledge, volunteers, material and monetary aid, as well as raising awareness. Solidarity protects all of those involved because we are acting together, no matter ones' station in life.

Charity, on the other hand, only addresses symptoms caused by unjust systems; it is just a bandage for deeper societal problems. Through charity, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and individuals allow problems to persist by not acting to address root causes. It's mere service work that must adhere to, and never challenge, systems of power. There is no togetherness between those serving and those being served in solving underlying issues. Charity is a needed bandage in this world filled with inequalities and suffering, but the charity idea and its methods often perpetuates problems for the long term.

Unlike charity, solidarity involves more than simply dressing a wound; it allows all involved to be active participants together no matter who we are. Solidarity enriches and improves lives. It aims to alleviate suffering, but also to change the underlying problems creating it.

— Collective Autonomy

Collective autonomy creates the condition for a hybrid of individual desires/self-interests to be integrated and negotiated within larger groups. The concept allows for various communities to network in strategic alliances, but with each retaining their independence, encouraging a framework where individuals, groups, or communities determine their own futures. Like the anarchist emphasis on healthy individuality being enmeshed within collective solidarity, this takes that practice to a more complex level of social organization.

— Community Defense

Community self-defense in any form is not defined by laws but by ethics based in need (to protect) and the principles of anarchy (whether people call it that or not) by which groups of people collectively exercise their power in deciding their futures and determining how to respond to threats without relying on governments. Limits on marginalized groups to determine their futures or collectively protect themselves need to be recognized and corrected. Community defense includes having strong networks of solidarity and care that can be called upon; people looking out for each other and prepared to come to each other's aid. It's the ability of a community to mobilize large numbers of people on short notice and is an expression of solidarity.

— Collective Liberation

Collective liberation encourages decentralization and power sharing within groups and communities; to acknowledge, minimize, or eliminate existing hierarchy and power imbalances so that all people involved can directly participate; to allow for personal autonomy within a framework of social equality. To creates social-political movements and communities that share power and resources and are free of any kind of unjust oppression and exploitation.

— Narrative Shift

Each of these political principles and practices include narratives of resistance, telling us stories of impossible revolutions and daring us to dream. Embracing and spreading new narratives can begin to affect a social and cultural shift. It is by talking to each other, holding each other, and developing new practices that the seeds of larger social changes are planted. People understand themselves and their place in the world through stories. By telling new stories we begin to shift larger narratives and impact cultural and social changes, which can eventually result in political change, affecting the power relations in society. This has been happening from the bottom up since the middle of the last century at least and, in a sense, what we are experiencing today is the battles over the stories we tell ourselves about race, gender, work, health, and our place in nature all coming to a head at once.

Liberatory Exquisiteness

Liberatory mutual aid aims to create openings for people to transform their lives. This should not be seen as mere service work, or simply helping each other, but engaging in ways that challenges us to go deeper in systemic reimagining of infrastructure. Liberatory mutual aid seeks to open paths that allow us to upend the inequalities of the slow disaster of capitalism by localizing and harnessing our power, collective autonomy, and networks near and far. Mutual aid can be liberatory, both personally and within communities, if approached within a revolutionary framework of fundamentally transforming society. Liberatory mutual aid seeks to challenge our investments in dominant narratives. Governments, corporations, NGOS/non-profits will *never* save us from either sudden and cataclysmic or slow, chronic disasters.

Humans are not inherently selfish or altruistic, they are both. The majority of people within disasters, if given the chance and despite limited resources, will help each other when it really matters. If we approach each other with the idea of solidarity, instead of charity, we need to acknowledge power differences, seek to subvert them, and come from a place that acknowledges that each of our well-beings is intertwined.

Already existing solidarity networks are the ground from which liberatory mutual aid and disaster anarchy grow. From there, it begins by asking the people and communities what they need and how they can be supported. If we begin with "leading by asking" communities (like the Zapatistas are fond of encouraging us to do), then we will have a clearer picture of what needs to be done. We do this on a hyper-localized scale: breaking down larger regions into smaller ones, then making connections block by block. Liberatory mutual aid also involves being accountable to those with whom we are engaged; both those doing the work, and the people in the communities where the work is being done.

Liberatory mutual aid is rooted in the idea of Dual Power as mentioned above. Within this framework, for instance, many people in New Orleans' Common Ground Collective (CGC) engaged in civil disobedience to disobey unjust and immoral laws: occupying a church to stop foreclosure, arming ourselves against white militias, running "illegal" clinics, while at the same time rebuilding or creating from scratch basic infrastructure: community clinics, women's centers, neighborhood assemblies, and community gardens. Engaging with theses frameworks from the beginning can give people localized collective autonomy and control of their neighborhoods and towns. These were coordinated and networked efforts.

In the early months after Katrina the CGC held small free schools across different neighborhoods for kids who were slowly returning home to broken neighborhoods and closed schools. They were small openings. Additionally, CGC volunteers, working with students and faculty, cut the locks on the Martin Luther King public school to gut it, clean it, and get it reopened. Those communities needed that school, despite the fact the city and the schoolboard said it would cost too much and wasn't worth the effort. MLK School became exemplary once it reopened. CGC and student volunteers broke the law because doing so benefited many and this far outweighed legal restrictions. In short, because it made sense to the needs of those communities. This was direct action in resistance and an expression of Dual Power.

Throughout mutual aid efforts, the goal is to rebuild infrastructure that has disappeared due to neglect and decay, and to also build new infrastructure that never existed: think health care, education, food security, communication, and more. Know that many efforts will succeed and

many will fail. Don't be discouraged. Push through the failures. On the other side of difficulties and failures are resilient, connected, autonomous communities. They are worth fighting for.

Collecting supplies under these circumstances is often not the problem. But distribution correctly based on need can be a logistical challenge, especially in the first days. But this is also true later. It might make sense to work within the confines of the law when it's beneficial, and it also makes sense to have a willingness to defy the law when it's counter to the reality and the needs on the ground. Do what's right, not what authorities say.

How to take the sensibility developed during those unguarded moments that disasters force on us and make them last is a question we need to answer, especially as disasters become more prevalent. Disasters, and the ensuing aftermath of cascading crisis, will only get worse — not in some grand biblical way, but in fits and starts. An economy collapses here, an earthquake occurs there, bad politics here, war in some other place. If governments fail, authoritarians will seek to take advantage. We must be ready with answers, but also with deeper questions. How can we build towards the future knowing what's coming? And how do we do this while keeping it liberatory?

The long histories of liberatory forms of mutual aid and solidarity should consciously be looked at as potential paths towards human freedom. While disasters glaringly and painfully reveal the failures of institutional power, they also open cracks for people to see themselves and their own power. People do this by supporting each other and working together. In direct and meaningful ways, people learn that they do not have to wait to make their lives better. They begin to realize that they *can* do it themselves, with support, even in the worst of times.

A Peek into Some Histories

> *"History is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit, but even without being sure of 'history' it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that nobody really understands at the time—and which never explain, in retrospect, what actually happened."*
>
> — Hunter S. Thompson *'Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas'*

We can build on a long anarchist history of mutual aid, specifically in the context of responding to disasters or crisis. We will confront more frequent disasters in the coming years resulting from climate change and other capitalist induced crises. Drawing from these histories can help guide us. Readers are also encouraged to research further into these sketches for themselves, exploring their rich depths.

Anarchist Black Cross

Mutual aid in times of disaster appeared in the early days of the Russian Revolution with the formation of the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC). This organization broke from the relief efforts of the International Red Cross (IRC) in Russia and Ukraine shortly after the revolution because the Red Cross refused to support prisoners, especially anarchist political prisoners, who were in dire need of medical attention and food. The ABC worked to alleviate this problem, with autonomous chapters springing up worldwide. Members provided material aid and called attention to the

plight of anarchist and other political prisoners. Anarchist Black Cross continues to support political prisoners worldwide.

Spanish Anarchists

In July 1936, fascist generals attempted to overthrow the elected Spanish government, provoking what is generally known as the Spanish Civil War (referred to by anarchists as the Spanish Revolution). In the midst of social and military turmoil, through decentralized collectives and federations, peoples' needs were met. Anarchists had begun organizing in Spain in the 1880s, and millions of people across Spain worked collectively together both in the cities and in the countryside. They both reorganized civil society along anarchist lines and fought fascism militarily with self-organized militias. They were ultimately crushed by the combination of Fascists and Communists, but for seventy years before the fascist coop, and for three years after, the anarchists of Spain provided thousands of examples of mutual aid in disaster and crisis.

Street Medics & Food Not Bombs

During the anti-nuclear movements of the 1970s and '80s, many anarchist practices were adopted in mobilizations across the U.S., from the work of the Clamshell Alliance in New England to the long occupations of the Nevada Nuclear Test Site. In addition to using decentralized organizing, affinity groups, and spokes-councils, the movement gave birth to two strands of decentralized mutual aid—street medics and Food Not Bombs. Street medics (those with varying degrees of medical experience ranging from first aid trainings to medical school) had attended protests since the late 1960s, but now took active roles in supporting people who had been tear-gassed, beaten, trampled, or injured by law enforcement at mass demonstrations. Food Not Bombs (FNB), rooted in its decentralized network of autonomous chapters to feed people worldwide, also became active in the early 70s anti-nuke movements. FNB feeding people under duress was a common sight at the anarchist-led protests in the streets as well as in the deserts of the Indigenous lands of Nevada.

Rise of Anarchist Mutual Aid Post-Seattle

The influence of anarchism had been again gaining ground in the U.S. since the 70s. This really accelerated rapidly in the 90s after the fall of Soviet Communism. When the World Trade Organization (WTO) met in Seattle in 1999, anarchists were at the forefront in organizing the mobilization against corporate globalization. A wide-scale anarchist renaissance emerged at successive massive summit protests in North America and Europe. Attended by tens of thousands of people, these mass mobilizations brought anarchist ideas and practices to large numbers of people. This led to the growth of anarchist networks of street medics, collectives focused on legal work, communications, and direct action.

After Disasters and Crisis

Mutual aid for the 21st century began to look different after the turn of the century and its rocky first decade. Disasters — human made, economic, and ecological — took their toll on the psyche of people in the U.S., but something important also emerged along the way: frontline

grassroots, decentralized cooperation in dealing with these disasters outside of the state and the non-profit industrial complex.

Common Ground Collective

When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in the fall of 2005, people worldwide could see the failure of the inadequate responses from both the U.S. government and the Red Cross. The state criminalized desperate people, prioritizing restoring law and order rather than rescue and relief. From the outset, a few of us activists on the ground asked questions: Could these informal post-Seattle networks like street medics, Indymedia, Homes Not Jails, Food Not Bombs, etc. be called upon to participate in disaster relief? Could street medics form a clinic? Could that clinic become a hospital? Could Food Not Bombs feed people for the long term? These questions led to reaching out to those networks for supplies, people, and resources. Decentralized relief efforts sprang up out of this chaos. One of them was the Common Ground Collective, the largest anarchist inspired organization in modern U.S. history.

Common Ground's foundational premises were simple: mutual aid and solidarity, expressed through the slogan "Solidarity Not Charity." Medics and health professionals, legal teams, Indymedia reporters, open source computer programmers, micro radio installers, eviction defense activists — organizers and volunteers came from all these networks, bringing supplies and other people to support communities by providing relief and rebuilding, letting people determine their own futures. Volunteers engaged with individuals and neighborhoods on varied projects from community defense, gardens, neighborhood assemblies, and trash clean-up to free schools, house gutting, and eviction defense. What made Common Ground different from most other relief models was that mutual aid and resistance to authoritarianism were consciously woven into its analysis and most of its practice in building collective liberation.

Over 28,000 volunteers came through in the first three years at Common Ground to support communities that had been devastated, neglected, and ignored even before Katrina hit. It was a mutual aid response to a crisis of the 21st century, built on long anarchist traditions. The Common Ground Collective was a manifestation of these ideas and it has had a reverberating impact outside of the Gulf Coast, both through shared stories of organization and by the tens of thousands of people that participated in the project over the years.

Occupy Movements

The next disaster was an economic one: Wall Street bankers' greed and financial schemes created a financial meltdown in the U.S. that caused massive job losses, collapsed businesses, and evaporated life savings, leading to large scale home foreclosures and evictions. Spontaneously, it seemed, thousands rose up to retake public spaces by reclaiming the commons, gathering together in mutual aid in city after city across the country and around the world. Millions of disaffected people supported the various movements under the umbrella name Occupy starting in September, 2011. Much like efforts responding to Katrina, different communities came together, working cooperatively to defend themselves, feed each other, and share experiences. Mutual aid emerged within campsites, in eviction defense actions, factories, and street protests across the country. Free schools, lending libraries, and medical care were given to those in need. Organiz-

ers and volunteers who had been active within Common Ground were also part of Occupy's decentralized organizing networks, building further on the ideas of mutual aid and solidarity.

Occupy Sandy

Human induced climate change continues to create erratic weather patterns. Hurricane Sandy, a Super Storm, struck the U.S. East Coast in October, 2012 with catastrophic effect in numerous states. Much like Katrina, once the storm passed, the government and Red Cross response was abysmal in already marginalized communities. Momentum provided by people from within the Occupy movement lead to the decentralized efforts of Occupy Sandy, rooted in the models of the Common Ground Collective and other radical movements, again personified by the slogan "Mutual Aid Not Charity." First responders went to otherwise ignored communities, helping set up programs and projects or supporting ongoing aid efforts. After the immediate crisis abated, many within Occupy Sandy continued to support communities in their rebuilding efforts for self-determination.

Oklahoma (OpOk)

In May, 2013 a massive tornado destroyed large parts of Oklahoma— more of the "new normal "created by the rapidly changing climate. People, once again, set up decentralized mutual aid support for immediate relief and longer-term rebuilding. These types of spontaneous organizing efforts now have connected networks to rely on for quick future responses, histories to build from, and people who bring extensive experience in dealing with crises and power sharing skills.

Coronavirus Pandemic/Black Lives Matter Uprisings' Mutual Aid

2020 saw two very different crises and disasters overlap and rock the foundations of civil society and Power. One was the coronavirus pandemic that was both an ecological and economic disaster. Second was the continuation of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) uprising, which initially started after the murders of Treyvon Martin and Mike Brown, then took off exponentially as potentially the biggest protest movement in U.S. history after the police murder of George Floyd in 2020. This sent the country into a crisis around racial identity and oppression, and the continuing role of the police in maintaining white supremacy.

During these events we have experienced an explosion of mutual aid, taking many forms, from basic cooperation amongst people, collectively organized material and medical support for people in the streets, to liberatory approaches during the movement for Black lives which have sought to create collective autonomy for historically marginalized communities. There has been a proliferation of cooperation and meaningful solidarity even as fear of the unknown grips the world.

Disasters, Crisis, and Conscious Paths Forward

"Without community, there is no liberation,"

—Audre Lorde

The ideas and practices of mutual aid are alive and well in the 21st century. In fact, the concepts have become so popular within the mainstream that there is a danger of forgetting mutual aid's liberatory potential. Our capacity to put our emergency hearts into action will continue to propel us forward living daily in our neighborhoods, during mobilizations of people, and when disaster strikes. Disasters will continue to affect all of our communities and lives to varying degrees. Being able to respond with liberatory mutual aid that counters the 'last person standing apocalypse' fantasies of survival is critical in moving us from only thinking of ourselves, to thinking of how can we can engage and actually thrive together in these dire and complicated situations.

Disasters can give us glimpses — the "cracks in History" the Zapatistas refer to — into potentials to take care of each other and work together when it really matters. After everything has been lost, mutual aid and its liberatory potential offers us other ways of seeing and engaging with each other when these cracks open.

Hoarding supplies to fill an empty concrete bunker amidst disaster is not only self-defeating, it's lifeless. At some point the supplies diminish. We can never stockpile enough gold, toilet paper, or bullets. If instead we engage together in conscious cooperation, we can increase our survival chances, creating worlds we truly want to participate in with our families, neighbors, and larger communities that we couldn't have imagined before.

This is more than some short-sighted journey where at the end your team wins for your god, government, or economic system. Mutual aid can be hard, with messy engagements, lack of clarity on what you should do, and fear of an unknown future. Yet these ideas can be incredibly beautiful and rewarding. Mutual aid allows us to put aside all the minutia we believe makes us different from each other and forge paths together.

The more than twenty years since 9/11 have seen multiple grassroots mutual aid initiatives all across the country. These have helped lay the groundwork and feed into the flowering of projects responding to the coronavirus pandemic. We also see street medic collectives tending to the injured at Black Lives Matter and antifascist protests, and legal aid collectives helping those jailed. This is us developing power, sustaining the common sense around the importance of cooperation and caring for each other, centering liberatory ideas, and developing a world beyond police and prisons.

The majority of the world cannot vote or buy our way out of disaster situations. Once we realize this, we can choose to make our and others' lives better. We are developing our potential as human beings. We need to be preparing now for the future disasters we will surely encounter. A liberatory mutual aid is a key piece in making the world anew in this historic time. We can use these ideas and practices to help make a life worth living.

In direct and meaningful ways, people learn that they do not have to wait for those in power to make their lives better. They begin to realize that they *can* do it for themselves, with support, even in the worst of times. These concepts — that anarchists politically name mutual aid — will continue to be needed for the survival and health of all of us in our day-to-day lives as we face uncertain futures. Disasters and crises open a crack for people to see themselves and their own power, allowing us to rebuild small pieces of our communities differently than before and establishing new patterns for the future. These are openings to something different. This is liberation and connection. This is disaster anarchy.

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