Anarchist Responses to a Pandemic

The COVID-19 Crisis as a Case Study in Mutual Aid

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being—ways that capitalism and a capitalist health system systematically hide. In the immortal words of the Industrial Workers of the World, it is building a new world in the shell of the old. And that would be worth doing even in the context of a competent government.

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Abstract

When central authority fails in socially crucial tasks, mutual aid, solidarity, and grassroots organization frequently arise as people take up slack on the basis of informal networks and civil society organizations. We can learn something important about the possibility of horizontal organization by studying such experiments. In this paper we focus on the rationality, care, and effectiveness of grassroots measures to respond to the pandemic and show how they illustrate core elements of anarchist thought. We do not argue for the correctness of any version of anarchist politics, nor claim that the bulk of this grassroots work was done with anarchist ideas explicitly in mind. Nonetheless, the current pandemic, like many social crises before it, serves as a sort experiment in political implementation.

Two things have been striking in the US response to the COVID-19 pandemic: the chaos, incompetence, irrationality, and often cruel misguidedness of the centralized government response; and the rationality, care, and effectiveness of grassroots measures in many parts of the country. In this paper we focus on the latter—especially the case of Washington, DC—to illustrate core features of anarchist politics. We do not argue for the correctness of any version of anarchist politics here, but merely illustrate guiding ideas that have been a part of anarchist theory and practice for well over a century. We also do not claim that the bulk of this grassroots work was done with anarchist ideas in mind, or explicitly out of a commitment to anarchist politics. Some was, and some arises out of related ideological commitments, but most simply functions out of no more than a desire to support one another.

The current pandemic, like many social crises before it, rather than providing a stand-alone argument or functioning as an implementation of any political theory, serves as a sort of laboratory experiment. When central authority fails in socially crucial tasks,

mutual aid, solidarity, and grassroots organization frequently arise as people take up slack on the basis of informal networks and civil society organizations. We can learn something important about the possibility of horizontal organization by studying such experiments, including how it arises through spontaneous action. If political thought is best illustrated through its implementation in practice, the functioning of grassroots individuals and organizations in a time of crisis is one way to understand the political mechanisms core to anarchist thought.[1]

§1. The Situation in Washington, DC, March–April 2020

A. National Government Responses

It is widely recognized that the US government has largely failed to meet the demands of a dangerous emerging new disease. Despite the fact that public health experts in multiple countries and international organizations raised the alarm early and urged aggressive policies of social distancing and testing, the US government lurched between dismissing the worry and a range of different responses. The US was massively short of protective gear, of (accurate) testing equipment, of ventilators, and of ICU beds, and there was no coherent leadership from the top for dealing with these problems. The president downplayed the danger in direct contradiction of the consensus of experts. When he did offer public statements, they veered from bragging to insistence that keeping official US numbers down was more important than public health,[2]

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[1] The classic statement of an argument along these lines is from Rebecca Solnit (2010).

[2] "I like the numbers being where they are," Trump said during a visit to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Friday. "I don't need to have the numbers double because of one ship that wasn't our fault." Mark (2020).

available.[20] But to participate in politics, to construct with others a world in which all can flourish, requires skills, knowledge, and practice. And those capacities do not arise by fiat. If a new world is brought about by a vanguard party handing down even genuinely egalitarian conditions from on high, the only people who will gain skills at organizing society are those in the party. Of course, history gives no reason to suspect that this centralization of power will wither away. Hierarchical power protects itself and moves inexorably to ever greater control.[21] But even if it did not, no capacity for broader involvement is built through an authoritarian movement toward collective liberation.

Grassroots responses to this tragedy do build capacity. In the face of such a devastating and sudden disaster, there are obvious downsides to leaving the response up to the spontaneous organization of local grassroots networks. A meaningful government response would have vastly greater capacity to meet human needs and to control dangerous anti-social behavior—not just congregating in defiance of public health advice, but things like profiteering, abandoning the most economically vulnerable, etc. So, in these ways, grassroots responses to COVID-19, however successful, seem like distant second-best matters of necessity.

But in terms of their ability to build capacity and to show us new non-individualistic, non-competitive ways that we can be together, they are far superior to a competent government. Every time a neighbor delivers loaves of homemade bread to each house in their block, each time someone provides a ride to a medical appointment, a toy to a child, or a grocery run, we learn who we can count on and why. Each time we get together and build a food distro, a community porch singalong, or an online gaming night, we learn both that we can organize ourselves non-hierarchically and that we care enough to do so. These actions teach us new ways of

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[20] For a detailed version of this argument see May (2009).

[21] See Rudolf Rocker (1998, 63); cf. Malatesta (1974, 14).

organization—that it provide evidenced-based and morally decent support to communities. Second, the grassroots efforts are themselves coordinated where possible. Though ward by ward work is largely independent, organizers have regular calls to coordinate, share lessons and resources, and keep up on the latest science from around the world.

E. Congruence of Means and Ends

A final core anarchist concept is the congruence of means and ends. Unlike traditional Marxists, anarchists do not believe in bringing about a free society through seizing state power or other institutionalized authority.[17] The core reason for this is that freedom, according to anarchist thought, is a social skill. Anarchists embrace not merely negative freedom—an absence of coercion—but a rich and substantive sort of positive freedom.[18] This positive freedom requires both material and social conditions necessary to achieve meaningful and flourishing ends[19]—I am not free, in this sense, to be a jazz saxophone player if there are no saxophones and unless there is jazz with all the rich historical and social background that this genre implies—but also active and meaningful involvement in the construction of the conditions of one's life. That is, one is not free in the sense embraced by anarchism merely by being the recipient of a range of life options, but one must as well be in a position to influence what those options are and how they are made

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[17] Again, this is not to say that anarchists eschew coercion as a tactic in changing society. Classical anarchist certainly endorsed things like the expropriation of the means of production—which they took to be illegitimately seized by private or corporate power in the first place. But there is no temporary stage in which the anarchist "leadership" or "vanguard party" would take over such power "on behalf of the proletariat." Rather, seized businesses are to be immediately controlled by those who labor within them.

[18] See Goldman (1998, 98); cf. Goldman (1910, 67).

[19] Goldman (1910, 61); cf. Bakunin (1972, 261); Guérin, (1998, 57).

to incorrect statements of his own administration's position,[3] to attacks on journalists,[4] and to outright falsehoods about test availability, time for a vaccine, numbers of infected, and status of an anti-viral treatment.[5]

In response to such an extraordinary failure, it fell to lower levels of social organization to mobilize a response. A great many layers of society took up the slack.

B. More Local Responses

In contrast to the chaotic, inadequate, and often counter-productive national response, several governors and mayors instituted aggressive, empirically grounded, and scientifically supported policies on their own. But they were far from alone in taking initiative. At all levels of society—from state governments, to corporations, to major civil society organizations, to grassroots networks and organizations—groups of people began to provide services and support in novel ways. Major corporations closed operations voluntarily. Virtually all sporting events in the US were cancelled by professional leagues, the NCAA, etc. Universities nationwide moved to online instruction. Restaurants voluntarily instituted delivery and carryout-only policies. Civic organizations, clubs, and venues closed to implement social distancing. Much of this was eventually required by local governments in some areas—one of the worst aspects of the lack of national leadership has been the massive variation in response between states and even regions within states, variation that is disastrous in the face of a virus that is indifferent to political boundaries[6]—but most was initiated autonomously.

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[3] See, for example, Collinson (2020).

[4] See, for example, Reuters (2020); Roig-Franzia and Ellison (2020).

[5] See, for example, Dale and Subramaniam (2020); Timm (2020).

[6] While California, New York, and DC, for example, were shutting down all large gatherings, the governor of Florida kept beaches open for Spring Break

Even more impressive, we claim, were the steps taken entirely at the grassroots, the steps that involved forming new coalitions and organizations. In tracing the way this happened, it is crucial to keep in mind a truism of social movement theory—that movements arise not utterly spontaneously out of nothing, but by way of existing networks, systems of contacts, and established organizations. Consider the DC Mutual Aid Network.[7] Originating in the easternmost wards of DC, Wards 7 and 8—a majority African American region that has the lowest family income in the District (DC Economic Strategy, n.d.)—it has spread to every other ward in the City. The network was initially convened by Black Lives Matter-DC (BLM-DC), an organization initially formed five years ago to combat police violence against African Americans. Since then, they have expanded their work to include food insecurity, grassroots domestic violence support, work against gentrification, support for public housing, and more. BLM-DC not only has a large number of direct participants, but it has also developed ongoing relationships with numerous other organizations in the city, some centered in the African American community, but many in others. These networks were easily called upon to quickly build the larger coalition in response to the pandemic.

In Ward 6, for example, the initial work was taken on by a group called Serve Your City (SYC). SYC is a youth-focused organization that primarily provides tutoring and youth sports opportunities for underserved youth in DC (SYC, n.d.). Since much of their typical work was shut down as a result of the municipal response to the pandemic, SYC was able to take on direct service work. Importantly, their previous outreach efforts in economically disadvantaged communities created contacts and a history of trust to draw on when providing new forms of support.

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partiers. While Fairfax County, Virginia closed schools, the governor refused to do so.

   [7] See www.facebook.com and the broader online Mutual Aid Network: www.facebook.com

leaders, and organizations like AquariusVann-Ghasri, Beverly Smith, Frank Muhammed, Kareem, Amy Moore, Mommas Safe Haven, Brothas Huddle, the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop, and others, playing a role in the supply chain. Fighting to make sure those without won't have too long to wait for support. Managed and organized by a team of incredible people representing the Ward 6 Mutual Aid Team who were strangers on Monday but forever comrades from a previous life.

…I've known a secret that the coronavirus is teaching and/or reinforcing for all of us. My wellbeing is connected to your wellbeing. The coronavirus is the greatest manifestation of equality that I have ever seen. It cares nothing about your identity, your perceptions, your values, your beliefs, your dogmas, your weapons, or your wealth.[16]

These comments illustrate not only the leadership of deeply socially engaged people, but also the transformative effect that the work has on all involved.

Localism is not an absolute principle of anarchism. Obviously, some matters need to be addressed on a broader scale. What one community does with a river affects those down and upstream on the same river, to mention the classic example. And one might well think that dealing with a pandemic is a paradigm of something that calls for centralized coordination. Viruses do not recognize national, state, or ward boundaries. And anarchism has developed numerous mechanisms to institute genuinely democratic centralized decision-making, organization, and planning, without falling into hierarchical modes.

This recognition that localism is merely a defeasible principle is implicit in much of the work in DC. First, virtually all the local initiatives include demands being made of the DC and national government. One need not endorse government as an ideal structure to demand—in a world in which it is the mode of centralized

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   [16] Quoted from a public Facebook post. See, www.facebook.com

It's been one of those weeks. One of the longest weeks of my life. Since Tuesday I helped build the foundation of a hyper-localized bloc of organizers. The Ward 6 Mutual Aid Team has utilized the model initiated by an amazing group of DC organizers who formed the DC Mutual Aid Network. This grassroots, community-led effort initiated by Black Lives Matter DC, No Justice No Pride, Black Swan Academy, BYP 100 and others formed in response to the inevitability that our systems will not protect, support, or sustain the lives of poor, working class Black and Brown people here in Washington, DC. No political candidate, local public official, charitable foundation, higher education institution, corporate mitigation fund, public health reps…will do whatever is necessary to ensure that our people receive what is needed to live in dignity while facing this imminent catastrophe….

The DC Mutual Aid Network is organizing ward by ward and have already helped thousands of residents across the city. We were so successful this week that at least two DC agencies called the various ward specific hotline numbers….Serve Your City is serving as the network hub for our Ward 6 Mutual Aid Team connecting resources including food and supplies to the community-based, grassroots orgs and community leaders on the ground. Serve Your City had to cancel all of its programs this spring. That means that Black and Brown children won't learn how to row, swim, snorkel, scuba, play tennis, practice yoga, receive college prep and early career engagement. And I think everyone can imagine how much that hurts me. I'm going to channel that pain and use the very same skills I practice bringing resources to the kids we support to bringing resources to the kids and families we support. The organization is called "Serve Your City" for a reason. I just never imagined that these skills would be necessary to mitigate the massive harm from something so powerfully devastating and destructive.

Serve Your City never works alone. It's impossible to do what we do without the power of collectivism, unity, and a shared purpose and vision. We have the most powerful family of people,

In other wards, the lead was taken by groups as vague as neighborhood listservs, or sometimes Neighborhood commissioners or churches. But in all cases, the work quickly spread through existing loose associational networks.

The outreach efforts of DC Mutual Aid Network involve work with the elderly, public housing residents, unhoused citizens, and other vulnerable people. People have made grocery runs for seniors and those at high medical risk. Programs have been established to feed at-risk children who are out of school. Fundraising has provided laptops for students learning at home. People have coordinated driving for essential needs and to medical care as well as in-home nursing visits. Social media sites provide centralized information on resources provided by the city, by NGOs, and by individuals. DIY solutions to a shortage of masks and numerous other problems are proposed and debated in real time. New scientific information is centralized and disseminated through the network and its social media platforms, and social pressure to follow best practices is disseminated by people trusted in local communities. (This network has been so effective that the DC government hotline has taken to directing people to DC Mutual Aid Network—without, of course, acknowledging or supporting its work (O'Gorek 2020).)

In DC alone, dozens of neighborhood listservs and social media sites offer skillshares and direct support—everything from money to rides to grocery deliveries to dog walking. Hundreds of efforts to support precarious workers exist in the city.[8] In all these ways a community of mutual aid has come into being in the midst of a disaster, largely without centralized leadership. And, of course, DC is not unique in this regard. Similar work is happening in numerous cities and rural areas.

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[8] One of us lives in DC and is at high risk due to age and underlying lung conditions. He has been contacted by at least a dozen different neighbors offering support and help.

§2. Anarchism

Among the classical nineteenth-century political philosophies, anarchism is the least studied within the academy and most widely mischaracterized. A systematic theory of non-hierarchical social organization designed to maximize both freedom and cooperation, with well over a century of sophisticated theory developed largely by anti-capitalist organizers and revolutionaries, it is routinely equated in popular discourse and the press with nihilism or chaos, while academics even coin oxymoronic notions like 'anarcho-capitalism.' In what follows, we move through the core elements of anarchist thought, illustrating how each can be found in the praxis of grassroots responses to COVID-19.

A. Mutual Aid

Mutual aid—solidarity, free cooperation—is a core concept of anarchist thought. It is the principle around which just social organization must be built. To embrace mutual aid as the sole legitimate organizing principle of society is to reject the institutionalization of any means of coercion, or of violence and the threat of violence. It is to embrace the idea that we can cooperatively reason with one another, and thereby instantiate our common inclination to build a society that benefits all without instituting any sort of hierarchy that functions to enforce such arrangements.

The grassroots DC response to COVID-19 is a clear and vivid illustration of mutual aid. The actions of DC Mutual Aid Network, neighborhood groups, etc., were all undertaken without any demands of local authorities or hope of personal gain. People saw a need, worked together through existing networks, offered help where needed, engaged in discussions of best practices, listened to established experts, and acted in concert with one another in the interests of all. In many cases, people volunteered activities that were dangerous—delivering materials to potentially sick commu-

Though a sort of coercive authority was deemed necessary in order to continue the work, it was exercised in a horizontal manner as a last resort, and with minimal harm to the status and freedom of the person coerced.

D. Localism

Localism is another core idea that emerges from many currents of anarchist thought: the idea that whenever possible, decisions should be left up to local communities.[14] This is both a principle that supports democracy and freedom—if there is no compelling reason to require uniformity, then it would be an assault on freedom to require all communities to act in the same manner—as well as an epistemic principle. Local communities know best what their own needs are, what local conditions are relevant to meeting those needs, and what social conditions and historical associations will constrain just solutions.

In the case of DC Mutual Aid Network, this meant that networks were organized by wards. While there were coordinating calls and sharing of resources, each ward organized autonomously, determining priorities for themselves. And, of course, many other initiatives within the city grew up either through informal regional networks, friend groups, sports clubs, etc.

In addition, leadership in these networks was local. One of the Ward 6 leaders is Maurice Cook, an adjunct instructor at the University of the District of Columbia and founder of Serve Your City, someone personally known to the residents of Ward 6 public housing neighborhoods and to youth throughout the city.[15] Here is the work in his own words:

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[14] See, for example, Kropotkin (1974), especially chapters 1–3. See also Bakunin (1973, 170–72) and Gordon (2018, 208–9).

[15] Serve Your City is an organization supporting underserved youth in DC, providing tutoring, sports, and material aid.

racist theories, and anti-science superstition are shut down or removed. Would that the elite institutions of US society were as able to recognize the difference between wishful thinking, nonsense, and outright lies.

In terms of internal process, authority here is based on a careful balancing of organizing experience and commitment to equality and democracy. Some of this is laid out in documents.[12] Other times practical matters do not conform to pre-existing rules, and tough decisions have to be made on the fly. At one point a number of highly damaging accusations were made against organizers in an online forum. Though no evidence was presented to support the allegations, they were taken seriously. A mediation process was proposed. Only after numerous efforts to work with this person were all rejected in favor of continued vitriolic attacks were they removed from the process and banned from DC Mutual Aid Network social media sites.

But is this not coercive? Is it not authoritarian to ban people?

Of course, social banning can be authoritarian, but two distinctions are in order: first, the "punishment" here was simply non-association. No one was assaulted, imprisoned, or even prevented from engaging in similar work with some new group that they could convince to work with them. Principles of non-coercive social organization are not violated every time we decide not to associate with someone.[13] Second, no one was institutionalized as the "banning minister." The use of such a punishment was not institutionalized in ways that could coalesce around a power center. It was a decision taken collectively, after attempts to reconcile and mediate, by those responsible for the work.

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[12] For example, Solis (1997); People of Color Leadership Summit (1991).

[13] Of course, things like shunning can be coercive, even violent in extremes. But deciding collectively not to work with someone in response to repeated aggressive actions that are seen as contrary to the point of our association is not such an extreme.

nity members, doctors coming out of retirement to serve[9]—and in no case do these fit the logic of self-interest and competition. As noted on the DC Mutual Aid Facebook page:

We want to take this moment to uplift the purpose and spirit of the group: mutual aid. This group is about solidarity, NOT charity. Protecting each other, not policing each other. Replacing oppressive systems and practices, not replicating them. And, as Dean Spade recently said, "banding together to meet immediate survival needs, with a shared understanding that the systems in place aren't coming to meet us…fast enough, if at all, and that we can do it together right now.[10]

It is a presupposition of anarchist thought that humans have fundamental social inclinations—inclinations to live together and to care for one another. Anarchists have consistently maintained that the actualization of "the material, intellectual, and moral powers that are latent in each person" (Bakunin 1972, 261) and "the all-around development and full enjoyment of all physical, intellectual, and moral faculties" is not possible "outside of human society or without its cooperation" (Bakunin 1992, 46). For anarchists, the fact that human beings are "collective product[s]" born of "collective and social labor" implies that our most basic dispositions—which are "immanent and inherent, forming the very basis of our material, intellectual and moral being"—are ultimately social in nature (Bakunin 1972, 236). This suggests, in turn, that "the isolated individual cannot possibly become conscious of [his or her] freedom" and, by extension, that "the freedom of other [people], far from negating or limiting [individual] freedom, is, on the contrary, its necessary premise and confirmation" (1972, 237). Similar points are made by Errico Malatesta, who argues that solidarity "is the only environment in which [a human being] can express [his or her]

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[9] See, for example, Stickings and Dyer (2020); Fox5DC (2020); DemocracyNow (2020).

[10] For the group, see www.facebook.com. For the post, see pixel.facebook.com. For the full Spade quote, see DemocracyNow (2020).

personality and achieve [his or her] optimum development and enjoy the greatest possible wellbeing" (1974, 29), as well as by Emma Goldman, who contends that individual freedom is "strengthened by cooperation with other individualities" and that "only mutual aid and voluntary cooperation can create the basis for a free individual...life" (1998, 118).

It must be emphasized that none of this entails a "unitary concept of human essence" according to which human beings are naturally benevolent, altruistic, and cooperative, rather than selfish, acquisitive, antagonistic, and the like (May 1994, 13). In point of fact, anarchist thinkers have unfailingly rejected traditional conceptions of "human nature," maintaining instead that individuals are socially constructed and that human personality is socially produced. Mikhail Bakunin, for example, argued that "the real individual"—no less than "his family, his class, his nature, [and] his race"—is constituted by "a confluence of geographic, climatic, ethnographic, hygienic, and economic influences" (1972, 89, 239–41). Like other anarchists, Bakunin resolutely denied that human beings possess "underlying intrinsic properties" or "innate ideas and sentiments." For him, there is no such thing as "human nature" apart from basic biological capacities and inclinations—"rudimentary faculties without content"—that individuals express in different ways and to different degrees. Human personality results from the production of content within these faculties via the complicated array of social, cultural, economic, and political forces that act upon them. In a key sense, nothing is truly "natural" to a human individual-qua-individual except the forces that are "exercised over him."

Even Peter Kropotkin—who, more so than any other major anarchist thinker, attempted to ground the human inclination toward sociability in biological fact—rejected the notion it is fully biologically determined. In his seminal work, Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution, Kropotkin's overarching thesis is that although "there is an immense amount of warfare and extermination going on amidst

for the success of the imminent insurrection" (1993, 41). Cooperating with other groups (which is not the same thing as deferring to them) is more often than not a strategic necessity in pursuing this aim.

A third category of mainstream institution includes groups like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or other scientific organizations. Grassroots work has been vastly better empirically grounded than national responses to COVID-19. Grassroots organizations facilitate social distancing in all manner of ways. They establish collectives to make masks and other supplies that government and capitalist industry have failed to produce in sufficient numbers. They pass on the latest scientific information on sterilization, social distancing, when and how to seek medical help, and more. All of this involves embracing the authority of serious scientific work.

C. Authority

This brings us to the question of authority. As Bakunin famously wrote:

Does it follow that I reject all authority? Far from me such a thought. In the matter of boots, I refer to the authority of the bootmaker; concerning houses, canals, or railroads, I consult that of the architect or engineer....But I allow neither the bootmaker nor the architect nor the savant to impose his authority upon me. I listen to them freely and with all the respect merited by their intelligence, their character, their knowledge, reserving always my incontestable right of criticism and censure. (1972, 229–30)

Again, our claim is that this distinction arises spontaneously in the practice of groups like DC Mutual Aid Network. We just noted that the entire project was based upon a respect for science. Not an uncritical respect—a quick perusal of the Facebook page will show active debates about some dimensions of official guidance—but a respect nonetheless. Comments promulgating conspiracy theories,

erced to follow decisions of a group that they can simply leave at any time. And given that most of these groups were spontaneously brought together to deal with a sudden crisis, even more subtle patterns of coercion that can arise in longer term organizations that are embedded within a society marked by multiple dimensions of hierarchy are unlikely to arise here.

One can see a commitment to horizontalist organization as well in the ways that many mutual aid networks relate to the institutions of dominant society. The DC Mutual Aid Network explicitly refuses any cooperation with police. In the view of the collective, police are the distillation of coercive authority, an institution whose entire function in society is to enforce social organization by threat or use of violence. It is also an institution that, in the view of those involved in this project—especially but by no means exclusively BLM-DC—has a history of harming the very communities they aim to support.

Other institutions while not embraced, are seen as tactically useful allies for specific purposes. Though BLM-DC has been a consistent and outspoken critic of the current DC mayor, and the broader DC government, there is no prohibition on cooperating with city efforts to provide aid and resources in a time of crisis. In fact, the DC Mutual Aid Network collates lists of services and advertises these to at-risk populations, sometimes providing translations. As an ideology that encourages the unity of means and ends and scorns dogmatism of any sort more generally, anarchism has never objected to forming and deploying such tactical alliances—as is made clear, for example, by anarchists' participation in the Popular Front during the Spanish Civil War. What anarchism repudiates, on the contrary, are vanguards—i.e., "particular group[s] with claims to either superior knowledge or more fortunate location in the political terrain…which can take strategic priority and win battles for others (and often speaks on behalf of the client group)" (Franks 2009, 99). Consequently, as Kropotkin writes, "the business of any revolutionary party is not to call for insurrection but only to pave the way

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various species, there is, at the same time, as much, or perhaps even more, of mutual support, mutual aid, and mutual defense," which suggests that "sociability" plays as much of a role in biological evolution as "mutual struggle" (1902, 5).[11]

Just as the nature and development of biological species results from the tension between competing inclinations toward mutual struggle and mutual aid, so, too, is human personality constituted by the conflict between sociability and individual processes of self-development. From the outset, human beings inhabit a reality that is shaped by a struggle between diametrically opposed forces, both internal and external (Kropotkin 1924, 24). Far from being founded on any essentialized conception of human nature, the ethical significance of solidarity, cooperation, and mutual aid is itself a reflection of this struggle (Kropotkin 2002, 119–20).

Although the state, capitalism, and other institutions rooted in hierarchy, domination, and coercion serve to amplify the impulse toward competition and antagonism while simultaneously causing immense damage to human sociality, there nonetheless remain many ordinary contexts of life—friendships, clubs, churches, families—in which people routinely do things for and with one another from a sense that cooperation is good for all. Anarchism is a political philosophy built around this simple idea: that we

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[11] Further, "[I]f we resort to an indirect test, and ask Nature: 'Who are the fittest: those who are continually at war with each other, or those who support one another?' we at once see that those animals which acquire habits of mutual aid are undoubtedly the fittest. They have more chances to survive, and they attain, in their respective classes, the highest development of intelligence and bodily organization.…In the animal world we have seen that the vast majority of species live in societies, and that they find in association the best arms for the struggle for life: understood, of course, in its wide Darwinian sense— not as a struggle for the sheer means of existence, but as a struggle against all natural conditions unfavourable to the species. The animal species in which individual struggle has been reduced to its narrowest limits, and the practice of mutual aid has attained the greatest development, are invariably the most numerous, the most prosperous, and the most open to further progress" (Kropotkin 1902, 3, 293).

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can solve social coordination problems by talking about them and working together. In pursuing this aim, moreover, anarchism doesn't just seek to tear down institutions, but also to marshal already-existing forms of cooperation and solidarity in the service of creating new social forms. As Kropotkin writes, the ultimate goal is not simply "to destroy authority in all its respects, [to] demand the abrogation of laws,...[to] refuse all hierarchical organization," but rather "to build,...to maintain and develop such relations between men that the interests of each should be the interest of all" (2002, 136–37).

This is not to say that anarchists reject all coercion, or even all violence. In particular cases of harmful or anti-social action—say a person attempts a murder, rape, or assault—anarchism lacks specific prescriptions for what others should do to prevent this. As a revolutionary theory, moreover, anarchism acknowledges that coercion—and, on some accounts and in some contexts, violence—may be necessary "in order to put an end to the far greater, the permanent, violence that keeps the majority of mankind in servitude" (Malatesta 2015, 49). That said, anarchism is also fundamentally committed to prefiguration which, "in its most general form...denotes an identity between political methods and political goals or ends" (Franks 2017, 29). Because anarchists "explicitly distance themselves from the position that the end justifies the means" (Franks 2009, 99), the question of whether to engage in particular acts of coercion or violence must be addressed in relation to the ultimate aim of building a free and peaceful society. As Malatesta (2015) puts it, although "violence is justifiable when it is necessary to defend oneself and others from violence" (45), it must nonetheless "be controlled by such considerations as that the best and most economical use is being made of human efforts and human sufferings" (50). I might forcefully stop you from assaulting someone. If you persist in your attacks, our community might even gather and decide to restrain or expel you. What anarchists will not do is create an institution of police—a group

of people whose social role, and, by extension, permanent power, is to engage in such coercive action. All of this is consistent with anarchist politics, which doesn't (necessarily) reject coercion and violence per se so much as their use as organizing principles of society.

B. Organization vs. Rule

Though superficially oxymoronic, anarchism can be thought of as a theory of organization. A clear illustration of this principle is the work of BLM-DC in the pandemic. An organization that was initially formed to confront the most violent civil institutions—police, prisons, etc.—is using its capacity to provide services that other aspects of hierarchical organization cannot adequately deliver. Thus, new horizontal relations between individuals and communities are developed in the work of meeting direct needs. According to anarchism, just social organization is motivated by and originates in mutual aid. It is sustained by instituting mutually beneficial forms of cooperation. As Malatesta writes:

Organization—which is, after all, only the practice of cooperation and solidarity—is a natural and necessary condition of social life; it is an inescapable fact which forces itself on everybody, as much on human society in general as on any group of people who are working towards a common objective. (2015, 77)

People strive to create and maintain just institutions because they see that it is in the interests of their own, and others' lives to do so. As noted above, what anarchism opposes are unjust forms of organization built around coercion, domination, and exploitation—all of which come about as a consequence of people failing to organize themselves (2015, 79). One can see an at least implicit commitment to this structure of organization in the grassroots response to COVID-19.

First, grassroots networks of solidarity, being fully voluntary, have no choice but to be internally horizontalist. No one can be co-