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Five quick thoughts on the limits of Covid-19 mutual aid groups & how they might be overcome

Anna Kleist

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Three weeks ago, I decided to set up a Facebook group to help people look out for one another in my little corner of south east London. Though drawing on the anarchist tradition of mutual aid, I didn't think of it as a particularly revolutionary act – I just knew that mine was a deprived, working class neighbourhood with a high density of elderly and otherwise vulnerable people, and that neither central nor local government would have the will or resources to look out for us. Since then, Covid-19 mutual aid groups have – if you'll excuse the pun – gone viral, with thousands of groups bearing that name cropping up all over the country. Some appear to be wonderful flowerings of human solidarity; others, the vanity projects of aspiring Captain Mainwarings who have clearly been desperate for an opportunity to bark orders ever since they retired from middle management.

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I've thankfully managed to avoid most of the left's online debates about these groups, both because I've been too busy (organising food deliveries etc), and because – after a long hard struggle – I'm finally developing an aversion to pointless agony. But from what I gather, opinion is (predictably) split between wide-eyed optimists who see these groups as a wonderful example of 'anarchy in action' (to borrow Colin Ward's famous phrase) and the cantankerous snipers of the ultra-left who use the real limitations of these groups as an excuse to not bother getting stuck in and help people. I think both are right and wrong, in more or less equal measure, and what follows is some very quick thoughts on why. They are not well conceived, comprehensive or theoretically nuanced; they are half-baked observations banged out in a space of time I should have been using to 'unwind'. For this reason, they are probably completely wrong. But I hope they are at least *productively* wrong. If they're not – well, at least I tried eh?

1. Most of the 'aid' offered by Covid-19 mutual aid groups is not antagonistic to the logic of capital – it's just shopping on behalf of other people. Indeed, whether such activity even deserves the name 'mutual aid' is, in my opinion, an open (if boring) question. After all: capital still has hold of what we need to survive, and we are still paying for it with the pittance they haven't (yet) stolen from us, even if someone else hands over the money to the merchant. Indeed, in a glowing endorsement of our efforts, ASDA are rolling out a 'volunteer card' that will make it easier, rather than harder for us to offer 'mutual aid'.
2. That said, some c19 mutual aid groups are at least aiming beyond the limits of commodity exchange. Within my local group, we've begun to see small scale acts of direct economic redistribution and (limited) free provision of essential supplies. Elsewhere, mutual aid networks

have mobilised to defend tenants from the evictions that we were told would not be happening. To my mind, the pressing question is how to extend and intensify this tendency. More specifically: how can these new mutual aid groups promote the de-commodification of the things we need to live and thrive?

3. Irrespective of the whether or not c19 mutual aid groups are mounting a challenge to capitalism, they are – as a matter of fact – helping large numbers of people to survive the present crisis, and that is nothing to be sniffed at. Collective survival is far from revolution but, as the Panthers taught us, it is a necessary pre-condition for revolutionary possibilities.
4. Local mutual aid groups are helping to build – at incredible speed – links of friendship and solidarity that have been worn away by 40 years of racist neoliberalism. In the hundreds of conversations I've had with neighbours over the last few weeks, there has been a consistent air of surprise that people are going out of their way to help one another. This suggests that mutual aid groups have the *potential* (though only that) to challenge people's ideas about what is possible: that they can act as living proof that things *can* be different, that we *can* choose care and solidarity over competition and profit and – most importantly – that it is better for all of us when we do. This is not to say that mutual aid groups are, on their own, capable of exorcising the mistrust and enmity that has come to permeate so many of our social relations – they aren't – but they at least offer the hopes of a beginning to that process and, as far as I can tell, that makes them one of the few games in town.
5. If we want the organising of the last few weeks to be something that pushes society in the direction of

liberation, we have a lot more work to do. We have to promote democratic structures within mutual aid groups; challenge the oppression and discrimination that is occurring within them; make connections with other struggles (workers' struggle, the fight for migrant rights, for prison abolition...) and promote forms of aid and solidarity that go beyond merely buying commodities on behalf of other people. This will not only require huge effort but also the oft forgotten revolutionary virtue of patience. Too many times over the last few weeks I've seen comrades flouncing out of WhatsApp groups because they 'aren't interested in being involved in a group that isn't explicitly political', as if caring for (and with!) those deemed 'expendable' isn't in-and-of-itself vital work, as if they wouldn't associate themselves with people who don't automatically think like they do. In giving in to these puritan impulses (which exist in many of us, myself included) we not only doom ourselves to irrelevance, but we abandon the people and ideals we claim to care so much about.