Rhiannon Firth, IGDcast
‘Mobilising Disaster Relief’
2022

Transcribed, annotated and printed in Return Fire vol.6 chap.7 (winter 2024–2025). To read the articles referenced throughout this text (for example, in [square brackets] or in footnotes), PDFs of Return Fire and related publications can be read, downloaded and printed by visiting returnfire.noblogs.org or emailing returnfire@riseup.net

theanarchistlibrary.org

‘Mobilising Disaster Relief’

Rhiannon Firth, IGDcast

2022

[ed. – Transcribed from a podcast on itsgoingdown.org in 2022. First of two interviews (see ‘The Position of the Excluded’) retrieved in this double-issue with long-time UK anarchists, hoping to maintain the transmission of lessons and memories from struggles of bygone decades, and what they mean for our situation today. Our ability to do this may be key in coming years, given the ‘eco’-recuperation (see The “Green” Farce Everywhere & Nowhere Else) underfoot for some time. The generational shift means that aspiring land-defenders today on these isles may not even know of – to take one example from below – the ‘90s holistic critique-in-action of car culture (even, in the best cases, of industrial society) in general, instead of today’s technocratic reduction to ‘reducing emissions’ making new electric vehicles seem the ecological option… and the same road-building program that was defeated around the turn of the millennium now back on UK planners’ agenda, without such popular rage. More broadly, this piece tackles the importance and dangers of mutual aid projects (a term now mobilised by both friends and enemies), pushing us to better delineate what makes such efforts radical, including – but not limited to – the kind of look back on COVID-19 responses (see ‘The Difference

Between "Just Coping" & "Not Coping at All"") we think anarchists need to make.]

*****

I'm Rhiannon (she/her). I live in London, UK. I've lived here for about 10 years. Before that, I grew up in the Midlands and I did my degrees and PhD in the Midlands, in the UK. I'm active in various social movements. I got into anarchism via the traveller and rave scene and DIY eco-protest scene in the late '90s in the UK. I was also a real geek that was really good at school, so I was doing anarchist stuff and then I got into studying anarchism academically as well at the same time. I did a politics degree and then I went on and did a master's and a PhD, so I studied a lot of radical politics while I was living it as well.

And then I moved to London; and I've been working as a lecturer and a researcher on various precarious contracts for about 15 years since I finished my PhD. I was active in the Occupy movement[1] back when I was still living in Nottingham; quite a small camp back there. And in London, I've mostly been involved with anti-gentrification and popular education/critical pedagogy type projects. I've written some academic books and articles. And my latest book is sort of trying to be less academic; it *is* quite academic, but it's also trying to have a social movement relevance as well. So that's called *Disaster Anarchy*, which I think is why I've been invited to talk on the show.

It's about mutual aid disaster relief, which I know has been a thing in the States for much longer than it has here. I got into that because I was working on a research project about disasters and my boss wanted me to go and interview some people who were involved with Occupy Sandy *[see below]* (because he knew that's the kind of thing I'm interested in and there was a bit of money to do that). So I jumped at the chance. I went in 2015, on the third

[1] ed. – see the supplement to this chapter of Return Fire; 'Centering Relationships'

more. I have no idea what's going on with the international economy at the moment. But you can also get a discount code: FIRTH30. So you can get 30% off, which makes it around £16, which I don't know how many dollars that is. But it's been printed in the USA as well as the UK. So it will be available on the US website too. I haven't actually looked at the price in there. Just say to anyone, you can probably get it on Amazon, but don't buy anything off Amazon ever. You can go into a bookshop and ask them to order some in. But if someone can't afford it, I'm negotiating possibilities with the publishers for making it open access. And with all my previous work, there's probably free versions online if you know where to look. But if anyone's struggling, you can just Google my name and drop me an email and I'll find you a solidarity copy somehow.

used against previous movements, and the history of the policies and how different movements have dealt with it so that people can try and identify them and resist that.

But I'm not sure I've got the answer. And I think that's why I think I probably think about that question almost too much. And that's why I end up writing books and the whole book.

IGD: How can we build on these lessons and take them into the future?

Rhiannon: I think setting up longer-term projects and defending existing spaces is really important. So I keep going on about that: resisting the eviction of people, resisting the eviction of squats, trying to keep people and communities together when they *already are* engaging in mutual aid.[30] But also I think the cooperative model: Occupy Sandy certainly set up a lot of cooperatives with money that was donated to them. And I think the cooperative model is a really great balance between something that has legal status (that the State isn't necessarily seeking or able to dispossess it immediately, so it's not constantly under threat): but then within that holding space, non-hierarchical organizing and building radical infrastructure. So I think the cooperative model is something to do moving forward. I went to Wisconsin and there were so many cooperatives in Wisconsin! I feel like the States is ahead of everything in terms of radical organizing at the moment. I don't know if that was always the case. And so going full circle, going back to my induction into it all in the late '90s, I felt like the UK was really thriving; but hearing about what's going on in the US these days, it feels like you lot are ahead.

IGD: Where can people follow your work and buy your books?

Rhiannon: The book I've just written, the *Disaster Anarchy* one: it's £20 from Pluto Press. So you can go on the Pluto Press website. I don't know the current exchange rate; it used to be [that] £20 would be more dollars, but I don't know if it is more dollars any-

[30] ed. – see 'Since Colonial Times'

anniversary of the hurricane, and I interviewed a bunch of really cool people. And obviously, coming from the UK, the US is a really different context. I'm still getting to grips with that. I do worry a bit about an American audience reading my book; because there's definitely stuff I might have got wrong or misunderstood because of my context I'm coming from. But then I also find that when I read American books about the UK, there's that kind of gap as well. I'm hoping that's a productive dialogue rather than anything else.

But I'm also aware that there's been a lot more disasters in the States than there has in the UK. And it's relatively recently that we've had any disasters at all here *[ed. – that is, spectacularised ones]*.

So I was finishing this book on Occupy Sandy, which was initially just meant to be an article. But actually, I found there wasn't really anything academic on disaster. There wasn't anything anarchist, and certainly not anything academic *and* anarchist that I could find at the time on mutual aid disaster relief. I started writing this in 2015; there's been a lot more stuff in the anarchist press over the last few years, but still nothing academic (well, not much, very little) about anarchist social movements mobilising disaster relief and consciousness-raising around disasters and all that kind of thing. So it took me ages to find enough stuff to write a book. And I just ended up reading, reading, reading; and it ended up not being an article. It took a book to process that.

I was just finishing the book, and it was nearly done after five years. And then COVID hit, and there was a huge mutual aid movement in the UK. So I thought, well, I can't really have written this book around mutual aid disaster relief sitting in London when all my friends are sort of mobilising mutual aid movements and not include that. So I did some interviews in London as well with people I knew through my network. Also a lot of the academic stuff that's come [out] about the COVID-19 mutual aid movement was (I'm probably going to talk about this later in the interview) just about the depoliticised sections of the movement, which was probably

most of it. But because I'm interested in anarchism, I interviewed anarchists. So I think that's quite an original contribution; in the UK context, at least. Not many people have written about that.

And also I compared some of the things that happened with Occupy Sandy with that. But I'll stop there for a minute, if that's OK, and let you ask a question…

IGD: You said you got involved in anarchism in the late '90s. I'm assuming you were involved in the anti-roads movement?[2]

Rhiannon: Yeah, [the] anti-roads movement: and there was Reclaim the Streets, which I was more involved with. So we just used to stand in the middle of the street and have a massive rave, basically: to stop traffic going up and down, and communities would get involved, and people would be on swings on tripods to stop the police from being able to move us. And that was the urban aspect of the movement.

There was also a rural aspect, and there was Swampy, who was a famous eco-anarchist in the UK. He was an absolute hero at the time…

IGD: Swampy, yeah!

Rhiannon: There was also stuff like, one of my ex-boyfriends lived in a tree for months where there was this ancient sacred stone site that they were going to build a road over. And people would live in the trees for months. But there was also a huge traveller scene of people that had been living in vehicles. It was a movement that had been going for decades, of people travelling the countryside, living in vehicles and doing big raves and things like that. And they brought in the Criminal Justice Bill and criminalised that lifestyle (which people had been born into and stuff…) *[ed. – further criminalised in 2021: see 'There Are Many Ways to Resist']*. I remember just being absolutely horrified by that. It's probably one of the things that radicalised me at the time. And I was doing a politics degree at the time as well.

[2] ed. – see Return Fire vol.4 pg89

community. And to me, that's an inherently almost spatial thing. So it involves direct action.

IGD: What were some of the limits that you saw the mutual aid groups coming up against? And how do you think that we can overcome them?

Rhiannon: Burnout is a massive thing, definitely.[29] I'm not quite sure… people run out of money as well. Or there's things like these furlough schemes and then they run out and we have to go back to work now. And then also the limit of interpersonal differences and so on; political differences are a big one. I've sort of talked about that already: people being silenced within groups, and groups and movements splitting because people understand the politics of the thing differently.

But even interpersonal differences… I suppose that's one of the things that in my work I've never really quite found the answer to. Before I worked on disasters, I did a project on intentional communities; and one of the biggest things that seemed to tear communities apart was difficult and authoritarian people throwing their weight around and splitting things. And I'm not quite sure how to overcome it.

One of the things I think is important is having a good critique of authoritarianism (and having a good critique of one's own internalized authoritarianism), and maintaining a radical and optimistic and utopian outlook. And also I think just recognizing the dangers of the fact that the State does want to do these things as well, and that it has intentional policies and practices in place to split movements. And maybe just knowing – as individuals and groups and communities – how to resist these tactics when the State tries to repress us and depoliticize us (including the internalized State).

That's partly why I wrote the book. And I think (or hope) it's at least partly useful by offering an in-depth analysis of some of the sort of State policies and discourses and practices that have been

[29] ed. – see You Are the Good Cause

what the State is against in a sense. The State seeks to capitalize on everything. All creativity and social relations is something that capitalism and the State will want to either recuperate or, if they can't recuperate or commodify it, they'll want to shut it down and stop it.

In specifically the disaster context, I think that disaster capitalists will come and dispossess and profit from all the creative action, and lovely projects and infrastructure will get turned into "well, this is a nice area now: let's gentrify it." Or, "this is too radical. This is irredeemable. Let's cut it off from capital." So it securitizes disasters by dividing the "deserving poor" (or nice, social capital forms of mutual aid, State-friendly type stuff), and it will set these in opposition to radicalized and racialized forms of community action that are constructed as violence, disorder and looting and so on.[27]

I keep going on about eviction resistance… But there was this beautiful action in Glasgow where the immigration police turned up and tried to rip some people out of their homes (at 5AM or something.) And the community came together, and they stood in front of the police vans and they called all their friends, and there were thousands of people. In the end, the van couldn't move and it was a stand-off, and eventually the men were released.[28] I guess that's an example of what I think mutual aid really is.

Mutual aid isn't about "well, let's help the nice people in our neighborhood, but there's some people hanging around on the street corner: let's call the police on them." I don't think mutual aid should be about that. I think it should be about building community and ultimately resisting things that seek to dispossess

vol.5 pg53], through structural critique and consciousness-raising, and through direct action" (DOPE Magazine #22).

[27] ed. – see the supplement to this chapter of Return Fire; The Swell

[28] ed. – Anarchists (who were first on the scene) report that 3 people were arrested for their part in the defence, although since acquitted. Other cities in Scotland and England have since replicated this successful action.

IGD: Which is interesting, because I feel like [for] a lot of Americans, the impression is that there was not many subcultures outside of punk that drew people into the movement.

Rhiannon: That was a big thing in the UK, and it was all connected with the DIY culture and eco-protesting and things like that. I'm not quite sure how to comment on that, because I don't know the States context so much. But there were lots and lots of illegal raves. So maybe people were just doing that for pure hedonism, but certainly the way that that was policed and criminalised radicalised a lot of people. And then also there was a connection between the raves and the traveller scene and then the anti-roads protests. So yeah, it was a pretty thriving time for radical politics in the UK.

IGD: Awesome. I'd encourage people to check out the magazine *Do or Die*. Especially the last issue they put out called *[ed. – or rather, containing the substantial strategic essay called]* Down with the Empire, Up with the Spring. *Do or Die* #10, I believe. Little Black Cart has a book version you can buy, that's very well worth your time to check out, which has a lot of reflections on a lot of these autonomous movements we're talking about. But it's from the UK, and they really melded the ecological struggle with a lot of insurrectionary, class-struggle anarchism in a really interesting way, which I thought was great.

Rhiannon: Yeah, there's an anthology, actually, which might be easier to access than the old 'zines. It's called *Cracks in a Grey Sky*. I've got it right in front of me, actually.

IGD: Yeah, that's the one I'm talking about from Little Black Cart, I believe.

Rhiannon: It's a great book.

IGD: So the press release for the *Disaster Anarchy* book writes, "Disaster anarchy is one of the most important political phenomena to emerge in the 21st century." Explain why this is so.

Rhiannon: In the book, I talk about the convergence of climate change and neoliberalism.[3] So, how disasters are becoming more frequent due to the crisis of social and ecological reproduction,[4] I call it. But, basically, the collapse of the oil economy and industrial civilization as we know it, in a sense, seems to be something that's even… I don't know if it's the same in the States, but it was on the news this morning; BBC News radio telling us that we're all going to be extinct… So, it seems to be pretty common parlance now. Certainly in London we had the highest temperature ever recorded. It was like 40℃ or something. I think it's quite obvious to most people, although I'm aware there's denialists (and certainly more in the US, I think, than the UK). But it seems obvious that something is changing. The world's changing. It's becoming a more scary and unstable place, the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events is increasing.

But also capitalism/neoliberalism has increased our interconnectedness, so that localized events reverberate globally.[5] The pandemic spread incredibly quickly. And also some of the protective measures that we might have had in the post-war period, like well-prepared health care services and social welfare: certainly in the States health care has been a lot less universal than it is here even, but also certainly one of the big dynamics we've had here has been the erosion of the health services. And they're being further eroded under neoliberal austerity.[6]

I think it's this intersection of more uncertainty in the weather, but also the interconnectedness of the world, the uncertainty of the economy through neoliberal things like financialization. And then also less protection for people through these kind of stabilizing measures like the welfare state. So I guess it doesn't any longer seem sensationalist or doomerist (I think that's a word…) to say

[3] ed. – see 'The Position of the Excluded'

[4] ed. – see 'The Difference Between "Just Coping" & "Not Coping At All"'

[5] ed. – see 'We Cannot Share This Planet With Them'

[6] ed. – see Return Fire vol.1 pg48

there's relationships beyond transactional relationships or things that are useful to capital and the State.[25] And I think mutual aid is an example of that: the idea of something being truly mutual and people helping each other: not for money, not for esteem or power, just because that's really human.[26] In the book, I argue that that's

[25] ed. – see Return Fire vol.5 pg53

[26] ed. – "Mutual aid is a form of disaster response that starts from the experiences and impacts on humans and other living beings and the meaningful structures of life embedded in objects, habitats, and ecosystems, rather than focusing on keeping order by managing the effects on the state or economic system, treating humans as generic subjects. It starts from the position of each person/being. Rather than a top-down approach that creates roles people must fill, a bottom-up response would facilitate people to contribute and plug-in' to a network based on their own talents, needs and desires. Rather than centralised efforts under a lead organisation, this approach would encourage multiple small groups, and a proliferation of projects with different emphases and methods – allowing some overlap and redundancy. […] Anarchism reimagines the temporality and scale of radical social change. There is an emphasis on the small scale, on degrowth and social recomposition, on a society bubbling with transgressive life through overlapping societies, groups, and organisations whose affinities and relations are immeasurable and un-mappable. Social change is both immanent and prefigurative, and does not require scaling-up through unity or a vanguard in order to be extended or politicised; such vanguardism tends to defer lived anarchy to the future. Transgression and insurrection are already a part of everyday life and are observable everywhere when everyday life is examined using an anarchist epistemology *[ed. – see Return Fire vol.5 pg118]*. People like [George] Monbiot and [David] Harvey argue that the problem with anarchism is that it can't be scaled-up to provide an effective response to large-scale 'wicked' problems like pandemics, climate change, and capitalist extractivism; however, degrowth and re-scaling is often an effective response *[ed. – for just a few great examples, see 'The Solutions are Already Here' by Peter Gelderloos]*. The powerful only accept solutions that leave their own position untouched, which effectively prevents degrowth: the state seeks to capitalise on all social relations. The anarchist reversal of perspective views humans' greatest enemy as the state *[ed. – see 'We Cannot Share This Planet With Them']* – a particular way of relating – rather than as other human beings in themselves. Mutual aid is therefore always vulnerable to co-optation by controlling ways of being. […] Even where explicit politics is avoided, mutual aid may have political effects through social recomposition, creating infrastructures, through prefiguring a more equal and stateless society and gift economies *[ed. – see Return Fire*

around social capital: we had a lot of it in Britain, even the Tory government were using the term mutual aid… I argue in the book that that's explicitly designed to encourage and mobilize the sort of State-friendly, papering-over-the-cracks, shopping actions that are helpful to the State: and then criminalize and securitize[22] those actions which aren't, and make them appear illegitimate and so on. We were talking about looting: some people's looting is helping and some people's looting is somehow dangerous and criminal. I try and situate that in a longer policy field.

IGD: So what are the subversive elements of mutual aid that we should work to strengthen and expand? We talked about recuperation: what are we actually doing right, that we should double-down on?

Rhiannon: Personally, I think just being together in community and having relationships with people that aren't commodified, and aren't in the terms of the State, and aren't useful to the State or capitalism: I feel like that's already radical in a sense, and I think it's already subversive.[23]

I think one of the big arguments in my book (and something that I feel quite deeply on a personal level) is that the State seeks to capitalize on all our social relations. Like I said, I became active in the late '90s and we didn't have the Internet then: it just seems even more obvious now that people have these Instagram stories where they're commodifying themselves as a person.[24] I suppose people have always done that… But there's life beyond that, and

ket logic has also devastated the health services in poorer areas of rich countries, so that whereas the margins were once associated with 'tropical' or Third-World areas, one increasingly finds the 'margins' within the core – for example poverty-stricken black communities in post-Katrina New Orleans" (Coronavirus, Class & Mutual Aid in the United Kingdom).

[22] ed. – see Calling it Terror

[23] ed. – see the supplement to this chapter of Return Fire; Open Letter from Return Fire magazine to the 2024.03.29–31 International Anti-Prison/Anti-Repression Gathering

[24] ed. – see A New Luddite Rebellion

that the oil economy and industrial civilization and the associated forms of governance are collapsing.

Also, people are profiting from all aspects of this; people are profiteering from it. Naomi Klein's book [on] disaster capitalism *[ed. – The Shock Doctrine]* is quite a good exposé of that. But I hope to go further than that, and have a specifically anarchist critique of some of this; and then also look at the movements that are offering hope, or at least mobilizing and trying to offer something different. And also different, new forms of eco-fascism[7] and Left authoritarianism[8] that also seem to be on the rise.

That's why I say it's one of the most important political phenomenons: when I say important, I think it's for me the only one I want to align myself with.

IGD: We want to start off by talking about the growth of mutual aid programs in the UK after the rise of COVID-19. So talk to us about this. Flesh out the movement; and how expansive was it? Tell us about the activity and give us an introduction.

Rhiannon: It's worth saying that even though I was already writing about mutual aid, and I was aware of mutual aid as someone who studied anarchism and had read Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*[9] and was writing about Occupy Sandy and mutual aid, most people in the UK wouldn't have heard those two words together. It wouldn't have been in the mainstream consciousness at all. And even radical-ish people who weren't anarchists probably wouldn't have heard "mutual aid." I think that's a bit of a different context to the US, where you did have Occupy Sandy and continuing movements around it.

I think another thing that makes talking about mutual aid a bit tricky is that even as it was sort of first conceptualized *[ed. – or, rather, re-popularised in the West]* by Kropotkin, it can be *more* or

[7] ed. – see Lies of the Land

[8] ed. – see the supplement to Return Fire vol.6 chap.3; Green Desperation Fuels Red Fascism

[9] ed. – see Return Fire vol.4 pg96

less explicit or intentional. So Kropotkin uses it to talk about animals, even, and the fact that he saw cooperation as being just as important to evolution as competition; so he'd talk about animals engaging in mutual aid. And also he talked about subsistence communities engaging in mutual aid – who wouldn't have referred to their actions as such, and weren't organizing politically; they were just living. And I think a lot of stuff that happens in the aftermath of a disaster (or even in normal working-class and marginalized communities in the UK and elsewhere anyway) could be understood as mutual aid and fit all the parameters of the term without necessarily calling itself that (or other people even needing to call it that).

But after COVID, there was this mutual aid movement of people explicitly calling themselves mutual aid and organizing these groups. And there was this national website, COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK. I've not been able to find out a huge amount about people who formed that: apparently some people started an explicit mutual aid group in Lewisham in London.

So that's south London, I'm in north London. And it's a big joke that "you don't go south of the river"/"you don't go north of the river": I'm very much a north Londoner! But I do know that Lewisham has really radical groups and communities. And I've gone to a lot of talks down there. I'm not involved in that community or embedded in it, but I'm very aware that it's there. So I'm not surprised that this thriving mutual aid group started in Lewisham. And the people who started that thought that they started the first group. So one of the interviewees was very careful; she said the people that founded that thought they founded the first mutual aid group. They don't know that. And I don't know the founders of that mutual aid group either, but they were on national TV talking about it.

And then lots of groups started to spring up. Those people felt quite responsible for the movement in some sense, because they felt that they'd founded the first one and they'd been on telly [TV].

(secretive) state agencies to oversee and co-ordinate their actions in order to differentiate between 'helpful' and injurious emergent actions – and ultimately to use generic structural adjustments, 'education' and 'nudges' to manipulate the beliefs and behaviour of populations in order to encourage those actions that are seen as helpful to the state. Actions helpful to the state are not judged via democratic means, but rather via the technocratic knowledge of experts. While the discourse seems entirely opposed to hierarchical and top-down control, it relies on the same logic of disposability and exclusion of that which is not useful to the state and capitalism. It is problem-solving rather than critical research, and treats humans as outward-directed nodes who can easily change behaviour based on promises of reward or threats of punishment, ignoring complex and often conflicting dynamics of meaning, belief, trust, desire and the unconscious. […] This cybernetic view tends to treat the sick as the enemy – or at least as dysfunctional nodes that are disruptive to the functioning of the overall system – to be controlled through authoritarian but decentralised behavioural nudges such as (sometimes vague and confusing) social distancing rules, in which the responsibility for interpreting and successfully following the rules rests with the individual. Take for example the UK government's advice on easing lockdown rules and encouraging a return to work, that individuals ought to 'stay alert' in order to 'control the virus'. Health becomes a 'game' which the sick are perceived to have failed – for example the advice to 'wash or sanitise hands frequently' assumes constant access to bathroom facilities, running water and soap which are not always readily available for homeless people for example, and the ability to purchase sanitiser during a panic-buying crisis when prices are exorbitantly inflated. Neoliberal public health emphasises personal responsibility for health outcomes, mimicking a decentralised approach whilst behind the scenes state, military, industrial and pharmaceutical capitalist technocrats are rigging the game to achieve desired (profitable) outcomes. To complicate matters somewhat, the current conjecture appears to contain social forces towards a gradual discrediting of neoliberal approaches, which is reinforced in the current crisis by the fact that individual health outcomes also affect third parties. This is leading to a resurgence of public health discourses that are basically totalitarian in character; mimicking the increasing securitisation and militarisation of responses to other crises such as the climate-refugee crisis *[ed. – see the supplement to this chapter of Return Fire; The Swell]* and the increasing bordering of nations. This may be leading to a recomposition of state and capital in new formations that Benjamin Franks calls 'nationalist capitalism' and Ian Bruff calls 'authoritarian neoliberalism'. There is a new root discourse emerging – away from 'risk management' towards 'new threats' where problems are cast as starting in disorderly zones on the edges of the world system, then filtering inwards, requiring strengthened borders, 'security' and/or neo-colonialism under the guise of 'militant humanitarianism'. Mar-

But then there was this report that was commissioned by the Department for Homeland Security after the fact, but drawing on overt and covert surveillance within the movement (that activists had been aware of and a bit creeped-out by at times). This report was written like, "how do we mobilize the youthful energy of these activists?" The whole language and report's really patronizing; "even though they were involved with this rather idealistic and unfortunate Occupy Wall Street movement, the urgency of this situation didn't leave any time for politicizing. They organized with resilience and flexibility, and they were efficient because there wasn't as much red tape…" Basically, praising the organizational aspects of anarchic organizing (they weren't all explicit anarchists by any means, but, you know…), praising their State-friendly efficiency actions, but diminishing anything radical or political about it explicitly and saying "as a State, how do we have a policy that can integrate these kinds of actions into our whole community approach?"

In the book, I situate that in a critique of… Basically, since World War Two, there's been this cybernetic management discourse[20] in disaster studies.[21] I try and situate those kinds of reports and ideas

[20] ed. – see Cybernetic Mommy Milkers

[21] ed. – "The currently hegemonic public health model is inseparable from disaster management, cybernetic co-ordination and behavioural nudge psychology. This thread was developed by Enrico Quarantelli, a leading name in disaster studies from the late 1970s until the present day. [Quarantelli] critiqued the top-down 'command and control' approach to risk management that saw the potential for disaster planning and management to manipulate 'prosocial behaviour' in the interests of restoring 'normalcy'. Following a cybernetic model which valorises feedback systems he argued that disasters impact differently on different segments of society and communities have their own pre-existing 'patterns of authority' and 'autonomous decision-making' that ought to be left in place. Disaster planning deals with aggregate data and ought to 'focus on general principles and not specific details' and should also 'be vertically and horizontally integrated'. This initially gives the appearance of equal treatment and a role for horizontalist organisations such as mutual aid groups. However, the integration of the horizontal with the vertical relies on the planning and management functions of

So they felt they had some kind of responsibility for the trajectory. And they set up this mutual aid UK umbrella group. They provided various resources and they had a sort of ethos. They weren't explicitly anarchist, but there were definitely radical decolonial, intersectional feminist type people, and they used a lot of anarchist-y discourse on the website, about keeping things local and not being affiliated with State agencies and things like that. So I think it was a really useful website. And then it did become this huge national movement, which was in many respects amazing; I was taken aback that mutual aid had become a term in the UK.

It's also difficult to associate the shape the movement became with the initial ethos of this website. I think it was something that people wanted to happen, and it became that term that they got behind. But I think there were a lot of problems with the way that website encouraged people to organise, in the sense that it recommended a spatial strategy of doing it by borough and ward, which replicates the territorial forms of the State in a way (like electoral districts). And I think that made them prone to co-optation and de-radicalisation by local officials. Some of my interviewees called it "the local councillor problem." So, they'd organise a mutual aid group and the local councillor for that ward would get involved because they'd be like, "well, that's my territory. This is who I represent: I'm in charge here." And they'd join and try and turn it into a sort of council enterprise.

And then there was this kind of very depoliticised (largest, probably) section of the movement who didn't want mutual aid to be political. So I look at a lot of the problems with that, about how it became largely a sort of helping exercise (helping people shop and papering over the cracks where the welfare State and neoliberalism have left people vulnerable) without radically questioning anything. But also I talk to anarchists. So in the book, I interview people who are explicitly radical. I think there's a lot of inspiration to be taken as well as critique of policies and ideas that make mutual aid merely this kind of modified helping thing, I guess.

IGD: So it seems interesting because my impression of things is that the movement sort of… I don't want to say got away from people, but kind of took on a life of its own, outside of the activity of anarchists and other radicals. Whereas here in the US it was very much a mixture of a lot of people hunkering down and starting projects; also a lot of people taking their own initiative, but it seemed very much a reflection of building autonomous action and thought, and people wanting to intervene in this moment. Is that how you would describe it?

Rhiannon: Yeah, definitely in a way. But also there was this explicit mutual aid movement, and that was valorized and glorified (in the press and on this website and [on the] news) as a depoliticalthing; as social capital.[10] But there were more radical sections of the movement as well. There were anarchists and other radicals

[10] ed. – "Disaster utopias problematise the orientation of utopia towards intention and the future. Nobody wishes for a disaster, yet they produce affects such as desire and hope for change, and facilitate (through necessity) the formation of grassroots infrastructures and technologies. However, the government and others (particularly the moralising discourse of the social democratic left and the NGO-complex) try to co-opt and de-radicalise them. There is a whole discourse, originally academic, but seeping into mainstream media and frequently adopted by NGO professionals, of 'social capital'. Social action, rather than being seen as something valuable on its own terms, is re-cast as a form of 'capital' to be mobilised in the interest of a return to the 'normality', or the even more terrifying 'new normal' – of capitalism-as-usual. Social capital theory emphasizes how local-level participation is vital in building 'resilience' and that top-down processes fail in emergencies because not responsive and flexible enough. It *sounds* radical and progressive because it valorises the grassroots, but the grassroots is not valued on its own terms but in terms of the value it has for capitalism/capitalists (ultimately – profit). This discourse encourages NGOs and grassroots to absorb former state functions, with the expectation of co-operation with the state (e.g. funding with conditions attached). The role of state is technocratic; to impose cohesion. When society and the state are seen as complementary and mutually supporting, this means that only the sections of 'civil society' that are legible to the state and which it can capitalise upon and control are seen as 'social capital'. Other social forces are a threat to be controlled, securitized and criminalized – through recuperation or repression" (Disasters & the Dispossessed).

and intentional policy of the State to treat certain sections of the movement that can be State-friendly… I'm not sure if you're aware: after Occupy Sandy one of the things I talk about was [that] the Department of Homeland Security published this document called The Resilient Social Network. Did you hear about that at all? It was praised in the movement…

IGD: I believe I've heard of it, but why don't you talk about it? And also you mentioned Occupy Sandy. Just tell us a little bit about that, because some people may not even have been around when that happened.

Rhiannon: Hurricane Sandy was a big hurricane in the States in 2012 that hit New York and the north-eastern seaboard,[18] and there was this huge social movement, Occupy Sandy, that was mobilized. So, Occupy Wall Street[19] had been evicted the previous year (and obviously that was a huge movement: huge international movement, but certainly huge in that part of America), and then Hurricane Sandy hit after that. There were social networks – as in on the Internet, and then social networks as in people who knew each other – that were obviously still heavily invested in that movement: so it was this latent thing that was able to come to life again, and people were able to mobilize through it to mobilize relief after Hurricane Sandy. They did things like mould remediation in people's homes, but they also set up some really cool cooperatives, an oral history project… They were widely acknowledged (by the mainstream media and so on) to mobilize relief more effectively than the Red Cross and FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]. There was really widespread public anger with those two agencies because of their perceived failures. And then Occupy Sandy were there helping people do stuff: it's PR failure for the State and a PR success for anarchism.

[18] ed. – see Return Fire vol.1 pg31

[19] ed. – see the supplement to this chapter of Return Fire; 'Centering Relationships'

I was quite focused on a specific snapshot in time, just the initial spring and summer lockdown when it was very much about getting food to people.

[I] also focused on a longer-term critique of the history of states trying to de-radicalize this stuff discursively rather than simply repressing people and criminalizing them… which also happens, calling things looting and so on. Certainly after Hurricane Katrina, I know that happened a lot where people were merely trying to meet their survival needs and it was discursively cast as "they're looting!"[17]

IGD: There's a pretty famous instance of one news program that had a shot of a white family taking obviously looted stuff. And they're like, "oh, they're doing what they need to do to survive." And there's another one of some black guy. It was like, "oh, they're looting."

Rhiannon: Yeah, it's exactly the same picture, but there's some white people and some black people doing exactly the same thing. And it's, you know, "these people are creatively finding ways to get food for their family." And then "these people are looting."

IGD: Going forward, what do you think are some of the lasting lessons from this wave of mutual aid organizing after the pandemic in the UK?

Rhiannon: One of the things I'm particularly interested in [is] the ways in which large sections of movement were recuperated or de-radicalized in a sense. So the depressing stories I was talking about, about more radical discussions and actions around eviction resistance and protests being shut down and people operating according to this bourgeois morality and wanting mutual aid to be about shopping, and [in] some of the groups even this passion for surveillance and threatening to call the police on people and things like that. I think that's really important to think about, because I try and situate that in the book in a longer-term, explicit

[17] ed. – see 'The Utopia we Dream of Becomes Most Visible in the Dark'

who were involved who had their own groups that would also be involved in local groups. And they try and continue (or initiate) quite political discussions within those groups.

Then there were also just communities and people doing stuff which personally I would refer to as mutual aid, but they might not even have been using that term. And that's what I ended up getting involved in personally, because I got involved in my local mutual aid group; it was a WhatsApp group where people were discussing things, and my group was one of the ones that I just felt was irredeemably middle-class and co-opted. And I couldn't bear it, to be honest. But another one of my friends was involved in this other local group that didn't call themselves mutual aid, but they were cooking meals and they wanted bicycle couriers, so I ended up couriering meals to people. But nobody called that mutual aid and it wasn't a mutual aid group, if you see what I mean. It was a different thing.

IGD: You say middle class. Can you define that?

Rhiannon: It means different things to different people. Partly I mean white-collar workers, people that have secure employment contracts and maybe a bit of capital to keep themselves going, and they can afford their rent each month… I mean, I'd include myself within that in a sense, but also it goes on with this bourgeois morality, which excludes other people through customs and rituals and discourse, and just generally looking down on people… Or discourse policing; seeing your own moral outlook as somewhat superior to other groups, I suppose.

We've got a big tradition (I mean, I suppose you do in parts of the US, maybe more on the East Coast) of strikes and unions and things like that. So that would be seen as a working-class movement. We're having a lot of that at the moment. The rail workers are all striking (even though they're on a decent wage – perhaps more of a decent wage than some people who might explicitly self-identify as middle-class – but there's a sense of working-class solidarity, if you see what I mean). Yeah, it's hard to explain. The class

system is just so ingrained and so much part of British political life, I think that it's hard to explain it to someone that's not enmeshed within it.

IGD: So just one other question in terms of the explosion of mutual aid stuff. Did different anarchist groups there decisively get involved? Or was it more like people on an individual basis getting involved in local groups? Did different networks make decisive interventions, like, "we're going to set up our own kind of mutual aid stuff?" Or it was more just people getting in where they fit in on the local level?

Rhiannon: That's a really good question. Actually it's a combination of those, from what I knew from my interviewees (who are people that I know from living in London for 10 years and being involved in anarchist stuff; so I think they had their fingers on the pulse). From what I can gather, people did get involved locally – and what that meant in practice was that some people would be the only anarchist in their group, and they'd be getting incredibly frustrated with some of the conversations and things that were going on, having to stop people from calling the police on people, and being the only one person in the group that felt that was an acceptable position… And [then from] groups where they were almost entirely anarchist (because there was a thriving anarchist scene in the local area, and quite early on people who weren't anarchist dropped out), to [where] there'd be a few anarchists in the group and then mostly non-anarchists.

But then there was a London-wide WhatsApp (not WhatsApp, I can't remember, but it was on one of the platforms). So anarchists interested in mutual aid were in a chat group, and sharing their frustrations and experiences with their groups and how radicalised or not they were.

And there were also mutual aid anarchist groups that were associated with particular spaces. There was a squat (I think there was more than one squat), and there was a social centre. So there were anarchist spaces that mutual aid groups grew up around the

I think you and I were discussing just before the show community action or just how racialized it all is. And the fact that there weren't a lot of police on the streets or around. And that was something we had here. There'd be these laws and they were really restrictive, and we'd have park benches taped off so you're not allowed to sit on the park bench (and we had these like one-way systems in parks and things), and there'd be all these crazy rules in place.[14] But it'd just be people policing each other. But then the only police through all my interviews [that interviewees] encountered was: they had a really tiny Black Lives Matter protest in a suburban area of London. (There was a big one in the center, but then they had this tiny little suburban one, with about five people on the street corner.) And the police turned up to it. And that was one of the few encounters with the police, was this mini, five-person BLM protest.

IGD: Here in the US, obviously, things changed in the summer of 2020 when the George Floyd rebellion exploded.[15] There was already a lot of mutual aid stuff happening at the time, so that fed into the rebellion. Because in Minneapolis there was George Floyd Square; so there was these pop-up makeshift hubs that were set up. Which is interesting, because now you see it evolve again: a lot of people are doing defense of [homeless] encampments that are being evicted, and with the summer, people are now doing mutual aid programs around how hot it is, to try and get people water and stuff like that. There's this constant evolution of what people are doing.

Rhiannon: It's hard to keep in touch with it all sometimes. Now you're mentioning some of these things, I think certainly we had some maybe smaller-scale versions of those things, and we had this big wave of protests as well in the summer [of 2020] similarly.[16]

[14] ed. – see Tories are Living in Fear of Direct Action's Rise
[15] ed. – see The Siege of the Third Precinct in Minneapolis
[16] ibid.

This sort of non-hierarchy has been valorized as this really flexible form of organizing. But I think sometimes the politics and ethics behind it: there can be problems. One of the big arguments I make is that mutual aid – in order to be really mutual aid – it has to be linked to some kind of sort of defense of the community if it becomes dispossessed. So a lot of the more radical actions were associated with squats or community centers or actual spaces. And then that involves police at one point trying to evict a group. There were other groups where people were trying to say "we need to stop members of the community being evicted from their home." And then the group would say "no, that's not mutual aid." But how is it not mutual aid? Sorry, I'm blethering a little bit…

IGD: One of the big contexts in the US was that all this stuff was happening amidst this massive culture war,[13] where the Right attempted to label everything either BLM [Black Lives Matter] or Antifa.

Rhiannon: I saw that in the news actually, definitely. Antifa as this sort of organization; people thinking it's this sort of big powerful organization that must be resisted and so on. It literally means anti-fascism!

IGD: Right. Well, it was helpful for them because it allowed them to basically explain autonomous anarchist movement activity as this weird, scary term that sounded conspiratorial. So it's like "people helping each other: it's Antifa, it's members of Antifa!" It just had this sort of conspiracy attached to it. And we were talking about some of these responses. I mean, some of that backfired because then it became like, "oh, the Antifa are helping people…"

Rhiannon: We have that a little bit here, you know: anything semi-radical would be labeled as BLM. There was definitely some of that here. I think it's more intense in the States, but we definitely do get some of that here.

[13] ed. – see 'It Depends on All of Us'

community associated with that anarchist space. So it was a real mishmash in a way.

IGD: I feel like one of the things that really propelled things here in the US was the idea that no-one was coming to save anybody, and that part of the problem was that our healthcare system is so non-existent, and so many people were just not going to get care. The system was already pushed to capacity, and the State really had no desire to expand its services.[11] Things were already pretty bad economically; and this was only going to make things worse. I'm curious; in the UK, were things that bad? Or was the State picking up a lot of slack? I know you all have more of a social safety net, although it's been eroded.

Rhiannon: I think people were very receptive to critiques of the State and the Tory government in particular, and still are. Because our Prime Minister: it was something else he got deposed for, ultimately, but he was having parties during lockdown and breaking his own laws. And people – especially on the Left, but the non-radical Left, just general left-liberals – are always receptive to a critique of the government. But they're not necessarily receptive to a critique of government *per se,* or authoritarianism. So I think there are a lot of people like that in the movement, who felt angry and wanted to do something that was political (in the sense of being against the current political party), and also a kind of do-goody type helping thing. But they didn't want to be too radical. I think there are a lot of people like that.

And also, we had a government furlough scheme, which meant that people who had permanent jobs… I can't remember the exact criteria: I knew the ins-and-outs of it at the time, but it feels like quite a while has passed. I worked; I was working from home anyway, so I didn't need to on furlough. I was researcher, so I was already working from home, and I didn't stop working. And that had its own problems, because I lived in a big warehouse at the

[11] ed. – see 'The Difference Between "Just Coping" & "Not Coping At All"'

time with seven people, and everyone else was either unemployed or they were on furlough. So it was just party time! We weren't breaking any rules,[12] because there were seven of us in the house

[12] ed. – Not that following the rules was necessarily the responsible thing to do: "We did not obey the lockdowns or the rules about gatherings – we established our own guidelines based on our own ethical, political and practical considerations. We asked a different question. Sometimes this resulted in us being more cautious than the law allowed, sometimes it resulted in breaking the rules. We were far from alone in this, and I know my circle benefited from other people's discussions. The pandemic has been unique in our lifetimes, but its ethical challenges are not: controlling the behaviour of others is a pretty central element of democratic politics. The government looks at us as a mass of people to be managed towards various goals, notably profit and social peace. They look at the world from above, through a lens of domination and control – this is as much the case for the pandemic as for climate change and poverty. Different politicians and parties will have different priorities, and our agency is reduced to advocating for how we want to be managed – or how we want *those other people* to be managed. We come to internalize the logic of domination and put the needs of order and the economy above our own. We start to view the world from above too, far from our own experiences, desires, ideas, values, and relationships. "The social war is this: a struggle against the structures of power that colonize us and train us to view the world from the perspective of the needs of power itself, through the metaphysical lens of domination" *[ed. – see Return Fire vol.5 pg38]*. In the context of the pandemic, to view the world from above means understanding the situation through corporate media (whether social or traditional), through colour-coded maps, through the designation of hot zones, through policy debates, through rules laid out by experts (I want their knowledge, not their authority). It means to think about our own decisions in terms of what everyone should do, to act ourselves the way we think everyone should act. Our own priorities vanish, and the agency of others is perceived as a threat. […] I want to oppose domination, but also its false critics. Some anarchists have thought they developed a critique of authoritarian responses to the pandemic, but they only succeed in being reactionaries. They are still seeing the world from above, where the only conceivable collective action is that of the state. They fall back on the discourse of individual rights, but there is nothing anarchist about a freedom carved into bite-sized pieces and spoon-fed back to us. […] They end up in bed with those who see any common good as an attack on their privilege. To me, freedom also means responsibility. It is an individual imperative to make your own choices, but also to understand yourself as embedded in a web of relationships. It is about voluntary association, but also understanding that we are also embedded in webs of relationships with all people

anyway. So everyone else, like, "party time!", and I was like, "I've got to do a job!". But some people got this furlough, which meant the government paid 80% of their wages for the whole time they're off work. It was employment retention. So it did mean there were these huge swathes of people (who had secure employment contracts but couldn't go to work, being paid by the government) who had a lot of time on their hands. I think a lot of those people got involved in mutual aid movements, and that partly explains why there was this huge movement of not-necessarily-anarchists.

IGD: I'm curious how people dealt with this problem of the lack of politics, or trying to divorce politics from the mutual aid organizing.

Rhiannon: I talk about that a lot in the book. And I was just astounded by some people's patience, to be honest: the anarchists I spoke to. And I suppose a lot of anarchists are used to being told that their ideas are impossibly idealistic, or being shut down, or being silenced. But just listening to the sort of patience with which people dealt with that constant silencing and invalidation within these WhatsApp groups and things: I couldn't necessarily deal with it. And a lot of people did deal with it, they did get somewhere and they progressed.

And I think that there were definitely other groups. Definitely, everyone I spoke to, there was this huge thing about the frustration of all these people just shutting down anything even vaguely beyond shopping or helping. But also there were people who said that people did become a lot more receptive to anarchist organizing, because they saw it as effective, or organizationally it was seen to be desirable. I think it was just anything beyond [that].

(not to mention all living things, the land and water) [ed. – see the supplement to this chapter of Return Fire; 'Centering Relationships']. We have responsibilities to those webs as well. When our choices in the pandemic start from ourselves and builds outwards, to our chosen people and onward to the societies we exist in, we are no longer seeing the world from above, but on a human scale" (Health on a Human Scale: a vaccinated anarchist against vaccine passports).