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Mutual aid versus volunteerism: Autonomous PPE production in the Covid-19 pandemic crisis

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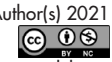

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis has confirmed neoliberal capitalism's inability to meet critical social needs. In the United Kingdom, mutual aid initiatives based on 'solidarity not charity' blossomed in a context of state incompetence and private sector negligence – including Scrub Hub, a network of groups that autonomously produced personal protective equipment and provided it directly to health workers. Using a convergence of autonomist and anarchist perspectives, this article examines Scrub Hub as an example of emergent autonomous political economies and considers the challenges of resisting co-optation into volunteerist hierarchies and suppression by the neoliberal state.

Keywords

anarchism, autonomism, co-optation, Covid-19, infrastructures of resistance, mutual aid, neoliberalism, Scrub Hub, social factory, suppression, United Kingdom, voluntarism, volunteerism

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Introduction

Scrub Hub was a grassroots network of people across England, Scotland and Wales producing 'scrubs', the pyjama-like clothing that health workers wear and change in order to prevent cross-contamination. The Scrub Hub volunteers performed a range of tasks including sourcing material, arranging deliveries, co-ordinating information, and sharing material and practical advice across the network, and, of course, producing the scrubs themselves, which were sewn predominantly in people's homes and delivered directly to healthcare workers. Across the 127 groups of solidarity in the Scrub Hub network, the vast majority of volunteers were women, and most of the sewers had professional skills, some having been furloughed from the fashion sector during the pandemic crisis. Others worked in unrelated professions but adapted their skills to contribute to the logistical needs of the collective. A small number were retired, and a large majority negotiated scrub making with childcare. The initiative began in mid-March 2020 when the first spike of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis led to a critical shortage of scrubs (and other personal protective equipment, or PPE) in the United Kingdom. The huge increase in hospital admissions, and the especially infectious nature of Covid-19 coronavirus, meant a massive increase in demand for scrubs, which neither the government, National Health Service (NHS) procurement departments, nor private companies could meet. In fact, Movianto, the private corporation outsourced by the government to manage PPE provision, was sold off just as the pandemic crisis was beginning to bite (Davies 2020). The UK government then hurriedly spent at least £12.5 billion to try to address the immediate shortfall (Conn 2020), but this was ineffective in getting an adequate provision of scrubs into the hands of health workers during the first peak of infections in March and April 2020. This scandalous lack of essential PPE, which left health workers and patients even more exposed to infection, was communicated by health workers through the widespread network of mutual aid groups that emerged in response to the pandemic crisis, and it was through this mutual aid network that Scrub Hub took shape. Over 4,000 mutual aid groups formed in the early stages of the crisis (Donaghey 2020; Howard 2020) – in part, this network grew from existing mutual aid initiatives such as the Manchester-based group UK Mutual Aid (Aidan & Sam 2021), as well as food-oriented initiatives such as Food Not Bombs; the Cooperation Town Network in Hull, London, and Birmingham; and the Sumac Centre/Veggies Catering Collective in Nottingham.

This critical reflection on Scrub Hub and autonomous PPE production in the United Kingdom began as an interview dialogue between the authors (Lachowicz 2020). Katya Lachowicz has been closely involved with a Scrub Hub group in Newham, East London, since its inception at the end of March 2020, and that firsthand experience directly informs the analysis and critique here.

The PPE shortages have been just one example of the United Kingdom's unpreparedness for a crisis of this magnitude, and the fundamental shortcomings of neoliberal economic policies in meeting people's basic needs have been starkly exposed. This system-level failure has been decades in the making, at the hands of successive neoliberal governments, Tory, Lib-Dem, and Labour. The accelerated privatisation and fragmentation of the NHS since the 'fiscal consolidation' of the 1990s (Streeck 2014) and the

scything of state-funded social care provision during the following decades of austerity have been chief factors in the United Kingdom's incompetent and negligent response to the pandemic, recognised as one of the very worst in the world in terms of deaths per head of population (De Best 2021). The United Kingdom–wide toll during the pandemic was reported to have exceeded 150,000 by 2 April 2021 (death certificates mentioning Covid-19) while the government's 'official' figure for the same period was 127,123 deaths (from any cause within 28 days of a positive Covid-19 test result) (The Visual and Data Journalism Team 2021).

Mutual aid and the Left, pre- and post-Covid

Beyond the devastating effects on people's health, and the horrific death toll, the pandemic crisis has called into question the entire edifice of neoliberal capitalism. The 'lockdown' measures that halted national economies have resulted in a worldwide economic depression with rafts of job losses – governments have been desperate to 'restart' their economies, even with the inevitable result of increased infection rates and more deaths. This disruption (or interruption) to the system has exposed cracks and gaps where alternatives have begun to take root, and existing alternative infrastructures have grown and adapted to this new crisis flashpoint – with all the expected diversity in discourse and practices around these initiatives, this response has been widely described as 'mutual aid'. The term has its roots as a classical anarchist principle, stemming from Kropotkin's articles from 1890 onwards (see Kinna 1995: 259, f.n. 2), culminating in the 1902 volume *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, in which he argued, in riposte to the social Darwinists of his era, that co-operation was as important a factor as competition in the struggle for survival for communities of humans and other animals. Given the anarchist-associated terminology, then, it is unsurprising that the mutual aid response to the pandemic crisis has been lauded by anarchist commentators. But, as the mutual aid activists Aidan and Sam (2021) recognise, these newly formed groups often 'don't have a specifically anarchist position or clearly defined critique of the capitalist system'. In the context of meeting people's survival needs, the development of a clearly defined critique or explicit political ideology is clearly a secondary concern, but the pragmatic character of mutual aid in collectively organising in response to hardship goes beyond the addressing of immediate need to also tackle the roots of why such injustices exist in the first place (Spade 2020). As such, mutual aid is an inherently (small 'p') political praxis, that draws critical connections between on-the-ground action, the wider social context, and (big 'P') Political analyses. This 'praxical' aspect, in combination with the active involvement of huge numbers of people from widely ranging political perspectives, has meant that 'mutual aid' has taken root far beyond its traditional anarchist milieu.

It is important to note that the concept of mutual aid was not a prominent concern within the wider Left prior to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. The term crops-up occasionally in discussion of mutual societies of workers, focusing on those historical instances of solidarity as a form of 'proto-socialism' (e.g. Jones 2019). More commonly, 'mutualism' is derided as irredeemably 'petty bourgeois', stemming from Marx's (1954 [1847]) critique of Proudhon – Wigger (2016) is typical of this approach, for example, dismissing mutual aid as being 'too easily marginalised under capitalism' (p. 139). Several

writers have characterised the Black Panther Party's free breakfast programmes, and other community self-help initiatives of the 1960s and 1970s, as 'mutual aid' (*Freedom News* 2019; Heynen 2009; Williams 2015), but, while these practices certainly resonate with mutual aid as praxis, the Black Panthers themselves did not use the term, instead framing their initiatives within a Maoist concept of 'serving the people' (Horras 2017) and as 'survival pending revolution' (Alkebulan 2007). Mao (1977) did actually use the term 'mutual aid', but only as a simple synonym for co-operation. The concept and practice of mutual aid began to appear as an organising tactic for socialists in the United States in the late 2000s and 2010s (following a re-emphasis on mutual aid organising within the anarchist movement itself). This is typified in the establishment of the Democratic Socialists of America in 2016 with their prominent emphasis on mutual aid organising as 'a key component in building community power' (Democratic Socialists of America n.d.). That shift in tactics and discourse emerged both in reaction to prefigurative protest movements such as Occupy as well as in the wake of high-profile anarchist-informed disaster relief initiatives, especially following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (crow 2012) and Hurricane Sandy in 2012 (Firth 2020), coalescing in the Mutual Aid Disaster Relief Group (Kenney 2019). So, while the terminology was beginning to gain some small degree of wider traction in the preceding decade, the huge proliferation of mutual aid nomenclature across the contemporary Left has significantly developed a significant development since the onset of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic crisis. Situated between prefiguration and crisis, therefore, the recent revival of the term provokes the question as to how mutual aid as a two-pronged concept of responding *to* direct need and organising *against* wider systemic change critically negotiates autonomy as both an 'affirmation' and 'negation' (Böhm et al. 2010: 19) in the cracks of a failing state.

Of course, even in the 'post-Covid' context, some democratic socialists have specifically rejected mutual aid and its anarchist associations (The Jacobin Show 2021), and some Marxists have continued to argue in an orthodox vein that mutual aid cannot 'represent a threat to the structures of global capitalism' (Morley 2021). Yet, the terminology has been adopted widely, including by groups such as Corbyn's parliamentary socialist 'Peace and Justice Project' (see *Socialism Today* 2021) and the Trotskyist Socialist Workers' Party. Often this adoption of mutual aid by non-anarchist Leftists has involved reinterpreting (or misinterpreting) the concept within a statist framework. For example, the Socialist Workers' Party asserted that mutual aid initiatives 'must be funded by councils and the government' (*Socialist Worker* 2020), which fundamentally misunderstands the bottom-up and autonomous emphases of mutual aid. While some recent writings on mutual aid reduce Kropotkin to a mere endnote (Spade 2020: 151), the key critical contribution of Kropotkin's development of the concept is in its anti-hierarchical implications – mutual aid is inimical to 'top-down' organising, making it not only incompatible with parliamentary or authoritarian strains of socialism, but, further, as argued in this article, mutual aid stands in critical counterpoint to the neoliberal context of volunteerist hierarchies.

Prichard and Worth (2016) identify mutual aid as a specifically anarchist principle, even describing it (somewhat problematically) as an '[a]narchist virtue' (p. 13). However, the rapid proliferation of mutual aid organising over the last year clearly indicates its powerful resonance beyond 'anarchist' frameworks, and its adoption by the wider Left

presents an opportunity to consider a real-world instance of 'Left convergence'. In the special issue of *Capital & Class* on Left-wing convergence, O'Hearn and Grubačić discuss mutual aid in some detail. Their adaptation of Scott's 'infrapolitics', described as an 'antagonistic relationship' of 'breaking away from systemic processes of state and capital' (O'Hearn and Grubačić 2016: 160), chimes with our discussion of alternative social factories. However, contrary to O'Hearn and Grubačić who situate mutual aid as merely 'a basis of exilic society' (O'Hearn and Grubačić 2016: 155) we argue that mutual aid initiatives were in fact key to meeting people's immediate needs in the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, and by bringing social reproduction to the fore, became 'alternative circuits of social valorization' (Hardt & Negri 2003: 12), in places where the state itself had 'withdrawn'. Mutual aid here is not a politics of exodus but rather an engagement with the '(im)possible' tension of resistance and co-optation (Böhm et al. 2010; Dinerstein 2012), a struggle against the abstraction of 'doing' into labour (Holloway 2002) from within a 'double temporality' of that which is 'already there' and 'not yet' (Hardt & Negri in Van de Sande 2015: 187).

The approach of this article is to analyse the significance of one example of mutual aid organising in the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, using a convergence of the complementary perspectives of autonomism (with its detailed analyses of social reproduction) and anarchism (as a praxis and in its critique of hierarchy and state repression) to critically situate mutual aid in, between and against the dominant logics of volunteerism.

Social capital, reproduction and volunteerism

The scrubs movement consisted of two separate platforms, Scrub Hub and For the Love of Scrubs. Scrub Hub was born in response to a call from a health worker on a street-level mutual aid group in London, and a web of 127 solidarity groups formed through the mutual aid network across the country, connected primarily through a website directory, Facebook and WhatsApp. For the Love of Scrubs (hereafter FtLoS) was developed by a nurse, who started out by using her sewing skills to make scrubs for her colleagues in Lincolnshire and then used a singular Facebook page as a means to centralise a wider group of sewers into action. Scrub Hub differentiated itself from FtLoS not only by having set up regional groups very early on via existing mutual aid frameworks, but also by having understood itself as a network that was primarily motivated to address the needs of individual health workers, as opposed to hospitals which were the main target group of FtLoS. In essence, the contrast between the Scrub Hub grassroots initiative and the FtLoS 'top-down' approach, and their distinct use of platforms, revealed a shift in the economy which was already well underway (Srnicek 2017). The Keynesian economic spaces of the 'happy' home and 'productive' factory, having been diffracted, were now multiplied into individual home production units, in isolation from co-workers – a technologically mediated form of extraction policed by affective commitment.

The dangers of such monitored forms of solidarity became clear in the scrubs movement when a particular concept of virtuous volunteering, 'spurred on' by the deaths of 'heroes' on the frontlines, resulted in the castigation of a fellow maker who expressed discontent on a social media platform at the government's failure to even thank them for their contribution. In response, another maker exclaimed: 'well if you're doing it for a

thank you, you're doing it for the wrong reason'. Of course, the hard labour of the women was to be compensated through 'affective remuneration' (Dowling 2016). This is the 'new capitalist utopia', in the words of Caffentzis (2013), in which the success of high-tech venture capitalism depends on the creation of a world of labour-intensive, low waged, distracted and diffractive production (p. 39). A world in which high monetary incentives should not be used, because one is to identify with the work project, cultivate self-discipline, and ideally work without a wage: 'a capitalist utopia where work and repression are their own rewards' (Caffentzis 2013: 65) and where 'life becomes inseparable from work' (Lazzarato 1996: 137–138).

Volunteerism is said to cultivate what Bröckling (2016) describes as 'the entrepreneurial self', a 'subject who is called upon to act as an entrepreneur of one's own life' (p. viii). This is precisely the subjectivity that the neoliberal state wishes to inculcate, and, to this end, Voluntary and Community Organisations (VCOs) have come to be reframed within the context of 'social enterprise'. The voluntary sector was marketised under the neoliberal policy of New Public Management (NPM) (Kendall 2003: 54), creating a competitive environment in which private companies were set to bid against VCOs for the provision of public services. This policy ultimately led to the dominance of an outsourced public sector in the hands of four private companies: Atos, Capita, G4S and Serco (Kendall et al. 2018: 762) – and the pandemic crisis has accelerated the corporate takeover of public services, with the UK government handing out £30.2 billion to private corporations to carry out core services and meet essential needs (up to 30 April 2021; Tussell 2021a)). Meanwhile, for the VCOs, this meant that they had to become more regulated and competitive to participate, demonstrating 'efficiency, value for money and a business ethos' (Hardill & Baines 2011: 90). The 'social' aspect of 'social enterprise' is firmly connected to a specific neo-Tocquevillean understanding of 'social capital' by followers of Coleman and Putnam, whose definitions have come to dominate community development theory over recent decades. For Putnam, it is by means of 'civic virtue' (Putnam 2000: 19) that economic wealth is generated within communities, regardless of class divisions (cf. Putnam 1993: 37). Unlike Bourdieu (1985), who specifically highlighted the distinction between resources and the ability to access them, by disconnecting the contexts of 'capital' from the 'social', Putnam's theory paved the way to punitive rhetorics and policies that criminalise poverty in what Wacquant (2010) describes as a state of 'carceral big government'. The extent of such a 'financialization of daily life' (Martin 2002) is exemplified in prison systems, where it has become socially acceptable to exploit inmates as a form of cheap labour, under the banner of 'social enterprise' in order to make 'beautiful handmade products' (such as a pair of felt cushions that were later sold for £500 (Fine Cell Work n.d.)). Prisoners were also drafted into making PPE during the onset of the pandemic for remuneration of just £12.50 a week, described by the *Daily Mail* as a 'princely sum' and a worthy investment costing 'a third of the usual price' (Scully 2020). This 'cost-effective' exploitation of volunteerism is also identified by Poppendieck (1999) in the context of food distribution programmes, that, '[b]y harnessing a wealth of volunteer effort and donations, [make] private programs appear cheaper and more cost effective than their public counterparts, thus reinforcing an ideology of voluntarism that obscures the fundamental destruction of rights' (p. 6).

In the context of work (whether at the workplace, in prison, or in 'charitable work'), it is of course workers' 'rights' that are most directly threatened by this ideology of volunteerism, but the implications are more complex and wide-ranging. In the institutionalisation of charity culture the volunteer becomes, on the one hand, a subject of neoliberal education, and on the other, a risky investment perhaps uneasily placed within the system of wage labour – they are co-opted into producing surplus value either for doing 'wrong' (as punishment) or for wanting to do 'right' (through 'civic virtue'). By transforming volunteerism into a 'marketised philanthropy' (Nickel & Eikenberry 2009), the very altruistic premise of voluntary action is perverted, ultimately destroying community life and engendering feelings of psychological strain in the participants involved (Dean 2015). Unfortunately, in many cases women participating in the scrubs movement were faced with the effects of this 'marketised philanthropy', suffering solitary conditions of unpaid work, and in some cases even having to pay for materials and deliver scrubs to designated collection points, alienated from their co-makers and the recipients of their products.

By obscuring socio-political contexts and their relations of power, social reproductive work becomes at best a duty and at worst entirely invisibilised. And it is here that 'social capital' as the 'totality of the capitalists' (Tronti 2019 [1966]: 44) is exploited, not only because social reproduction is rendered an organic part of working life, devoid of remuneration, but because unpaid work becomes 'meaningful'. Prisoners report better mental health by engaging in creative work, but at no point are their conditions of employment connected to the exploitation of the carceral system itself. In the words of Tronti: 'At the level of maximum capitalist stabilisation, the plan of capital can also come to socially organise the natural tendency of its own production' (Tronti 2019 [1966]: 51). Duffy and Pupo (2018) expand on economies of coercion and fear by historically locating unpaid work in slavery and domestic labour, in which 'women's work is "freely" chosen as a labour of love rather than socially constructed' resulting in assuming a role that is 'socially denigrated, economically marginalised yet culturally romanticised and mandated' (p. 17). The financialisation of social reproduction means that unpaid work is an imposition rather than 'truly volunteered' (Dean 2015: 145).

Voluntary action, predominately performed by women, is marked not only by an intensification of struggle over social reproduction, but equally the racialisation of voluntary work and political struggle in the context of crisis. Emejulu and Bassel (2015: 88–89) note that by juggling cuts, care work, low-paid jobs in the public sector, and as a subsequent result of complete exhaustion, women of colour have significantly less energy to engage in political activism. Shachar (2014) depicts these so-called autonomous spaces of civil society as 'white management'. This can be seen not only in the predominance of white people in voluntary contexts, but equally in the relation they have to those they set out to represent, and the ties they have to funding sources. The Newham Scrub Hub, based in a working-class borough of London where black and minority ethnic (BAME) residents account for 70% of the population, felt that there was a lack of awareness towards the needs of minority groups by the predominantly white, middle-class participants in FtLoS, who gathered significantly more funds and unquestioningly made scrubs for hospitals, ignoring other health centres such as care homes where a large number of people of colour work. Piarvé Wetshi, a black woman and founding member of the

Newham Scrub Hub, commented that several black nurses she spoke with had not even heard of the movement. And, despite providing many scrubs to struggling healthcare centres in Newham, this provoked a question within the team as to why this was the case, and whether the collective had done enough to reach out. The grassroots structure of Scrub Hub was certainly more appealing to Newham residents than FtLoS, as it allowed for 'neighbourly connections' to form. However, due to financial constraints, it was at times a struggle to maintain this autonomy against larger charity frameworks or civic developmental organisations, which were often seen as trying to capitalise on the Scrub Hubs' voluntary work and new-found social bonds.

Recognising these harmful aspects of the 'neo-slavery' of the third sector (Caffentzis 2013: 74), Scrub Hub East London initially aimed to set up as worker-run co-operative, but procurement departments at NHS Trusts were simply unwilling to pay them – they expected Scrub Hub and other similar initiatives to provide scrubs for free, as volunteers not workers (even though they would normally pay for scrubs produced in China, Bangladesh and India, and regardless of the fact that the UK government was at the same time pouring tens of billions of pounds into the coffers of private corporations to do the same job). In the context of FtLoS, this 'army of volunteers', despite clearly being identified as professional and skilled 'costume designers, tailors and seamstresses' (Press Association 2020), were encouraged to enter into relations of unpaid work with the NHS Trusts. They were depicted by the media as `putting their sewing skills to good use' by producing home-made scrubs in a `Dunkirk spirit' (Slominski 2020). The NHS Trusts, instead of running procurement contracts through small manufacturers and the highly skilled workforce available through these sewing initiatives, exploited the care, concern and willingness of the participants within the context of 'crisis' response, while their 'just in time' logistics abroad were suspended. These 'normal' PPE procurement channels, to which the government has now returned, have been revealed to rely on sweatshop labour, and even 'factories in China where hundreds of North Korean women have been secretly working in conditions of modern slavery' (Pattisson et al. 2020). There is an argument to be made that the normalisation of low or unpaid work in these factories directly translated into the disregard of the value of scrubs production by women 'at home'. Value and the disposability of women's work became key points of contention and certainly highlight the problematic discourses around techno-futurist 'postcapitalism', which rather than marking the age of post-work, is clearly rooted to the politics of social reproduction (Pitts & Dinerstein 2017).

The issue of volunteerist hierarchies has been problematic for mutual aid activists in other respects too. Aidan and Sam (2021), active with mutual aid initiatives in Glasgow and Brighton, highlighted 'the difficulty of trying to break down distinctions between "service provider" (the volunteer dedicating their time and energies) and "service user" (the person receiving support)'. The 'negative effects' include the disempowerment and passivity of those who receive support, the creation of a top-down '"activist" mentality', and ultimately, as above, the replication of 'capitalist structures and hierarchies . . . [i]nstead of building networks of solidarity' (Aidan & Sam 2021). Swann (2021) argues that, '[i]n anarchist reflections on mutual aid organising, this distinction between the charity model of management and the participatory model of mutual aid is seen as a tension rather than a strict either/or'; however, in practical terms, Swann (2021) notes

that this 'creeping' charity model 'makes mutual aid groups fundamentally less effective in their capacity to act and adapt quickly' because autonomous decision-making is 'removed from the people on the ground doing the actual work of mutual aid'. And indeed, Kropotkin (2009 [1902]) was clear that charity is not an example of mutual aid, precisely because of the emergence of hierarchical (and volunteerist) social relations, which 'impl[y] a certain superiority of the giver upon the receiver' (p. 221). Resonating with these dynamics (though not necessarily being conscious of them at the time), Scrub Hub groups made efforts to bring health workers into the production processes by centring their designs around the immediate needs that the workers reported, such as the requirement for long sleeved plastic gowns as opposed to the flimsy sleeveless aprons provided as standard, or by circumventing the institutional scrub distribution hierarchy which left many social care providers ill-equipped.

The concept of volunteerism has featured widely in academic debates in the United Kingdom (Anheier 2014; Kendall 2003; Milbourne & Cushman 2013), particularly in response to the revival of a social solidarity rhetoric as part of the New Labour electoral campaign of 1997 in the framework of a rising knowledge economy (Thorpe 2010). This laid the groundwork for the austerity programmes of the Tory-led Coalition government from 2010 – these radical cuts to welfare and other public provisions were ideologically veiled in their 'Big Society' agenda as a substitute for 'Big Government' (Hemmings 2017: 47). As Flaherty puts it, `[t]he conservative celebration of volunteers aligns with the policy goal of destruction of the social safety net. The more private citizens volunteer, the less government has to spend' (Flaherty 2016: 25) – and thus was the expectation of NHS Trusts with regard to independent scrub producers. Value has become a subject of increasing importance since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic which exacerbated deeply entrenched structural inequalities. Underpaid 'essential workers' were, and continue to be, placed at the frontlines, risking illness and death with little to no protection. And yet for the first time, the roles of the cleaners, the nurses, the food pickers, the care providers and the delivery and service workers were revealed as central to the functioning of social life. Capitalism entered a crisis of value based on its own survival of legitimation and its dependence on the myth of wage labour. Social reproduction experienced an intensification of exploitation, but at the same time a resurgence of self-valorisation and a deeper understanding of the transformative capacities of solidarity.

The challenges faced by autonomous scrub makers against neoliberal volunteerism illustrate one particular example of a 'social factory' (Tronti 2019 [1966]) where the accumulation of capital extended beyond the workplace and weaved itself into the fabric of society. The term is useful in this context as it not only uncovers the hidden production of social relations on which capital thrives, but equally suggests the emergence of an oppositional 'self-valorised' counter-power out the 'cracks' of capitalism (Holloway 2010; Negri 1991). In the situations where solidarity prevailed, sewers benefitted not only from the increased contact between participants and workers from a wider field within the health and delivery sectors, but also from the potential of being able to develop and interconnect with other structures of care. One such example was the connection of Scrub Hub East London to another mutual aid group, See a Need Fill a Need, which collected and distributed various resources such as food and laptops to families in

need. Scrub Hub East London provided leftover fabric, and a mask-making branch was created in co-operation between the two groups which supplied Newham residents with free masks at a time when it was suffering from high infection rates. Since then, a Women's Forum has been created for monthly meetups and support. Out of the hub came another neighbourhood group, Sew Social Newham, which invites members of the community to share and help each other out with personal sewing projects as well as extra-local initiatives, such as The Pachamama Project which makes and distributes washable sanitary pads for refugees.

Within the hub itself, rather than performing a detached hierarchical form of charitable service while under furlough, the process of engaging with, or having access to, the whole production process (from the database of orders, to the procuring of materials and funding, to the cutting and making of the scrubs) more than just filled a 'gap', it situated itself in the negotiation of the exploitation of work and life as a 'social factory' (Tronti 2019 [1966]). 'Alternative circuits of social valorization' and new subjectivities were created in the process (Hardt & Negri 2003: 12). Knowledge was being shared on the group's social networks, and funds, materials and excess orders were moved across groups within the network according to need.

In drawing a distinction between 'biopolitical production' and Foucauldian biopower, Hardt and Negri emphasise the collaborative and informational aspects within labour and their subsequent latent power for self-valorisation as 'a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism' (Hardt & Negri 2001: 294). While immaterial labour is perhaps not as hegemonic as has been described by Hardt and Negri (in Caffentzis' (2013) words, 'the computer requires the sweatshop, and the cyborg's existence is premised on the slave' (p. 79)), their emphasis is that labour exists as an internal contradiction within capital and it is therefore through the realisation of labour's power over capital that a process of transformation can occur (Trott 2007: 223). Dowling likewise speaks to a contradiction in reference to the struggle over social reproduction, stating that 'it is this contradiction between these two dimensions – of reproducing labour power for capital versus reproducing life itself – that helps to shed light on the possibilities of constructing alternatives' (Dowling 2016: 4). It is in the emergence of emancipatory infrastructures of care and subjectivities that such an alternative to capitalist valorisation is proposed to be found – and as argued below, the mutual aid responses to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis can be understood as emerging examples of such emancipatory infrastructures.

Co-optation and suppression of autonomous Covid-19 crisis responses

The latent political–economical significance of the 'alternative social factories' exemplified by Scrub Hub has been highlighted above. This radical potential has been actualised, to some extent, in the context of autonomous responses to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, but, at the same time, numerous factors have served to suppress that radical potential. As already noted, 'mutual aid' is a concept rooted in the classical canon of anarchist political philosophy, and the couching of Covid-19 responses within that anarchist framework highlights its implied challenge to capital and the state. Colón et al. (2019 [2018])

highlight that mutual aid initiatives and networks 'address more than mere survival' – 'by building the structures of a society autonomous from and in opposition to the state and capital, survival programs can become liberation programs as well' (p. 69). Not only does mutual aid manifest alternative social structures, '[c]hallenging Empire's . . . infrastructural hold', it also transforms the individuals who participate in these initiatives, 'interrupting [Empire's] affective . . . hold, undoing some of our existing attachments and desires, and creating new ones' (Montgomery & bergman 2017: 140). The Ataşehir Solidarity Network in Istanbul describe this as a challenge to the 'culture of submissiveness' that facilitates the capitalist neoliberal state (in Özdemir 2020: 22). Counter to the neoliberal/entrepreneurial focus on the individual, this 'lived transformation' is recognised by Montgomery and bergman (2017) as building, and being shaped by, '*collective* power' (p. 50 [emphasis added]).

However, such alternatives are immediately put under intense pressure from the state and capital, and neoliberal hegemony more generally, through processes of co-optation and suppression. In the absence of the anarchist-informed framing of the Covid-19 mutual aid network, it was notable that scrub groups associated with FtLoS quickly developed to assume the structure of competitive business models. A large majority of these initiatives were based on maintaining an isolated workforce, managed by local coordinators who (more often than not) assumed these positions of power by dint of their personal contacts in the higher echelons of NHS Trust management, reflecting the conditions of work engendered by logics of volunteerist hierarchies and 'social enterprise'. Scrub producers working from home without overlockers (a tool required to 'finish' the edges of the fabric) would sometimes complain that their work was being rejected by coordinators after they had 'only' French-seamed the edges. These women saw their work as part of an 'emergency response' and not as a source for free labour subject to intense quality controls. This 'professionalisation', both in terms of imposing hierarchical structures and enforcing quality controls, is frequently deployed by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as a 'pacification' strategy to 'capture and domesticate movements' – the outcome of which, argue Montgomery and bergman (2017), is that 'parts of movements get destroyed, co-opted subdued, and divided . . . what was once a transformative practice can become a stagnant ritual, emptied of its power' (pp. 175–176).

Returning to the question of isolation, the scrub makers were not only separated from entering into social relations with one another and with the health workers via their segregated work arrangements, but were also denied participation in voicing their concerns in larger political contexts. Hemmings (2017) discusses how voluntary organisations, despite responding to societal needs, are restricted in their ability to voice their opinions or lobby as they become increasingly competitive and accountable to funders. Because scrub producers were dependent on external donations, and on favourable national media coverage to help solicit donations, they were placed in a challenging position in terms of presenting and expressing themselves. This was exemplified during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis when the BBC approached scrub makers to send in 'selfies' holding up rainbows to cheer on the NHS. The participants of Newham Scrub Hub were hesitant, but decided to combine these rainbows with the slogan 'Test, test, PPE, keep key workers virus free!' None of these 'selfies' were featured in the BBC news

programme. The 'social enterprise' framework into which VCOs are forced neuters their independent capacity to express political dissent.

'Professionalisation' has also been used as a tool of suppression by the UK government to restrict autonomous PPE and scrub producers. By May 2020, many of the sewers were faced with new government regulations that were now also applied to voluntary networks (Office for Product Safety & Standards 2020), and some were even threatened with prosecution for 'circulating unregulated PPE' (Rudd 2020). As a result, already limited funding had to be siphoned into producing wash labels advising staff to launder their scrubs specifically at 71°C (a function not readily available on a domestic washing machine) (Office for Product Safety & Standards 2020). Meanwhile the production of plastic gowns and visors was also either halted or delayed, due to the new requirement of a costly certification process. Many volunteers left the groups fearing that they were doing something 'illegal', or were unwilling to countenance a further intensification of their work, having been fatigued by their already-intensive workload that continued all the way into the summer. The 'quality control' justification for the imposition of government regulation over PPE was disputed by health workers on the ground, who fed back to Scrub Hub makers that they 'hadn't seen better quality scrubs', and indeed, more than 40 million items of PPE supplied by the government's preferred corporate contractors have been found to be faulty or unusable (Public Accounts Committee 2021).

As noted above, the producers of these 'home-made' scrubs were very often professional garment makers, and a large majority of scrub groups were collaborating with small-scale manufacturers or in some cases with the factories from where they had been furloughed, in order to get access to industrial scale machines for the cutting of fabric to pattern. One interlocutor reported that she and two other colleagues had cut an excess of 17,000 items of PPE in just a few months using such professional equipment. The efforts by some makers to set up as non-profit organisations or workers cooperatives were rebuffed by NHS Trusts, as it became very clear that the government's policy was to stick to their 'just in time' logistics (Davies & Garside 2020). Even those UK manufacturers that had started producing scrubs, and who had managed to match the prices of their 'competitors' elsewhere in the world, were told that their contracts would stop in September 2020 under the excuse that the government would be returning to their original supply chains.

The jealous state

As noted by the Ataşehir Solidarity Network in Istanbul, the Turkish 'government saw the "danger" of solidarity networks and . . . announced that "no one can help other than us. It is forbidden!"' (in Özdemir 2020: 22). This is a jealous reaction by the state – autonomous initiatives highlight the state's inability to respond to local level needs, particularly in moments of crisis, and this reduces people's dependence on the state as omnipotent provider and undermines the state's claim to hegemonic control. As Sahin and Abbas (2020) note, 'Nation-states are often hostile to solidarity and mutual aid efforts because their existence alone exposes state failures in social welfare' (p. 5). But, more fundamentally, the state requires its 'subjects and resources [to] be *assets*, serving the imperatives of the state' (King 2019: 3). When people challenge those imperatives by

organising independently to meet their own needs, the state rushes to re-assert its sovereignty and control. This extreme centralisation of power was a core process of state formation in the early modern period. Kropotkin's (2009 [1902]) foundational conceptualisation of mutual aid organising identifies this jealous demand for exclusivity on the part of the emerging states: '"No state within the state!"' (p. 183).

The UK government's suppressive response echoes that of authoritarian regimes such as Turkey – albeit with just a shade less blatancy. The co-optive and suppressive facets of this state jealousy are evident in the distinct treatment of Scrub Hub and For the Love of Scrubs – some autonomous producers were threatened with prosecution, while the founder of FtLoS was awarded an OBE (BBC News 2020). Upon collecting her OBE, Ashleigh Linsdell emphasised the group's deference to the state, noting in a BBC interview that the group would still provide scrubs to those who offered a valid explanation as to why they needed them, but that they did not intend to stand in the way of supply chains that had now resumed (BBC News 2020). This 'resumption' of supply chains was in the form of a cronyistic handover of public service contracts to private corporations from their friends in the UK government. Under emergency procurement measures since 18 March 2020, competition for government contracts has been suspended (Cabinet Office 2020), and, up to 20 February 2021, more than 3,000 contracts had been handed out with no tender process whatsoever (Tussell 2021b). Millions of pounds have gone to companies that do not have any employees or trading history (Delahunty 2020), contracts worth at least £1 billion have been awarded to Tory party 'friends and donors' (Crerar 2020) through a 'highly unusual' 'high-priority lane' PPE procurement channel for 'well-connected firms' (Pegg et al. 2020). All this while autonomous scrub producers have been denied funding or remuneration, or have even been criminalised for their work.

An anonymous group of anarchist activists in Bristol, writing at the beginning of the pandemic crisis, warned that '[m]utual aid and solidarity can be no more than acts of charity if they are not combined with resistance in this current context' (Anonymous 2020: 3), and this chimes with the experience of Scrub Hub. Some Scrub Hub members joined protests against the government's failure to protect health workers (and patients) from infection, but other people involved in the initiative frowned upon this direct 'political' stance as a distraction from meeting the critical need to get PPE into the hands of health workers. While this stance reproduced neoliberal codes of volunteerism, it also served to provoke a fruitful discussion on positionality and the notion of charity. Even Scrub Hub participants who would not necessarily consider themselves 'political' were engaged in this. But this political engagement was always under pressure from the intensive workload of scrub production and the swirling anxieties of the pandemic, which exhausted many of the Scrub Hub volunteers. What began as a crisis response to meet an immediate need became more prolonged than people had imagined (or hoped). Even with the sustaining networks of solidarity, burnout has been a serious challenge, and this has drained the energy required to respond to government suppression. But in many ways the greatest difficulty in mounting effective resistance to this erosion of mutual aid initiatives was the (limited) return of everyday normality. As Montgomery and bergman (2017) put it, this is 'the reinstallation of individualising and isolating forms of life.

People go back to their jobs, their houses, their smartphones, and control returns' (p. 145).

The cracks and opportunities that opened in the disruption of the first wave of the pandemic crisis are being (partially) closed – but we will never return to the same 'normal' as prior to the crisis. Many of these transformations will be negative, with increased state surveillance, new police powers, job losses, and individual and community trauma, to name a few. Nevertheless, even while the reactionary processes of co-optation and suppression appear to be overwhelming, there will also be a legacy of the radical transformations that have taken place during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. As noted above, the UK mutual aid response built upon 'legacies of mutual aid' by mobilising and expanding upon existing networks. Shantz (2009) describes these as 'infrastructures of resistance', and as Swann (2021) notes, '[p]eople and groups with this kind of experience will be better placed to navigate the threats and challenges to mutual aid organising and will be better prepared for effective self-organisation'. A key question is how these 'infrastructures of resistance' can grow to effectively challenge capitalism and the state – or to use Negri's (1989) terms, how can these alternatives become the 'basis without which society is no longer conceivable' (p. 52)?

Prichard and Worth (2016) emphasise the need for 'ideological coherence and precision in the naming of the enemy' and insist that an 'alternative agenda must also be made explicit', 'to create a space in which a viable alternative can be forged' (pp. 10, 11, 8). Despite the latent radicality of mutual aid as an organising principle, there was variation across the decentralised Scrub Hub groups in terms of responding to the political context surrounding the lack of PPE. As in most of the street-level mutual aid groups, the expression of political opinions was often frowned upon by participating neighbours – the clear priority was filling the 'gap' and addressing need, regardless of the systemic cause of that need (falling back into the neoliberal 'charity' mindset). The general sentiment was that politics was removed from the everyday experience of the group members; politics was something that happened 'over there' in Westminster. However, even in the efforts to depoliticise the discourse surrounding 'mutual aid', a certain engagement was starting to emerge – this was a recognition of what it means to be part of a community and how that community relates to events 'out there'. Indeed, despite local council attempts to co-opt mutual aid groups, the government was still being situated by the neighbours as beyond the realm of their private WhatsApp groups, and collective 'neighbourly' acts were reclaimed with the dignity of interaction. The task of resistance, then, is protecting the dignity of that community-level interaction. This is emphasised on the Covid-19 Mutual Aid (2020) UK webpage, which states clearly that 'Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK does not directly work with: The police; Councils and local authorities; Political parties; NGOs; Government bodies or departments, including the Home Office'. So, at this level, the mutual aid response to the pandemic has been quite explicit in 'the naming of the enemy' – though, as recognised, this has not always been reflected across all the groups operating under the mutual aid banner.

Prichard and Worth frame their concerns in the terms of a Gramscian 'war of position' (Gramsci 1971) – mutual aid initiatives, and the alternative networks they create, resonate with these ideas, but perhaps the essential contribution of autonomous and

anarchist analyses is the recognition of revolution as a process. As Gustav Landauer puts it,

> even the eradication of coercive institutions will not automatically create a liberatory society. We create that society by building new institutions, by changing the character of our social relationships, by changing ourselves – and throughout that process by changing the distribution of power in society . . . If we cannot begin this revolutionary project here and now, then we cannot make a revolution. (Landauer in Ehrlich 1996: 5)

Indeed, alternative modes of production, like Scrub Hub, refuse the crushing atomisation of neoliberal work and volunteerist hierarchies, and make new social conditions – it is here that 'different subjectivities can be constituted and paths to alternative futures opened' (Weeks 2011: 100–101). But Landaeur's project of 'changing the distribution of power in society' is unavoidably steeped in resistance, struggle and conflict. This 'process of breaking away from systemic processes of state and capital' will, and must, generate an 'antagonistic political demand' (Böhm et al. 2010: 28, see also O'Hearn & Grubačić 2016: 160). As much as mutual aid initiatives responding to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis have been clear in identifying reactionary and co-optive elements, it is the state and capital that 'name themselves' as the enemy in the clearest terms, and people have recognised this in the course of their involvement with the mutual aid pandemic response.

Conclusion

The immediate aftermath of disasters and insurrections has been described as a 'beautiful opening up of possibility' for the flourishing of mutual aid practices (Sitrin 2012: 37), chiefly because the dominance and control mechanisms of the state and capital are disrupted. This was the case in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis – the state and neoliberal economy failed to meet people's basic needs, the powers-that-be temporarily lost control of 'the narrative', and people organised to provide for themselves and for others, pointing towards alternative social realities. But, as Montgomery and bergman (2017) note, 'A key question is how to keep these relations alive in everyday life, even as Empire's stultifying rhythms are reimposed' (p. 145). As the months progressed, many scrub producing groups became increasingly institutionalised into the neoliberal charity culture and volunteerist hierarchies, in keeping with the hegemonic NPM, neo-Tocquevillean understandings of 'social capital' that have proliferated since the late 1990s. The result has been alienation, disillusionment, burnout and even fear.

But, thanks to the extensive mutual aid networks that sprang up around the country, people who would not ordinarily associate themselves with anarchist (or even socialist) principles have connected with one another on street and local levels to help each other out where the state had revealed itself to be redundant. PPE makers were one of many groups that ranged from food provisioning, homeless support, driving health workers and delivering vital provisions. Contrary to the government's infantile 'nudge' rhetorics, the Covid-19 crisis has shown that people are entirely able to form bonds of solidarity. The disillusionment with government selloffs and the success of mutual aid has

highlighted the potential 'cracks' for extending solidarity, challenging labour abstraction, the reproduction of capitalism and embracing dignity (Dinerstein 2012: 531).

While burnout, co-optation and suppression have been obstacles, autonomous infrastructures of resistance that fed into the initial pandemic response have been expanded and new 'legacies of mutual aid' are being formed. As Aidan and Sam (2021) put it, 'the lessons learnt provide valuable experience in the context of cascading social, economic and environmental crises'. Connections between people will persist as this crisis continues to unfold, and these networks will develop and grow to meet the next flashpoints in our condition of perpetual crisis.

The lived experience of this autonomous community response to crisis has also been an opportunity to appraise the real-world application of 'Left Convergence'. In terms of mutual aid organising, anarchist and autonomist analyses critically complement one another to develop a nuanced understanding of 'bottom-up', self-help praxes and emerging autonomous economies, within and against the hegemony of volunteerist hierarchies and concerted repression by the neoliberal state.

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