**Research Statement**

This Conceptual Paper presents a taxonomy of ‘mutual aid’ in academic discourse. Current popular usage of ‘mutual aid’ generally follows Dean Spade’s conceptualization which emphasizes a non-hierarchical, participatory approaches to organizing and contrasts mutual aid explicitly with more institutionalized ‘charity’ approaches. However, the term ‘mutual aid’ has been used to describe a variety of phenomena in the social sciences. While most link to the anarchist Kropotkin’s definition of the term, they sit uneasily with the current anti-bureaucratic conceptualization of mutual aid. This paper aims to outline the major themes and overlaps of the various uses of mutual aid in the discourse, aiming for future lines of research.

**‘Modern’ Mutual Aid**

* Dean Spade – Overvew and anti-Charity focus, review values, link to popular examples.
  + Anarchist responses to a pandemic: The covid-19 crisis as a case study in mutual aid
  + Mutual Aid in north London during the Covid-19 pandemic
* Rebecca Solnit – Not emergency/crisis focus, note some anti-hierarchical leanings
  + Will philanthropy save us all? Rethinking urban philanthropy in a time of crisis
  + Mutual Aid in north London during the Covid-19 pandemic
  + Amplified injustices and mutual aid in the COVID-19 pandemic
* Kropotkin in the ‘Modern’ MA tradition

Note: Lots of ‘incidental’ comments to Dean Spade/Solnit def’n, while Anarchist is more heavily theorized. Many ‘practice’ examples take very surface level defn which can be quite broad. What to make of that?

**Mutual Aid in Anarchist/Geography Discourse**

* Grubacic and Graber (note how this links to Spade/Activists)
* Other Anarchists from various publications
* Kropotkin as explored in the Anarchist/Georgraphy tradition

Articles:

* Capitalism, mutual aid, and material life: Understanding exilic spaces
* Caring geographies: The COVID-19 interregnum and a return to mutual aid
* Making autonomous geographies: Argentina's popular uprising and the 'Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados' (Unemployed Workers Movement)
* Occupy Wall Street: Creating a strategy for a spontaneous movement
* Radical social welfare and anti-authoritarian mutual aid
* Bridging Materiality and Subjectivity: Expanding the Commons in Cooperation Birmingham
* Mutual Aid in north London during the Covid-19 pandemic

**Mutual Aid as a general phrase OR subunit.**

**Mutual Aid in COVID**

Theoretical and Popular literature. Look to Dean Spade, DSA, and activist literature to flesh out main themes. (could be multiple single-spaced pages)

**Kropotkin-19**

Graeber and Andrej Grubaci c (Graeber and Grubaci c 2020), in their introduction to Pyotr Kropotkin’s Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution (Kropotkin 1902), noted that

in the Global North, everywhere from various occupy movements to solidarity projects confronting the COVID-19 pandemic, mutual aid has emerged as a key phrase used by activists and mainstream journalists alike. At present, mutual aid is invoked in migrant solidarity mobilizations in Greece and in the organization of Zapatista society in Chiapas. Even scholars are rumored to occasionally use it (5).

(pg 70)

We named our group Kropotkin-19, after Russian anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin, author of Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution (Kropotkin 1902). Kropotkin argued that practicing mutual aid is

[t]he surest means for giving each other and all the greatest safety, the best guarantee of existence and progress, bodily, intellectual and moral. [ …] Moreover, it is evident that life in societies would be utterly impossible without a corresponding development of social feelings, and, especially, of a certain collective sense of justice growing to become a habit. (42)

In his book, Kropotkin challenged the Darwinist view that humans are believed to be competitive by their nature. Instead, Kropotkin suggested that “in the long run the practice of solidarity proves much more advantageous to the species than the development of individuals endowed with predatory inclinations” (17).

**Amplified Injustices**

 to the most vulnerable people around me and to connect with the people who were best positioned to help. I left notes on the doors of my neighbors who I knew to be elders, frail, or live alone, as well as on the door of an anarchist collective. I knew the collective had been active in creating a mutual aid network—the organized practice of “people giv[ing] what they can and get[ting] what they need” (Shepard in [Izlar, 2019](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7672310/#bibr7-1473325020973326): 352) – this seems important source for social work

**Mutual Aid in North London**

. The (short) literature on mutual aid defines it as an organizing principle for grassroots cooperation and care between small groups of people, usually directed towards survival needs (Kenney, 2019; Kropotkin, 1902/1987; Spade, 2020). Initially formulated by Russian thinker Peter Kropotkin in 1902, the principle has recently re-emerged in the vocabulary of collective action, for example, among local residents who led community-based responses to natural disasters, such as Common Ground following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Occupy Sandy after Hurricane Sandy in 2012 and the cross-national American network Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (Kenney, 2019; Spade, 2020). These groups provided basic survival needs for people who, for various reasons, were left out from traditional relief response. Members were both helpers and receivers and therefore immediately identified basic needs for populations who were struggling. Reflecting on the shortcomings of relief efforts after Hurricane Katrina, Kenney noted that the emergence of mutual aid groups revealed that ‘state, federal, and industrial non-profit assistance often fall short in meeting the needs of marginalized individuals and communities’ after natural disasters (2019, p. 2). Mutual aid is therefore a form of political participation and dissent with the way care is administered and managed in society (Spade, 2020, p. 136).

**Bridging Materiality and Subjectivity**

s it has been documented by many scholars before, mutual aid networks have historically provided a fertile ground for commons against and beyond capitalism in different geographical backgrounds (Beito 2000; Garcıa-Bryce 2003; Kropotkin 2006). In fact, mutual aid has traditionally emerged among oppressed communities as a response to extreme patterns of dispossession. Take as an example the workers’ societies, mutualities and consumers’ cooperatives that became popular in heavily industrialised areas of Europe from the mid-19th century until WWII (e.g. Dalmau Torva 2015; Robertson 2012). The iconic Survival Programs started by the Black Panthers at the end of the 1960s provide a more recent illustration of organised mutual aid in response to the marginalisation and lack of welfare benefits for black populations in the US (Rhodes 2017). In still another example, during the last two decades mutual aid has been a central strategy of urban communities in Latin America when responding to socioeconomic crises or even when supporting particular socioenvironmental struggles such as the Water Wars in Bolivia (e.g. Chatterton 2005; Zibechi 2010). The emancipatory potential of mutual aid is better understood when compared with charity, which is the dominant form of relief used by institutions and organisations in the UK and globally (Kapoor 2013). Charity reinforces the social cohesion of capital by considering the recipient a passive object who has individually failed in providing for themselves.5 This logic creates a bond based on dependency and indebtedness which reproduces power differentials between the giver and the recipient, perpetuating at the same time marginalisation and inequality (Raventos and Wark 2018). Conversely, the principles of mutual aid include coop- eration, solidarity and horizontality. It is a process that, by acknowledging the agency of the people in adverse situations to improve theirs and other people’s lives, erases the distinction between giver and recipient (Crow 2014). Thus, whereas charity legitimates and perpetuates capital and the state as forms of social organisation, mutual aid offers the potential to look beyond those and enacts values associated with a social organisation based on communing

**Reciprocity in COVID (China)**

In addition to the Concern & Love System, this paper also borrows from theories of mutual aid to explore its reconfiguration as an emerging global phenomenon worthy of re-interpretation in the COVID-19 context. Social theories of mutual aid trace back to Peter Kropotkin’s 1902 book Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution. According to Kropotkin, cooperation among all sentient beings (including human) is the main factor driving evolution, not competition and selection. Particularly in the Chinese context, Tsu (1912) regards mutual assistance in various aspects of the society as displays of philanthropic spirits embedded in Chinese traditions, such as virtue and kindness promoted in both Confucius’s and Mencius’s thoughts. If Kropotkin and Tsu investigate the foundations of mutual aid by tracing its history and traditions, then recent works on mutual aid consider its functions and possibilities by attending to the current moment of a global pandemic. Spade (2020, 134) considers mutual aid to be a set of arrangements of “bottom-up strategies” that contrast with traditional state and charity assistance and highlights its utility in actively mobilizing the collective to confront social injustice, disasters, and other crises. Social mobilization and solidarity formation are echoing around the globe, marking mutual aid as a significant form of Reciprocity universally adopted by diverse communities in the pandemic (Springer 2020; Domínguez et al. 2020; Tolbert 2020). Wuhan, the first city where a COVID-19 outbreak occurred and robust quarantine was implemented, is no exception. Mutual aid is not necessarily concerned with political gestures or agendas. Anthropologist David Graeber applauds the rediscovery of Kropotkin’s conceptions of mutual aid among worldwide social movement promoters, but clarifies that Kropotkin’s insights are “not just about the nature of government, but the nature of nature – that is, reality – itself” (Graeber and Grubačić 2020a, b). In other words, before entering the realm of politics or the process of politicization, Graeber reminds us that mutual aid refers to animal beings’ initial, spontaneous, and collaborative reactions to crises. For example, we found that rather than confront government and institutions, mutual aid volunteers in Wuhan believed their purpose was to supplement the deployment of governmental assistance. Spade (2020) suggests mutual aid represents a gesture of political protests that aim to challenge structural violence. However, in contrast, we found that mutual aid groups in Wuhan appeared to sidestep politics or calls for accountability in favor of simply trying to address pandemic needs. Our analysis identified a strong sense of citizen-focused solidarity that avoided, or even transcended, political intentions. Our three-point theoretical approach more accurately accounts for these various modes of assistance in Wuhan and informs out call for a different approach to the Reciprocity principle in pandemic times.

**Capturing Waste/Innovation**

While food redistribution activities are rapidly growing internationally [4], they are far from homogenous, and have often attracted critique. Our paper compares two broad approaches: charitable food banking, and redistribution as mutual aid. Charitable programmes to redistribute food have been contested because of the risk that they do not address structural causes of either over-production [9] or food insecurity [10,11]. They have been seen as papering over cracks left by states’ withdrawal of statutory welfare provision [12]. Much of the literature analysing activist and charitable forms of surplus food redistribution comes from the experiences of North America, where food banking in particular has spread in recent decades as a means to contain both overproduced food commodities and manage destitution in the context of neoliberal restructuring [13,14]. Poppendieck [10] criticised entrenched food charity in the USA for its inadequacy in solving hunger created by Reagan-era welfare cuts. Such charity, she argued, enabled further state retrenchment by upholding an impression of goodSustainability 2020, 12, 4252 3 of 19 and capable communities through which the discomfort of living in unequal societies is mollified by well-intentioned acts of voluntarism and donation. The US food banking system expanded rapidly during the 1980s and 1990s, from dispersed origins that Poppendieck [10] argues were “supply driven”, as food surpluses were diverted through the “heroic” and often faith-inspired actions of community members. Poppendieck depicts the “inherent drive toward stability” that saw initial efforts expand into well-resourced logistical networks and formalised food banking organisations. This expansion of corporate-sponsored surplus food redistribution has been analysed in terms of neoliberal governance [14] and the upholding of circuits of capitalist value in economies of manufactured scarcity amid excess [15]. Turning to the UK, ‘food poverty’ became an increasing concern from the early 2000s [16,17]. The introduction of austerity measures from 2010 intensified discourses around food waste’s relationship with food poverty (e.g., Business Ethics Council, 2014). Rapid growth of charitable food provision followed [18], with critical voices noting how such provision lies outside of market functions and state entitlements [12]. The emergence of community self-organisation of charitable food provision was thus problematised as potentially providing a justification for the withdrawal of welfare entitlements [18]. It has also begun to be analysed as part of a globalising spread of the US-originating food bank model [19,20]. Around the world, other efforts to redistribute surplus foods developed more as mutual aid than charity, from the Black Panther Party’s alternative provisioning programs created in the face of state neglect in the United States [21] to anarchist-inspired community kitchens [22] and the online food sharing movement that is spreading through mainland Europe from its German origins [23]. A core aim of mutual aid is to provide relief while critiquing unjust economies, with a view to replacing them with systems that satisfy the fundamental food needs of all beings i.e. transforming dominant capitalist production, which proponents have long argued is “obstinately bent on producing more than can possibly be consumed” [24]. Both charity and mutual aid approaches began outside of incumbent institutional arrangements, suggesting impulses towards self-organisation and the potential to effect sustainability transitions [25]. However, contextual and ideological differences underlie the tendency towards food banking’s maintenance of existing food regimes, while mutual aid seeks to transform these. We will therefore analyse the nature and extent of self-organisation in two UK initiatives, one that is closer to the US-style charitable foodbank model, and another that attempts a more distanced and critical relation to established food industry actors.

**The Limits of Mutual Aid**

The mutual aid model of unionism began to lose ground from the early 20th century, when responsibility for welfare provision began to shift onto government and employers (Bacharach et al., 2001; Jarley, 2005; Wills and Simms, 2004). In the United States, government-sponsored social security programmes were first introduced by the Roosevelt administration. Unions later made rapid progress in negotiating employer provision of health insurance, overtime pay and other costs during World War II (Bacharach et al., 2001). In the United Kingdom, the Labour Party had established a welfare state and introduced several improvements in workplace and community life by the end of World War II (Wills and Simms, 2004). Similar changes in Australia meant the mutual aid model of organising had receded by 1950 (Weinbren and James, 2005). As a result of these developments in the provision of services, unions and their members no longer needed to function as welfare providers, shifting instead to the currently dominant servicing model, in which collective bargaining and political activity has become the work of professional union staff. The global decline in union membership and power in recent decades has seen scholars and activists begin to question the effectiveness of the servicing model (Bronfenbrenner et al., 1998; Carter, 2006; Fairbrother and Yates, 2013). Among the critics are proponents of a return to the mutual aid-based model of unionism, who argue that – in an increasingly hostile environment that has resulted in conditions not dissimilar to those that initially gave rise to mutual aid-based models of organising (Bacharach et al., 2001) – it might encourage members to take greater responsibility and ownership over the unions (Jarley, 2005). A return to a mutual aid-based model would require unions to adopt a more horizontal structure that encourages collective action of the rank and file (Fine, 2015; Lynd, 2015) and to connect with workers’ interests beyond the workplace (Tapia et al., 2015; Wills and Simms, 2004).

**Radical Social Welfare**

Mutual aid as social welfare Similar to current understandings of social welfare, reassessments are moulded by history, context, geography, culture, norms and mores. However, due to modern social welfare systems being built upon notions of worthy and unworthy poor, as well as the discrimination, surveillance and means testing of beneficiaries, viewing ‘social welfare’ as something outside of the state and capitalism seems natural. Reconsidering social welfare as a system of social support that ensures the well-being of everyone, without the need for oppressive, hierarchical and institutionalised structures, subverts the idea of (and need for) systems of social control that partially ensure the basic minimum of social welfare for people, leading to a Delivered by Ingenta IP : 165.215.209.15 On: Fri, 17 Jan 2020 18:07:29 Copyright The Policy Press Joel Izlar 352 social welfare that facilitates community empowerment, autonomy and solidarity by people, with people and for all people – outside the state and outside capitalism. A radical social welfare, or anti-authoritarian mutual aid, that is aimed at ‘bring[ing] about a society in which men [sic] will consider each other as brothers [sic] and by mutual support will achieve the greatest well-being and freedom as well as physical and intellectual development for all’ (Malatesta, 1909: 2) paves the way for a system of social care that is collapsed into society itself, becoming a part of everyday life. Radical approaches to social welfare and social work are not new, and many social welfare ideals have rich linkages to anti-authoritarian traditions (Reisch and Andrews, 2002; Pyles, 2009), such as social anarchism (Kropotkin, 1902; Gilbert, 2005; Ward, 1996, 2011; Shepard, 2014). Social anarchism is a philosophy that has been marred by scorn, misunderstanding, misrepresentation and misinformation. This has been due to: • anarchism's core tenets, which question the legitimacy and subvert the foundations of established order; • the nebulousness and fluidity of its terms and theories of knowledge, ethics, reality and being; and • well-established internal tensions between collectivism and individualism. Social anarchism is one of many quasi-unfixed variations in anarchist thought. It is based on anti-authoritarian socialist and communist practices, and seeks to ‘dismantle oppressive, hierarchical institutions…. [And to] replace those institutions with organic, horizontal, and cooperative versions based on autonomy, solidarity, voluntary association, mutual aid, and direct action’ (Fernandez, 2008: 52). It also aims to ‘establish a post-capitalist, egalitarian social order…. [Where] decision-making [is] decentralized’ (White, 2013: 117). This is accomplished through the ‘workplace or local occupational group [anarcho-syndicalism]’ or the ‘self-governing neighborhood or “commune” [anarcho-communism or communalism]’ (White, 2013: 117). Social anarchism is theorised to ensure an economic distribution that is social, inclusive, participatory, autonomous, equitable and equal – channelling the maxim ‘from each according to his [sic] ability, to each according to his [sic] needs’ (Marx, 1875). Mutual aid is an organisational concept of social welfare at the centre of social-anarchist and anti-authoritarian traditions, with their practices and variants birthed from this central idea. ‘Mutual aid’ is a somewhat nebulous term, and broad in scope, but it can be viewed as a “voluntary and complementary” exchange of goods, resources and/or services for mutual welfare – or ‘people giv[ing] what they can and get[ting] what they need’ (Shepard, 2014: 166). Foundational values of mutual aid are antithetical to conventional understandings of sanctimonious charity and psychopathologised helping as they do not present a moralistic hierarchy of giver over receiver, nor a delineation between the two. However, in some cases, unavoidable hierarchies present themselves as some people are incapable of giving and/or participating, which may lead to power differentials like ‘horizontal violence’ (unintentional divide and rule) (Ledwith, 2016). Mutual aid may take the form of support groups, cooperatives, unions, solidarity economies or networks of support that ‘emphasize the significance of autonomous creativity in the struggles against states and capital’ (Shantz, 2013: 62). Mutual aid is a native component to human experience. By observing the natural world, the influential anarcho-communist thinker Peter Kropotkin (1902) saw mutual Delivered by Ingenta IP : 165.215.209.15 On: Fri, 17 Jan 2020 18:07:29 Copyright The Policy Press Radical social welfare and anti-authoritarian mutual aid 353 aid as intrinsic to nature, as well as a sociobiological and prehistoric quality intrinsic to humans, their preservation, procreation and evolution: But whatever the opinions as to the first origin of the mutual-aid feeling or instinct may be whether a biological or a supernatural cause is ascribed to it – we must trace its existence as far back as to the lowest stages of the animal world; and from these stages we can follow its uninterrupted evolution, in opposition to a number of contrary agencies, through all degrees of human development, up to the present times. (Kropotkin, 1902: 144) Despite ongoing academic contentions and the evolution of thought surrounding the innateness of mutual aid, altruism and cooperation in humans, there are contemporary grounds that mutual aid, cooperation and altruism are deep-seated behaviours of our species (Tomasello and Vaish, 2013). Altruistic and cooperative tendencies can be seen in the earliest forms of social welfare and social work, and are further exonerated as inherent when compared to centralised forms of authority and power, which have caused social work values and qualities to be moulded and corrupted by market forces.

**These Bars Can’t Hold Us Back**

On their own, restorative practices may simply reflect a do-good politics that fail to address the drivers of various inequities (Koopman 2008), but when combined with a food justice politics grounded in mutual aid that recognizes and works against oppression, activists are better positioned to reduce power asymmetries These Bars Can’t Hold Us: Restorative Food Justice 1363 © 2016 The Author. Antipode © 2016 Antipode Foundation Ltd.(Cadieux and Slocum 2015).

**(im)Mobilities**

The phrase “mutual aid” is used here – and throughout this text – to describe the work of Occupy Sandy, largely because that is the phrase that the movement itself used. As Jaleel (2013) notes, “Occupy enact[ed] an ethics and practice of mutual aid: a bi-directional exchange of knowledge, skill sets, and resources,” which functioned as an “alternative to state neglect and impositions of austerity.” This political praxis entailed “the binding together of people and organizations in emotional networks of care and accountability that extend[ed] the prefigurative politics of the [Occupy movement’s] encampments into the world at large.” Therefore, in using this language, my intention is not to enter into emerging debates in geography (and beyond) regarding mutual aid (see Ince and Bryant, 2018; Springer, 2013). Nevertheless, as will be discussed below, the infrastructural politics of Occupy Sandy may speak to this literature’s concern with the “the generalised relations of mutuality which societies inherit and reproduce” (Ince and Bryant, 2018, p. 4, emphasis original).

**Will Philantropy Save us All?**

3. Conflation between mutual aid and philanthropy

From the beginning of the crisis we have seen a different form of collective action emerge from society and regular citizens: from doctors and nurses producing home videos of how to make their own PPEs from trash bags and cling film, to soup kitchens and food banks run by neighbourhood associations and community groups, a wide display of generosity and shared solidarity has taken shape across cities in the US, the UK or Spain, very different from the large and mediated fund-raising campaigns organized by celebrities and the like (Solnit, 2020, Tolentino, 2020).

All these initiatives have relied on the common principle of “mutual aid”, a concept first developed as a political idea by the Russian philosopher Peter Kropotkin in the early 20th century, but which in recent times has been used to describe the shared form of solidarity bringing people together, especially during hard times. Speaking within the context of the COVID-19 crisis, American writer Rebecca Solnit recently explained the way in which the terms has evolved and being embraced by a broader spectrum of society,

A dozen years ago, the term “mutual aid” was, as far as I can tell, used mostly by anarchists and scholars. Somehow it has migrated into general usage in recent years and now, in the midst of the pandemic, it is everywhere. Mutual aid has generally meant aid offered in a spirit of solidarity and reciprocity, often coming from within struggling communities, empowering those aided, and with an eye towards liberation and social change (Solnit, 2020, unpaginated).

Solnit is one of the authors who has written more extensively about the idea of mutual aid and shared solidarity in the wake of disasters: in A Paradise built in Hell (2010), she provides with a detailed account of multiple instances when such shared solidarity has taken shape: from the 1755 Lisbon earthquake to the 2005 hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, almost every time a natural (or man-made) disaster has struck, people have managed to come together and support each other through collective action driven by a shared sense of responsibility.

And yet, somehow, the stories of people’s generosity, resilience, and creativity in the wake of the current pandemic have gotten somewhat muddled or thrown into the same bag as philanthropy. While there is no denying of the influence and the “star-effect” of celebrities and High Net Worth Individuals to fund raise, it is very important that we differentiate between these headline-making campaigns from the regular, every day actions of anonymous individuals, and their power to organise and reach out to one another, whether that be doctors, nurses or workers in the food industry. It is necessary that we make this distinction for, as obvious as it may seem, over the past few months we have been hearing again and again that “philanthropy can bring people together” through “individual acts of kindness” (Maurrasse, 2020, unpaginated).

I would argue, however, these “act of kindness” are not philanthropic actions but mutual aid at its core, specially seeing the context in which all these groups and collective efforts emerged from: it is important to note that, from its origins, the idea of mutual aid included an element of protest and rebellion, and that is something that should be taken into consideration when looking at the differences between philanthropy (and charitable giving) and collective action. As Jia Tolentino points out, “both mutual aid and charity address the effects of inequality, but mutual aid is aimed at root causes—at the structures that created inequality in the first place” (2020, unpaginated). In many ways if should not come as a surprise that many of the stories about mutual aid and support networks have come from the United States, for all these networks and examples of altruism and generosity also speak out to the systemic failure of a system that has left those most in need behind. I will be returning to this idea in my conclusion.

As such, we need to be vigilant that mutual aid is not conflated with philanthropy for, at their core, they speak to different causes and, equally important, they seek to solve a different set of problems.

**A Sociology of COVID 19**

In the United States, *Teen Vogue* discusses the value of mutual aid, the virtues of Peter Kropotkin, and the deficiencies of Donald Trump ([Diavolo, 2020](https://journals-sagepub-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939416)). (This sentence alone is beautiful).

**Connectivity in times of Control**

Against the logic of the invisible forces created by individuals’ self-interested pursuit of profit, here mutual aid is always free and grounded in the ideals of solidarity and interdependence as a basis of survival.

**An Integrated, Trauma Informed**

The mutual aid model of group work emphasizes the relationship between members that plays a significant role in the problem-solving process (Schwartz, 2005). The impetus for change comes from the connection between members who share common problems that they must work together to solve. This was a paradigm shift for groups from leader as “authoritarian” to leader as “democratic facilitator” to foster mutual aid.

NOTE: Not Chapperman, but feels like an important background ‘trench’.

**Caring Geographies**

As people reconnect in spite of the lockdowns and social distancing between us by lending a hand wherever it is needed most, we are bearing witness to and actively participating in the reconstruction of the unshakable and fundamental basis of all life on this planet: mutual aid (Kropotkin, [1902] 2008).

The heart of all life

Historically, the state and capitalism worked in concert to destroy mutual aid, largely through the imposition of private property (Springer, 2017). Instead of tightly knit community bonds, the state sought to replace these affinities with a nationalist allegiance, a condition not rooted in an ethic of compassion and care, but rather in obedience and othering (Gelderloos, 2017; Scott, 2017). By transforming exchange into a transaction of assumed value relative to scarcity, as opposed to the former practice of reciprocity according to need that human societies hinged upon, capitalism worked to eradicate mutual aid over the course of several centuries. While capitalism and the state appear as the dominant mediators of our everyday lives, and they certainly manipulate our capacities and constrain our thinking in profound and unsettling ways (Barrera and Ince, 2016), they have not succeeded in annihilating mutual aid. It has continued in myriad and mundane forms, such as watching your neighbor’s kids, car pooling, caring for a pet, passing the salt when asked, taking a picture for a stranger, and through the conviviality of virtually every friendship that has ever existed (Springer, 2016). Mutual aid is just what we do. Thus the reason for this resilience is quite simply owing to the fact that mutual aid is actually the wellspring of all life on this planet, both human and nonhuman. In times of crises, mutual aid is pragmatic and comes to define our responses at a community level and as a species precisely because it is the most paramount element of our survival. As Peter Kropotkin ([1902] 2008) recognized, mutual aid is promoted through natural selection and is a factor in evolution.

The idea that survival of the fittest alone shapes the trajectory of evolution has always been a willful misrepresentation of Darwin’s work, demonstrating how scientific discourse is never immune to politics. Kropotkin was averse to such a reading precisely because it was used to legitimize capitalism (McKay, 2014). His life’s work was dedicated to explaining how cooperation was essential to prosperity within the animal kingdom, pivotal in many Indigenous and early European societies, vital to the organization of medieval guilds, and was routinely practiced among the poor as an essential means to ensuring their survival (Kinna, 2016; Morris, 2018). Kropotkin never denied that competition exists within the natural world or even among humans. Rather, he emphasized that cooperation was equally, and, in point of fact, even more important in the perpetuation of life. When we consider this from a multispecies perspective, it should become obvious. No single species, even an apex predator, can live without a reliance on other species, even if the connection is only as a source of food. Life itself is an intricate and beautifully complex web of mutual aid relations. While individual members of a species may compete over resources in times of scarcity, even for solitary animals, it is more in their benefit to ensure that other members survive since this is the only way to guarantee the continuity of their species (Dugatkin, 1997). In this moment of COVID-19, we are seeing how it is in fact reciprocity that is saving us from complete catastrophe, and we are beginning to understand that we have the ability to expand our circle of care beyond family and friends. Such activity is vital to the functioning of our societies and even our survival as a species. We would have never made it this far into the human odyssey without mutual aid.

**Unions and Social Capital**

The concepts so central to contemporary discussions of social capital were expressed by early trade unionists using such terms as &dquo;mutual aid,&dquo; &dquo;solidarity,&dquo; and &dquo;brotherhood.&dquo

**Mutual Aid as Abolitionist Praxis**

Mutual aid makes it possible both to survive the present – solidarity as resistance – and to imagine and build ‘decarceral futures’ (Aiken and Silverman 2019; Spade 2020; Kaba and Spade 2020). Particularly when seeking help from state and official sources is a dead end and an active harm, people organize to help each other. Perhaps there is no refugee camp, no migrant community, no institution of confinement, no group of survivors, no low-income neighborhood where people of color live, where that isn’t the case.

In prisons and migrant detention facilities, mutual aid is a way of life and survival. Extensive research has shown that mutual aid or peer-support is very beneficial for criminalized people (Maruna and LeBel 2003; Pollack 2008; Sheehan, McIvor, and Trotter 2011), yet the oppressive carceral system typically does not support it.

**Solidarity at a time of Risk**

What is perhaps unique in this moment, however, is the rapid shift towards articulations of solidarity through mutual aid, a concept describing collaborative human survival, as the foremost model for how best to enact solidarity during this time.

II. Mutual Aid at a Time of Risk

We are inescapably entwined and entangled with others, even when we cannot track or directly perceive this entanglement.

–Alexis Shotwell, Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times

Mutual aid, a term introduced by the Russian anarchist thinker Peter Kropotkin at the turn of the 20th century, outlined a model of natural and human evolution built in collaboration, solidarity and what he called a “Mutual Aid instinct in Nature” (1902: 5). Rejecting Social Darwinist arguments that extended theories of competition in natural selection onto humans through eugenics, Kropotkin outlined his observations and analysis of mutual aid as a foundational evolutionary feature of life across the human/animal divide. Kropotkin’s work has long been featured as a core [End Page 191] text in anarchist thinking, and has informed contemporary scholarship on social and political entanglement (Shotwell 2016); however, the concept of mutual aid, applied to 21st-century activism, looks quite different from the model outlined over a century ago.1 Today, a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic, mutual aid has been mobilized to mean everything from models for social organization in domestic survival clusters (pods, bubbles, affinity groups, care circles, containers, homes, chosen families, etc.) to wide networks of exchange on social networking groups, where strangers are invited to post needs and offers for aid and assistance during the pandemic.

Although the concept of mutual aid has long been in circulation among anarchist and abolitionist political projects, it has been taken up broadly across political and ideological frameworks (Spade 2020), including as a model for entrepreneurial collaboration (Sarkar et al. 2019). Since the start of the pandemic, tensions have also emerged in different articulations of mutual aid, such as in critiques of the mainstreaming of mutual aid projects through the launching of new charitable mutual aid organizations (Tolentino 2020). Reviewing the wave of material published online on mutual aid since the start of COVID-19, the turn to care in articulations of solidarity have been particularly striking. Prompts to care for the self, to care for others, to develop care plans, and to provide community care have been central to attempts to make sense of how to survive both the pandemic and social distancing measures. The relational aspect of care of the self, both for oneself and for the good of others,2 is magnified in a pandemic, where self-management has become a key form of viral containment outside of more authoritarian responses