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Experiments in collective care: community action in the shadows of crises

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Whilst approaching the notion of 'recovery', it is clear that the Covid-19 pandemic is not over, and may indeed not be over in the foreseeable horizon. This in itself poses challenges for analysis; the two years of the pandemic have a blurry and intangible quality, and, as time goes on, experiences of crisis become mixed up with other aspects of lives, and indeed other crises, whether they be personal or global (Bowlby and Jupp 2021). What we can say is that there have been different phases of pandemic, in terms of different sets of conditions and material threats, atmospheres and practices (unequally distributed across many different axes of inequality), but also different phases of meaning-making and analysis (Bailey et al 2020).

During the first six months of the pandemic, one theme of much analysis was around the rise of local community action of different kinds, taking place in the context of widespread 'lockdowns' and widespread (although again differentiated) vulnerability to the new airborne virus circulating. There had been a collapse in many of the normal infrastructures of governance and everyday life. These new forms of local action included the collectively organised provision of food and medication to those in need (often called 'mutual aid' – see Spade 2020), the collective production of masks and protective equipment, but also more informal and spontaneous acts of neighbourly solidarity and care, from public art, to music, singing and dance, supporting those suffering the social and emotional impacts of isolation and lockdown. These acts were given further meaning through their circulation on social and conventional media, and through academic and popular analysis (eg Kavada 2020, Shabi 2021). Not only did such practices provide an alternative 'story' of the pandemic, but the kindness, solidarity and resourcefulness on display also provided tantalising glimpses of solutions and futures in the face of other, even more intractable crises. As Rebecca Solnit argues, 'Ordinary life before the pandemic was already a catastrophe of desperation and exclusion for too many

human beings, an environmental and climate catastrophe, an obscenity of inequality' (2020a). Faced with this, she observes that, 'the generosity and solidarity in action in the present moment offers a foreshadowing of what is possible – and necessary' (2020b). Do such small-scale experiments in collective provisioning, care and sharing point the way to different kinds of economic and political futures, that are more equitable, sustainable and caring?

During 2020, I tracked the development and aftermath of mutual aid initiatives in two areas of SE England, case studies that are further discussed in my just published book, 'Care, Crisis and Activism' (Policy Press, 2022). My current ISRF-funded research on gifting and sharing within communities has also involved reflecting with community projects in three regions of the UK on their shifting roles during different phases of the pandemic. It is clear that following the particular period of the first lockdown, many of this first wave of local mutual aid initiatives stopped. Some of those who had taken part initially in mutual and community support had been freed up by 'furlough' schemes from work. The lifting of some restrictions plus the arrival of vaccines has meant that patterns of work, education, care and provisioning, all of which were so severely disrupted at the start, have resumed, albeit under new and often unstable arrangements. Despite the pandemic and its social and economic impacts being far from over, as already pointed out, its impacts have become more dissipated and there are less visible crises of collective life to galvanise such action. That said, there is no doubt that this earlier phase of local action has produced impacts and continues to shape other forms of action. Mutual aid and other initiatives have to some extent morphed into different kinds of local schemes, often trying to tackle more long term issues such as generalised food insecurity, but again these have become more hidden and fragmented.

So, what can now be concluded about the meaning and longer term significance of these practices? It may be helpful to consider that there are connections to already-existing forms of mutual and community support, shaped by conditions and dynamics which pre-existed and will undeniably persist into the future. As such, the early phases of the pandemic 'turbo-charged' forms of local collective action but did not necessarily re-invent them. One of these existing dynamics is austerity, in terms of the retreat of the state from many aspects of collective provisioning, support and care at a local level (Hall 2019). Austerity had already fuelled the rise of forms of local action and provisioning around material needs for food, clothing and furniture for example, as well as the creation of spaces to provide collective support, for example through the rise of 'community pantries' and 'social kitchens', which provide food but also spaces of connection. The projects I am currently studying predate the pandemic and include food provisioning at various scales, initiatives to enable the gifting of household resources, goods and furniture, especially to families in need, and the mutual exchange of time and skills across households.

Such practices also coincide with conditions of environmental crisis, and experimentation around local provisioning of food, growing, and the collective sharing of resources to reduce waste and over-consumption. Within such initiatives we therefore see a coming-together of social justice or welfare orientated actions with environmental and ecological action. Such a coming-together also enables new crossovers between mechanisms and discourses of more traditional 'activism', with forms of local provisioning and collective care. For example, actions around providing food for those in need might be taken quickly, via horizontal networks of local actors, operating outside the formal structures and procedures that have often characterised local welfare organisations. Ticktin (2021) discusses an example of collective 'community fridges' in New York City that enable new forms of food sharing during the pandemic and beyond. Drawing as they do on anarchist ideologies, she also argues that such actions suggest a new integration of 'care work (or 'social reproduction') and political organising' (p42) that can contribute to a project of a 'feminist commons'.

Drawing together these intersecting rationalities and actions are often forms of digital networks that enable fast connections and actions to intervene within localities. Again, such a use of the digital is not new but has clearly been accelerated by the conditions of the pandemic. Groups I studied often combined instant messaging tools such as WhatsApp, with more public facing platforms such as Facebook or Instagram. As well as an instrumental value in creating real time connections (for example linking someone in need of medical supplies with a neighbour able to deliver them), there are clearly also affective and emotional affordances from digital platforms (Bissell 2020). The new subjectivities and identifications that arise from using digital platforms might also be thought of as enabling this coming together of care work and politics. Koch and Miles (2021) propose the notion of 'stranger intimacies' to analyse the interconnections enabled by platforms such as Air bnb and dating apps. This notion can also be applied to welfare and care activism, whereby an intimate awareness of those experiencing need or injustice in a locality might generate new attachments and interventions. For example, local community 'hosting' or 'sponsorship' of refugees, organised both online and face to face, can generate intimate interactions and identifications across geopolitical inequalities (Aparna & Schapendonk 2020). This is therefore an affective and emotional realm of activism, that in itself expresses wider yearnings for more public and collective spheres of care beyond the self and the home.

So how far might intimate spheres of care-based activism generate wider political and economic change? As other commentators have been at pains to stress, small-scale solidarity, provisioning and care work often feels like a 'sticking plaster' and insufficient in itself to affect wider change (eg Cloke et al 2017). In a range of ways, such forms of care take place in the 'shadows' of state care (Power and Williams 2020). This lends a complexity to the politics of the sticking plaster, as the very existence of such projects and interventions supports the economic and political status quo – indeed a turn to community provisioning may be actively embraced by neoliberal visions of the state (see Shabi 2021) So this might seem to be 'meantime' activism, waiting for wider economic and political change that would erase the need for it (Cloke et al 2017).

However, there is perhaps also value in thinking afresh about how these interventions intersect with the market and state. Analysing the 'sharing economy', (broadly around environmental concerns), Santala and McGuirk (2022) argue that analysis has tended to *either* see such initiatives as reinforcing the economic status quo of the 'smart' neoliberal city *or* as politically disruptive and sitting outside existing political and economic structures. Instead, they propose paying more detailed attention to community sharing and provisioning as it is actually enacted, that they see consisting of 'adaptive performances' that connect to state and market structures and can potentially alter them. Turning to examples that I have been researching, such as a community food growing project in a deprived coastal town, I can see that the project connects to the local council and governance, as well as to wider economies of food production and consumption. As well as existing 'in the shadows' of these wider structures, we might also see such projects as potentially inhabiting, moving into occupying or reshaping, political and economic structures.

Honig (2017) makes a similar argument about the need to occupy and reshape what she terms 'public things' – public infrastructures of state and the economy – despite their exclusionary and violent histories. She differentiates this vision of occupation from the notion of a 'commons' which sits outside current state and market arrangements, and is often called upon in recent analysis of community activity. Instead we need to trace the mechanisms via which experimental community action is already beginning to reshape local political and economic structures, and is beginning to make a post covid future in the here-and-now.

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