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# Beyond resilience? State failure, mutual aid and local action

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## Abstract

Resilience offers an important framing for analysing responses to crises. However it is a highly contested concept, roundly condemned by many because of its associations with neoliberal logics of rule and the shedding of responsibility from states to citizens and ‘third sector’ organisations. In this paper we draw on the work of Cindi Katz to explore resilience as multi-faceted, and linked to Katz’s notions of ‘resistance’ and ‘reworking’. We use this framework to assess the political significance of mutual aid and other forms of grassroots support to the COVID pandemic in the UK. We draw on three empirical vignettes: one of a mutual aid group in south-east England that emerged during the pandemic; a second of a long-established voluntary sector organisation, part of the ‘Settlement’ movement; and a third of civic action in a small town with a strong tradition of volunteering. These offer vignettes of action at different geographical scales, and with different political and cultural histories. We argue that neither discourses of ‘resilience’ as self-reliance, nor the transformative promises in some accounts of mutual aid, adequately capture the shifting and contingent politics at play. Instead we stress the complex dynamics of different patterns of social action in particular places as practices of resilience, resistance and reworking emerge in response to perceptions of state failure. Following Katz’s framework we illuminate this fragile and emergent terrain of action, and suggest how such action might mitigate other emergent crises.

## Keywords

Resilience, mutual aid, state failure, COVID-19

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## Introduction

The crisis of COVID in the UK led to a proliferation of forms of ‘mutual aid’ and grassroots support, some new, and some re-purposing existing and organisations and groups. Such efforts tended to focus on providing food, healthcare and social support within localities. They attracted media attention at the start of the global pandemic, including from progressive commentators (Butler 2020; Shabi 2021; Solnit 2020), but were also celebrated by Conservative politicians. Prime Minister Boris Johnson spoke of the ‘awe-inspiring acts of generosity, public spirit and neighbourliness’ involved in pandemic responses (Butler 2020). And a right wing Christian group of MPs founded the ‘New Social Covenant’ unit in 2021, emphasising the values of family, community and nation in in policy making (<https://www.newsocialcovenant.co.uk/>). Policy-makers sought to learn from the proliferation of mutual aid in order to strengthen local ‘resilience’ (Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020). The significance of these activities is now more uncertain: the capacity of individuals to contribute to local welfare activities was quite quickly limited by the return to employment after the COVID furlough scheme (now coupled with the intensification of economic hardship). Currently concern about COVID is being displaced by anxieties about fuel and food poverty, mental health climate change, and intensifying patterns of inequality. But how far might mutual aid of the kind that emerged during the pandemic offer solutions to these intersecting crises?

The interest of politicians in grassroots organising and local resilience resonates with well-worn debates about the politics of the local, including work on how seemingly radical initiatives may be appropriated by government regimes (Newman, 2012). A focus on ‘community empowerment’ or ‘partnership’ characterised the UK Labour government (1997–2010), while the austerity policies of subsequent Coalition and Conservative governments had led to the stripping away of many local community spaces and institutions, despite Cameron’s espousal of a ‘Big Society’. As Jones and Hameiri (2022) argue, in the UK the shift from government to governance served to hollow out state capacity and reduce effectiveness. What they term the ‘dangerous’ diffusion of responsibility away from the state to private and third sector contractors, together with a reliance on ad hoc emergency measures to contain crises, produced what they term ‘state failure’ in relation to the pandemic. Calvert and Arbuthnott (2021) talk explicitly about the ‘failures’ of the UK state resulting from the populist politics of Boris Johnson, and their negligence in managing the pandemic effectively. As well as failures in planning and decision making, both national and local governments were ill-equipped to respond as a result of successive waves of cuts, ‘hollowing out’ and outsourcing. This had produced an environment in which aspects of the infrastructures of community connection had been dismantled (Jupp, 2021).

The challenges to the economic resilience of central and local government, together with a crisis in health and social care services, meant that state actors were ill-equipped to respond to the immediate needs of local populations during the COVID pandemic; instead there was a reliance on local, community-led or ‘bottom-up’ responses. From a neoliberal perspective such responses would be viewed as desirable examples of ‘resilience’, further justifying state withdrawal. However they can also be viewed as exemplifying a radical and ‘resistant’ politics which looks beyond the state to transform society (Spade, 2020). In our analysis we embrace neither view entirely but chart a different course. We draw on the work of Cindi Katz to trace the dynamics of resilience, resistance and re-working of existing institutions and practices. Such an approach allows for a different appraisal of the overall political significance of mutual aid practices. They point to new political potentials but are also enmeshed in particular geographies of state retreat and community action.

We begin by noting various approaches to ideas of mutualism and resilience in work on the pandemic. The three vignettes that follow explore local responses to the pandemic. The Discussion draws these together, highlighting the complex and relational dynamics of different patterns of social action. We conclude by assessing the continued relevance of Katz to understanding the

relationship between state failure and local action in the context of the current multiplication of crises that, for many, appear to threaten the sustainability of life itself.

## Key concepts

Research on responses to the pandemic within and beyond the UK presents diverse perspectives. Some, such as Open Democracy (Kavada, 2020); Dignity (Wein, 2020), emphasise the value of advocacy or activist groups; while others focus on voluntary and ‘third sector’ action (Benton and Power, 2021; Harris, 2020; McCabe et al., 2020; Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020). Much of this activity was described as forms of mutual aid. In terms of its political significance, many commentators highlight the anarchist orientations of mutual aid (Linkov et al., 2021; Travlou, 2021) or point to its anti-capitalist potential (Flexor, 2020). Whilst Mould et al. (2022) suggests that mutual aid is mainly viewed by government and the media as a form of charity, he also points to its radical and progressive potential. Anarchist approaches have a strong connection to the notion of ‘prefigurative politics’ – a politics that envisages alternative futures by embodying radically different ways of living and working in the present, including, perhaps, those based on principles of mutualism. Monticelli (2024), for example, points to the significance of prefigurative initiatives in response to the failures of existing services and societal norms exposed by the pandemic.

A somewhat different dynamic emerges from taking a wider notion of ‘mutualism’. Mutualism can be understood as an affective economy of support, fellow feeling, responsibility, duty, care, kindness, even love, connecting individuals to wider collectives. Ties to others may be strong or weak, highly local or digitally stretched across place or scale (Santana and McGuirk, 2022). It may be imbued with moral imperatives (Muehlebach, 2012) or rest on prosaic, everyday acts. It may be relatively long lasting or may fade as other demands come to take precedence. Mutualism may draw on older solidarities or cooperative ties (as in the Settlement movement example in vignette 2, below), while others locate it in the history of mutual societies (Cayuela, 2021). O’Dwyer (2020) challenges how far mutual aid groups can be viewed through the lens of activism. Nevertheless it may be explicitly ‘political’ (Sitrin, 2020; Spade, 2020) though often adopts an appearance of political neutrality in order to win support or be inclusive. Mutualism may therefore involve the production of different ‘infrastructures’ of care and support (Jupp, 2022) both informal and within different organisational forms.

Mutualism can be viewed as a source of ‘resilience’ (Linkov et al., 2021), although the relationship between these terms is not straightforward. Resilience is a capacious concept that became deployed across multiple domains in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, from ecology to engineering, from urban politics to climate change. As such it raises problems of definition and observation (Dagdeviren et al., 2016). It is also highly contested, charged with being aligned with neoliberal policy approaches based on the primacy of individual responsibility (Mackinnon and Derickson, 2013), as opposed to the more collective imperatives of mutualism. The widespread deployment of resilience in contemporary governance tends to overlook power dynamics and social inequalities (Donohue and Edmiston, 2020): indeed Camponeschi (2022) suggests that resilience can be viewed as a mobilising discourse that tends to advance the interests of urban elites.

Our usage of the term here is rather different, in at least three senses. First, we look beyond governance, technical or organisational systems, as these perspectives tend to depict resilience as an apolitical – or post political – concept. Our studies took place at a moment of rupture in which such systems were proven inadequate, not least as a result of the stripping away of public infrastructure during the years of austerity. It is in this context – and wider concerns about state failure – that interest in different forms of mutualism arose. Second, we consider resilience as sitting alongside, and entangled with, other responses to crises, drawing on Katz’s concepts of resistance and re-working (outlined below). Third, a focus on agency helps address the apolitical and individualising

inflections of resilience common in the literature. Rather than equating resilience with either expert systems or individual adaptation, we emphasise factors that helped develop and sustain different forms of mutualism within particular local geographies.

Overall, we argue for a need to become attuned to the fluid and sometimes contradictory dynamics of such local responses in order to appraise both their limitations and potentials.

## Working with Katz

The analysis in this paper builds on a framework first elaborated by Cindi Katz (2001, 2004) and more recently developed by McLeavy et al. (2021), Sparke (2008), Hughes (2019) and Hughes et al. (2022). Three processes are identified. *Resilience* for Katz refers to endurance, persistence; the agency of people and organisations taken to withstand their situation. This includes the small acts that sustain people and groups through hard times, such as everyday acts of neighbouring or organisational strategies of survival. Describing the weaving of ‘webs of care’ in New York during the Aids pandemic of the 1980s, Katz (2004) showed how these rested on local affinities and the nurturing of care-taking and mutual aid, as well as more conscious forms of opposition (2004: 246). This is a helpful way of locating the practices of mutual aid that proliferated during the pandemic, bringing together the significance of individual agency and the weaving of wider webs of support.

*Reworking* is closely linked to resilience in that it involves the reconstitution and redirection of available resources to new purposes; but differs in that actors are driven by ‘an explicit recognition of problematic conditions and offer focused, often pragmatic, responses to them’ (Katz, 2004: 247). It also involves people remaking themselves as political subjects and social actors. Both the material and personal dimensions of reworking raise key questions for the analysis of responses to the pandemic. While not challenging embedded power relations, reworking opens up efforts to think or create new worlds and change the conditions in which people live. The reference to ‘think’ and ‘create’ is significant in prefigurative projects: transformative change rests on ‘reframing’ and ‘rereading’ as well as on new practices, communities and initiatives. This dialectic relationship is key to understanding transformative projects of remaking:

... citizens’ ability and willingness to see alternative ways of being, doing for and thinking... not only motivate the emergence of communal sharing but ... are also reshaped by the practices, communities and initiatives themselves. (Santana and McGuirk, 2022: 3).

*Resistance* for Katz signifies a range of subjectivities, from those that foreground oppositional consciousness to those embedded in prosaic, banal, ephemeral practice. For Hughes (2019) conceptualisations of politics characterised by a *predetermination of form* – membership of a political party or explicit revolutionary intent – are inadequate. Indeed, the consciousness that characterises resistance “is likely to emerge from everyday acts of ‘resilience’ and the processes of ‘reworking’ as much as in the course of more targeted and conscious acts of resistance” (Katz, 2004: 256). This challenges the binary conception of agency as either political or apolitical, offering a more emergent and fluid notion of politics, albeit one not necessarily oriented to overthrowing the established order. As Sparke (2008: 424) explains, Katz contrasts resistance that involves oppositional consciousness and achieves emancipatory change, with forms of reworking that alter the organisation but not the polarisation of power relations.

We wanted to test the capacity of Katz’s framework to illuminate local action during the pandemic, paying attention to the different spaces, infrastructures and organisations in which it took place. In the vignettes presented below, we show how forms of mutual action and community engagement contributed to the resilience of organisations, places and people in particular localities. We point to ways in which these were creatively reworked to manage conditions of crisis; and

suggest how resistance was inscribed in everyday practice and adaptive strategies. In so doing we point to a need for a more attentive focus on the empirical dynamics of mutualist practices and their political dynamics and potentials.

### *Empirical resources and methods*

The initial research projects from which the vignettes are drawn were conducted entirely separately during the pandemic period and were first brought into dialogue at the Interpretive Policy Analysis Conference in June 2021. The first vignette was derived from a wider study of mutualism and care in one market town in the South East of the UK. The second is linked to research with community anchor organisations (community led bodies with formal governance structures that provide a range of services and are embedded in local action) in a large UK city. The third was generated from involvement in local action in a small town. They were, then, not commensurate in approach or methods. However, in subsequent discussions we realised that they offered resources that helped illuminate the impact of the pandemic on local infrastructures, practices and capacities, providing different examples of mutualism in different localities. To bring out the connections between the projects we carried out follow up research in each site, drawing on a mix of methods: interviews, participant observation and auto-ethnography. Putting them together resonates with Katz's notion of 'critical-topographies'; methods that make it possible to "excavate the layers of process that produce particular places and to see their intersections with material social practices at other scales of analysis" (2001: 1228). By using resilience, resistance and reworking as analytical devices via which to understand mutualist practices we have been able to draw out the relational dynamics of pandemic responses in three sites in England: a market town in the south-east, a small town in the West, and a large city. These were very different, but were connected by what Katz (2001) terms the 'contour lines' produced by austerity and state failure highlighted in the Introduction to this paper.

We faced a number of methodological challenges. Most of the references on Katz cited above are drawn from human geography; our team included people from socio-legal studies, social policy, sociology and geography, requiring us to move beyond our disciplinary roots. Furthermore Katz's work, and that of those following her, moves beyond structuralist accounts of power and agency to embrace feminist, post structuralist and post-colonial theory (e.g. MacLeavy et al., 2021). We were sometimes confounded by Katz's emphasis on blurred boundaries and fuzzy categories, and at times were drawn towards trying to pin concepts down in order, for example, to map different instances of resilience and resistance, or to develop ideal types of mutualism. However, the concepts we drew from Katz do not lend themselves to the kind of tight definition that would enable comparisons of this kind. Instead, our study drew on interpretive methods in which meanings emerged and were refined in the course of the research.

### *Vignette 1: Shifting affective infrastructures: mutual aid in a market town*

This comprises a small-scale study of a mutual aid network in a market town in South East England. The town has approximately 20,000 inhabitants; it is economically mixed with a gentrified core of period properties and much larger areas of mixed housing tenure. The population is predominantly white British. It is located in a borough of significant deprivation. The town mutual aid network was a new (and temporary) initiative, although it did have some connections to other networks and initiatives in the town. The discussion below is based on interviews with area organisers, and auto-ethnographic reflections as a volunteer 'mutual aider'.

The network was formed just prior to the UK going into a full 'lockdown' when it was becoming clear that existing structures of society (including crucially the national and local state) were not adequate to support and care for citizens. There was a context and atmosphere of crisis (Anderson,

2016) and a collapse of ‘normal’ arrangements of care, work, education and consumption, as noted above. Choosing to become involved in mutual aid was experienced by those involved as an expression of agency or even resistance. Rather than obeying the instruction to ‘stay home’ and turn inwards to their own households (as government instructions had emphasised), the mutual aiders turned their attention outwards. Marion (one of the co-ordinators) reported, ‘I had to do something... the situation was so extreme’. It felt obvious that the state was not going to care. This was then a kind of resistance to the status quo, and a determination to act otherwise in a crisis situation. It was noted that the mutual aid network was able to respond quickly whereas the more formal government response was much slower.

Mutual aid was a term and a concept that had begun to circulate in digital and media spaces during the pandemic, indeed could be understood to have ‘gone viral’. Its use did not mean that the town network formed part of an organised programme and nor necessarily did those signing up to be involved believe themselves to be part of a ‘political’ response, resisting the conditions of the pandemic. The philosophy of the group was explained as being about ‘neighbour to neighbour’ support, building a mutualist and perhaps more resilient community:

We’re here to support each other when we can and to accept support from others when we need it, without ever requiring anything in return. We are not a charity with givers and ‘beneficiaries’, we are neighbours building mutually supportive communities. (Town mutual aid group leaflet).

The practices of mutual aid involved making contact with residents of a particular street via leafleting, and then supporting them, particularly those deemed to be vulnerable or shielding, with tasks that had become dangerous or impossible – centrally food shopping, but also collecting prescriptions, running other kinds of errands, and providing emotional and social support. Emails and WhatsApp groups connected mutual aiders, whilst Facebook was used to highlight households in need and recruit more volunteers.

The combination of online and offline practices is significant in reworking the local infrastructures. Digital spaces have particular affordances in relation to drawing individual and household needs from the private sphere into new kinds of public spheres. Koch and Miles (2021) write of new ‘stranger intimacies’ enabled by dating and accommodation digital platforms – strangers can now rapidly connect in relation to personal and emotional spheres, albeit mediated and moderated in particular ways. Digital spaces also enabled the circulation of affects and impulses, and connecting those feelings to actions. The mediation and moderation of such networks is not to be taken for granted – the mutual aid co-ordinators spent considerable time and labour providing support and guidance to others in the networks, for example around money and aspects of health risks and safety.

Overall, for many mutual aiders, the practices were experienced as a politics of kindness and empathy for neighbours, perhaps an extension of existing familial and neighbourly connections and care practices. However for a minority of others it was more explicitly political. As one participant stated, somewhat jokingly, ‘I thought at the time it might be the end of capitalism!’ Dave, one of the co-ordinators, described conditions of ‘explosion’ and revolutionary potential, an explicit resistance to the status quo:

At the beginning, as well as being scary, there was an enormous amount of possibility opening up, what had been considered immovable, unchangeable rules of how society worked... were absolutely blown apart.

Dave saw the project as taking a ‘softly anarchist’ approach that might be *experienced* rather than explicitly discursively embraced. For example, the network used techniques and structures of



‘horizontal’ and non-hierarchical organising, but Dave said that he only told them later on that what they were doing involved anarchist practices.

Indeed whilst beginning with an experience of shared crisis, as time went on, divisions between volunteers and those being helped under the scheme became more stark, and this mutualist approach became harder to sustain. This is partly because of the categories of vulnerability which became part of pandemic policy; certain groups were told to continue to ‘shield’ whilst the majority were able to return to some level of socialising and mobility. The practice of mutual aid therefore had shifting meanings, from an initial collective sense of crisis to a set of interactions involving individuals (normally younger, able-bodied) supporting older, isolated, individuals with some health vulnerabilities.

The initial pandemic lockdown can also be seen as a particular space-time which freed up people to become involved in volunteering in particular ways, with both the ‘stay at home’ orders and policies on furlough. Over time, mutual aid moved away from responding to needs linked to lockdown and became more involved with ‘crisis ordinary’ (Berlant, 2018): the ‘messy’ and ongoing issues of mental health, isolation, ill health, as well as wider economic, social and embodied inequalities and differentiated vulnerabilities. These were ongoing needs, albeit exacerbated by the pandemic, but were burdensome for volunteers to continue to engage with in the longer term, suggesting the limits of mutual aid as a form of resilience.

Because of these wider shifts in the meanings and atmospheres of lockdown, and the more micro-shifts in the intersubjective nature of the practices of mutual aid, the initial, comprehensive coverage of the town gradually dissipated and mutual aid practices became based on individual relationships rather than part of a collective effort. This also speaks to the shifting affective atmospheres of the pandemic over time, a sense that orientations towards community and others were reshaped. Marian spoke about her feelings with regards to her neighbours at the start of the pandemic, from a position of acknowledging that she now felt very differently:

I would stand out there and just think, ‘oh my street, I love my street, I love my neighbours’... and I would think ‘wouldn’t it be lovely if we had a big street party’... and now... I’ve just forgotten about that – gone.

There was an inevitable temporal shift at work here during different phases of the pandemic, although a more formalised infrastructure of mutual aid might have sustained these affective webs for longer. However, it is interesting that Marian still retains this potent memory of these different orientations towards her neighbours. ‘Something’ had happened, a new form of community agency and energy had been expressed, a yearning for collective care. Yet these yearnings and energies were not readily sustained within ordinary conditions and routines.

Despite this, the mutual aid experiment undoubtedly generated connections, resources and memories of community action which could be reworked and repurposed for different means. In autumn 2020 there was a national discussion about ‘holiday hunger’ among families who would normally access free school meals. There was an immediate response from local organisations and individuals in the town, again initiated online, working to provide food and support in ways that local authorities were unable to.

Indeed whilst mutual aid networks nationally have not generally continued to operate in relation to ‘crisis ordinary’, some have continued to provide emergency food and/or reworked practices to seek more sustainable solutions to local food insecurity in particular. One of the legacies of mutual aid, then, may be a new local consciousness about poverty and need, and a willingness to act. It is unclear at this stage whether this could be seen as a new political consciousness – or indeed what such a politics would look like, as we return to in the discussion section.



## Vignette 2: City Settlement

Our second vignette focuses on a large community anchor organisation in a city in southern England, set up as part of an international settlement movement in the 1900s, with founding principles based around ideas of mutualism:

That each person had the capacity to grow and the right to enjoy “the best”; that evolutionary rather than revolutionary change would be effective; and that the welfare of the nation as well as its neighbourhoods was dependent on personal communication across the barriers of economic and social class. (Berry, 1986).

The Settlement is located in one of the most income deprived areas of the city with the highest percentage by population of Black and Minority Ethnic residents. Over its long history the Settlement has had to adapt to different pressures and crises, so reworking is part of its culture and practice. Indeed, as with many similar community anchor organisations, the everyday life of the Settlement can perhaps be encapsulated as the ongoing act of resistance and reworking with the aim of resiliently carrying on as an ‘anchor’ for local communities. COVID, however, presented a different existential challenge as the Settlement faced lockdown, closing their doors and shifting to remote provision.

Part of the City Council’s pandemic response involved designating a number of COVID Response Hubs throughout the city of which the Settlement was one. This designation led to substantial reworking as the organisation shifted to meet the short-term needs of residents in lockdown, distributing food, collecting shopping and prescriptions, and providing other essential services remotely. Managers identified a need to quickly repurpose – and rework – some of the organisation’s activities to meet the demands of lockdown.

A specific example of this rapid reworking was the adaption of the longstanding Befriending service that moved from a face-to-face to an over the phone service. This shift in service provision format focused attention on the individual, with phone calls rather than in person group work. This reworked format and attention being paid to isolation from lockdown conditions brought to light long-term exclusion that had become socially normalised over time and almost invisible for those experiencing it.

... this [lockdown] is no different to our everyday lives. I can go a month without speaking to anybody other than the girl and the local shop because I go in and buy a bit of food. (A service user of the Settlement).

Lockdown conditions had both made loneliness and exclusion more visible, and served in part to destigmatise it. The Befriending service established a first point of contact, offering people “permission” to recognise their loneliness and a passport to engage with the organisation; and could also bring people into contact with others to support one another, for example, by using the Settlement café once lockdown had lifted.

If you’ve got somebody in flat 6 and somebody in flat 22, both saying they’re lonely, what do we need to do that facilitates those two people connecting and staying connected? So that might be about providing the space. (A director of the Settlement).

A tension was identified between directly meeting needs and developing more mutualist responses, evident in the Settlement’s work to combat food poverty. A variety of organisations were

providing food bank-type support. Food banks, however, offer limited mutualist potential. As one local resident noted:

Visiting a food bank is so degrading and embarrassing, there's people worse off than me, am I using other's vital food? (A service user of the Settlement)

At the start of the pandemic the Settlement's response was oriented to meeting essential food needs rather than establishing support networks or developing greater agency.

For months at the start of the pandemic we were cooking up all the food from [...] Settlement freezers that had been intended for Lunch Club, and other food from Freecycle. We had lists of people who needed support and the lunches were delivered by volunteers. I was cooking five days on the trot. (A volunteer of the Settlement)

The Lunch Club which offered a free lunch at the Settlement ceased operations at the start of the pandemic, but beyond the first lockdown, a new Food Club emerged. Food Clubs potentially enable a more mutualist response to issues of food insecurity, offering a low-cost food box aiming to provide nutritious ingredients. Contrary to food banks, where the recipient has to be referred and is based on a charitable/paternalist model, they are based on a membership model, with a weekly subscription. The Food Club became a space for sharing with residents making up cards of their favourite recipes for dishes that could be cooked with the ingredients provided.

So the Befriending service and Food Club can be taken as attempts to enable and support practices of mutualism between neighbours based on shared understanding and nurturing caring relationships, rather than carrying out 'service provision'. In a more formal sense, the Settlement's research project Roots to Community Influence (RCI), which began prior to the pandemic but began in earnest after, also sought to develop shared understanding and knowledge about the local communities:

It was about how do we hear your stories and how do we use that evidence to influence change. (An employee of the Settlement)

Community members were trained up as researchers. Interviews with local residents highlighted extremely low levels of confidence. One third of those interviewed were educated to degree level or above, yet there was consistent undervaluing of skills and education, and so limiting their chances of finding employment.

The pandemic acted as a catalyst that led to a reworking of the employment support services, backed-up by knowledge from the RCI research. By working with employers, the RCI insights were drawn on to inform reworked employment support services for those out of work; moving from more individual support to collective action. The Settlement encouraged local employers to shift recruitment practices to recognise and proactively respond to the issue of confidence, undervaluing skills and 'over qualification'. This broader, collective response intervened positively into individual lives, but there was also an awareness that without further collective action – for instance, union organising or co-operative working – this shift could do little to overcome the structural constraints of employment relationships for those living in poverty.

Across these examples the Settlement sustained a commitment to community development, reworking services in an agile way. COVID affected the organisation's activities, accelerating processes, stressing different priorities, or highlighting and making visible overlooked needs and challenges. The major tenor of its response was, however, driven by a form of long-term engagement, care and investment in the communities the Settlement works within, operating with

principles of community development that long predate the pandemic. The closure of the shared spaces at the Settlement that was required during lockdown meant a great loss for local residents. However the organisation resisted strong pressure from governmental organisations to close all face to work and to move all services online. For the families living in nearby high-rise housing, particularly large, multi-generational families in small flats, the family centre continued to operate very limited access under tightly controlled conditions. This was, in the words of a local resident, a 'life-line'. The Settlement's response might be viewed as an example of its long term resilience, but the interviews suggest that the decision to stay open constituted an explicit form of resistance that drew on the political orientation of the Settlement movement.

Reworking of other services (some of which were moved online) was also significant. There was an ongoing experimental and improvised quality to many of these projects, as organisational spaces and structures were re-purposed and new tools and practices of organising tried out. Yet there was also an inherent fragility experienced by those carrying out the reworking and resistance, with feelings of burnout, exhaustion and despair common, especially in the face of worsening poverty and a lack of supportive local and national government. It seems that without such wider infrastructures to enact a broader politics of care, such experiments may run out of steam quickly in the face of intertwined crises.

### *Vignette 3: Border town: social infrastructure and social action*

Responses to the pandemic in Border town echo some of the themes of the first two vignettes: the creativity and improvisation that characterised the initial response, the forms of social infrastructure that enabled positive action; and the potential for longer term legacies. However there are also significant differences that reflect the local geography and resources of the town, as well as its politics (conservative in both social attitudes and voting preferences, though tinged with green). Border town has a population of just under 5,000, which includes many 'incomers': often retired professionals, predominantly white. Although the impact of austerity was less extreme than in the other two sites we studied, the town has pockets of poverty and deprivation; and the disproportionate number of older people presents considerable health and care challenges as well as concerns about rural isolation.

The town has a thriving economy of mainly local, independent shops/cafes, many of which played key roles during the pandemic. The town also has overlapping networks of churches, charities and clubs. The density of the social infrastructure served the town well during the years of lockdown:

[we] have lots of small networks that have done things of benefit to the community for a long time, so the pandemic just meant reshaping their relationships and activities to meet the new needs. And of course it has lots of professionals with a lifetime's experience of working like this. (Volunteer coordinator, Community Trust)

These different networks operated with multiple – and not always complementary – values and forms of mutuality. As one resident explained, the benefit of having incomers meant that they were not plugged into old antagonisms, or the historic tensions between different churches. However, many farmers, and workers in rural industries remained outside the emerging networks of help and support. Self-reliance was a dominant theme in interviews with those from families whose presence in the Town spanned several generations.

A key role was played by the local Community Trust, funded through charities and contracts with the NHS. Rather like the Settlement in vignette 2, this provided a café, a befriending service and a

range of ‘well-being’ activities that supported people through the pandemic. But it operated from a model of community service rather than community development. It initially struggled to adapt:

It was very stressful; because most of what we do is building based, staff struggled to respond to changing guidelines, and we lost a lot of income. We learned to deal with today, doing tactical responses to immediate needs. In a way this was liberating – we had to brush away anything that didn’t fit with what was most urgent. (Chair of Trustees, Community Trust)

Focusing on a town has enabled us to trace the range of differing – overlapping but not necessarily complementary – logics of mutualism. These were both practical (meeting needs) and affective (based on personal ties of neighbourliness and/or commitment to the ‘community’). All were heightened by a sense of crisis, and were viewed as temporary adaptations. As in vignette 1, over time volunteers became more concerned with getting back to work or meeting neglected personal and familial needs. As furlough schemes ended volunteering inevitably reduced; direct involvement in responses to the pandemic helped expose many to local conditions of poverty and isolation.

Overall the pandemic deepened the relational architecture of the town, drawing in new volunteers and reshaping relationships between residents, traders and town council. Across the town, people expressed considerable pride in what had (collectively) been achieved, pointing to the work of the Community Trust, to the proprietor of the general store, who won an award for his work, and to the nature of the population:

Everyone was queuing up outside the bakers. It was so nice to see people and I’d have to say the whole community looked out for each other. When I went to other places you could see people just ignoring the measures but in [the town] there was a great awareness of the risks to an elderly population. (Deputy Mayor)

Respondents were careful to take an apolitical stance, often claiming ‘I’m not political but...’ However there was much irritation about the inadequate responses of both central government and the county council. The sense was that ‘we’ had to step in since no one else would:

They were too slow and ungainly; they didn’t know what was needed and didn’t have the skills or resources to do anything about it anyway (café owner supplying free meals to children during school holidays).

But it was not only national and local government who were subject to critique: a new town council was elected during the pandemic, based on collective resistance to the failures of the long-standing group, displacing leaders viewed as not up to the task of responding to the crisis.

The pandemic also generated new forms of local action as people had time and capacity to engage in voluntary work or to become involved in different forms of local action. Some interviews also suggested a reflexive awareness of a community becoming more visible to itself during the pandemic.

I think COVID has done the town good. Before, it felt like it was going down a bit – familiar stuff – much of it good, but just repeating on an endless loop. Not much that was new or exciting. But COVID was such a shock, it made people try to hold on to what was important, and try new things. We lost a lot of course – people, some businesses. And we struggled, but since then it’s like new energies have been released. (Active member of several local groups)

Such energies are now less focused on immediate health crisis but on a growing awareness of the multiple crises that the town faces: food and fuel poverty, social exclusion, the financial legacy of defective governance by the town council, the impact of the war in Ukraine, growing concerns about mental health and the climate crisis. The cost of living crisis was particularly significant; in December 2022 the Town Council reported a growing shortage of volunteers caused by people having to work longer and retire later.

And yet, post pandemic, new projects continued to emerge; on supporting refugees from Ukraine, on developing Community Land Trusts, and on the growing mental health crisis. Each could be described as prefigurative. For example, a garden has been created as a resource for a range of groups: dementia patients, those with anxiety and depression, people with learning disabilities, occupants of the local women's refuge and others. This was built by an extensive network of volunteers recruited through WhatsApp groups and a 'my neighbourhood' digital network set up in 2021; these are younger and tend to be part of activist networks beyond the town.

This project differs from others mentioned in this vignette. First, it is much closer to the anarchist principles that implicitly infuses mutual aid projects: emergent, informal, and non-hierarchical. Second, it fits with the environmental consciousness of the town, and the particular forms of social infrastructure that this had generated, with many formal and informal groups concerned with environmental protection. These were not necessarily comfortable with the anarchist ethos mentioned above; the boundary between overt resistance and a more modest engagement with reworking derelict land was rather blurred. Third, it offers a model of mutualism based on recognition of the interdependence of human and non-human, of care for the planet as well as for people. Finally, although it came out of crisis and disruption, it offers a different temporal framing of infrastructure building and social action. It has survived long beyond the pandemic and can be viewed as prefiguring new forms of network building and civic activism. This form of activism exemplifies Katz's emphasis on adaptive strategies but nevertheless offered a lively spirit of resistance to established patterns of charity and benevolence in the town.

## **Discussion**

Here we reflect back on the vignettes and trace possible connections and disjunctures. In doing so we highlight the temporal dynamics responses to the pandemic; highlight the significance of different forms of social infrastructure in play; and discuss the fluid relationship between Katz's conceptions of Resilience, reworking and resistance.

Resilience implies sustainability over time. But the temporal dynamics evident in our vignettes was complex rather than linear. The 'crisis time' of the pandemic ruptured the daily pattern of life and work, and in each vignette we could trace the rapid development of new forms of mutuality, new solidarities and new organisational strategies. The explosion of networks and groups offering support in the early stages of the pandemic may have been a high-point of mutualism. Lockdown meant that more time and energy were made available for everyday local concerns; logistics, places of care, organising, and navigating relationships of the here and now rose to the top of the agenda.

But as the pandemic stretched on, different dynamics played out. For the mutual aid group in the south-east, the end of furlough curtailed available time, and many women became exhausted as the burden associated with providing neighbourhood – as well as familial – care chipped away at their resilience. A similar dynamic played out as volunteers in vignette 3 struggled to sustain their commitment. But other dynamics were evident. For the Settlement in vignette 2 an initial period of resistance to total closure of its premises was followed by extensive reworking as services and programmes adapted in line with its long term aims of community development. Even if the particular mutualist connections generated during the pandemic were not to continue, the organisational learning that resulted from extensive projects of reworking offers a resource for the

future. In vignette 3, new actors – cafes and businesses – took on leadership roles since the Community Trust seemed slow to respond. Volunteering was also disrupted as many older people – predominantly women – withdrew because of their own vulnerability to COVID.

The possibility of resilience, it seems, was conditioned both by government policies on work and welfare, and by the strength and density of its social infrastructure. Hall (2020) distinguishes between forms of infrastructure represented by on the one hand institutions, organisations and buildings, and on the other by networks and relationships. The Settlement and Community Trust vignettes 2 and 3 were examples of the former, though each worked to build the networks and relationships that could sustain people through troubled times. The mutual aid groups in vignette 1 were more fragile and contingent. We might suggest that a more formal infrastructure of mutual aid might have sustained affective webs for longer.

Resilience was, then, not a clearly defined phenomenon but was embedded in processes of reworking. In vignettes 2 and 3 we saw experimentation and improvisation as organisational spaces and structures were re-purposed and new tools and practices of organising tried out. But in each we also saw more transformative projects of reworking take shape. The mutual aid network in vignette 1 can be understood as a new form of social infrastructure; while this was temporary, new neighbourly connections were established that are currently being reworked to meet emerging crises. The reworking of food provision in the Settlement, the changes to the Town Council and Community Trust in Border Town and other examples are all clearly concerned with reworking, driven by the recognition that continuing to function under adverse conditions was not enough.

Across the three vignettes, we have shown how the pandemic brought a recognition that things could and should be done differently. But how far can such processes be viewed as forms of resistance? However our vignettes suggest that the border between reworking and resistance is porous rather than fixed. The mutual aid network in vignette 1 exemplified non-hierarchical, networked and collaborative ways of working. In vignette 2, the Roots to Community Influence shifted the ways of thinking for those involved, enabling them to see that they were not simply care recipients but were actively involved in building capacity across the neighbourhoods they lived in. In Border Town the very process of responding to the pandemic crisis helped constitute more active – indeed activist – citizens. This in turn generated projects oriented towards multiple crises, including the Russian/Ukraine war, the mental health crisis and the climate emergency. Although few would view themselves as ‘political’, some new senses of agency emerged through practices through which community was performed or made visible during the pandemic.

Some initiatives might be viewed as ‘prefigurative’ of alternative forms of politics: progressive, horizontal, anti-authoritarian. These work by ignoring the constraints of the present in order to live a desired future (Cooper, 2020). The garden project in vignette 3 is one example and the forms of mutual aid depicted in vignette 1 can also be viewed as prefigurative of alternative forms of social care based on solidaristic practice (see also Monticelli, 2024). However, notions of prefiguration invite an overexcitement about their transformative and transgressive possibilities. The initiatives in our vignettes were characterised by a quiet and pragmatic – but often transgressive – forms of action that opened up new possibilities and imaginations (see Askins, 2015 on quiet and mundane politics). As we discuss further in the conclusion, the more nuanced approach advocated by Katz, with its focus on the mundane and everyday, has alerted us to the importance of the blurred boundaries between resilience, reworking and resistance.

## Conclusion

The three vignettes have suggested the complex dynamics of social action in particular local spaces in response to the COVID pandemic. Although the ‘crisis time’ of the pandemic has passed, the failures of the UK state to respond adequately to other urgent crises is generating multiple forms of

local action. But how might we interpret the wider political significance of the proliferation of informal, local and mutualist responses? The idea of local resilience is seductive but, we argue, does not adequately reflect the complex – and sometimes conflicting – forms of agency in play. Nor does it take account of the factors that often led to burnout, failure and retreat. And as Katz herself notes, the ‘3 R’s’ also work within dominant structures of power, and as such may become co-opted into hegemonic projects of governing. As we noted in the Introduction, during the pandemic mutual aid was celebrated by government as part of a (fantasy) UK success story, but it could also be viewed as justifications for further cuts to state provision, while buttressing gendered conceptions of work, family and community.

Instead of attempting to assess local resilience during the COVID pandemic we have drawn on Katz’s work to illuminate some of the overlapping practices and rationales which characterised local action. Our empirical work suggests that practices of resilience, reworking and resistance cannot be reduced to a simple set of analytic descriptors or prescriptions. They are mobile, fluid concepts that have to take account of the specificities of space, time and resources, and the forms of social infrastructure these generate. As we have shown, the pandemic tended to enhance awareness of local conditions of loneliness and poverty. While Katz enabled us to explore politics as embedded in everyday life, rather than in self-conscious acts of resistance, we witnessed shifting affective atmospheres and greater willingness to engage with others in improvised or experimental action – whether to enhance social connections or for more transformative projects of ‘reworking’.

Transformative projects suggest very different political imaginaries from those associated with resilience, inviting excitement about the possibility of new political projects: emergent, horizontal, connective, prefigurative, all offering bulwarks against incorporation by neoliberal politics. Our empirical work, however, suggests that neither excitement about the progressive possibilities of local action, nor despair about its alignment with conservative political projects, is appropriate. As our data suggests, it is the porosity of each of Katz’s concepts, the boundaries between them, and the capacity of actors (individual and organisational) to move between them, that has enabled local action to flourish in the spaces abandoned by the UK state during the COVID pandemic.

We want to end by suggesting some possible directions for future work that flow from our analysis. One concerns the relevance of mutual forms of action in addressing emerging and future crises. As the pandemic fades from public consciousness and political attention, the ‘webs of care’ it generated may fracture. But our data suggests that people have been drawn into greater awareness of and involvement in responding to local needs and the relational architecture that founds community. Although the picture is partial and uneven, we have seen new networks and projects emerge, and new ambitions for the future articulated. We could glimpse emergent responses to the fuel crisis, food poverty, the needs of new migrants, the climate emergency and the growing crisis of mental health.

But how far is it possible to move from glimpses and hints to more sustained analysis? At least two issues are significant. First, as we have shown, specificity matters. So: how might the approach offered here enable research on responses to other perceived crises in particular spaces? We have argued for the importance of different forms of social infrastructure, and their relationship to questions of temporality. Second, we have offered a model of working across Katz’s concepts of resilience, reworking and resistance that suggests the importance of holding these categories, and the relationships between them, open rather than moving towards premature closure.

[Hughes et al. \(2022\)](#) argue that Katz’s work remains relevant to contemporary debates in political geography – and, we suggest, beyond – in political economy, policy studies, community development, and other settings where the roles of states and citizens in addressing contemporary crises are debated. But how might it be possible to translate her approach to blurred boundaries and nuanced interpretations of social action across disciplines? The analysis we have offered is one that refuses totalising political analysis in which optimistic readings of social transformation are



undercut by pessimistic readings of co-optation and incorporation into dominant political projects. This has been possible because of Katz's rich conception of agency, one that transcends and problematises notions of 'motivation', conservative conceptions of resilience and more political ideas of activism and social transformation.

Finally, Katz raises, but does not fully develop, questions of affect and subjectivity. In this paper we have attempted to offer a nuanced and contingent reading of agency, one which acknowledges flux and uncertainty, and which holds open the possibility of multiple and sometimes conflicting subject positions ('I am not political but...'). Contemporary work from psychosocial (Seitz, 2022, Jupp, forthcoming) studies offers resources that can take forward our emphasis on nuance and the blurring of categories. But perhaps we need new theoretical approaches to illuminate shifting alignments of resilience, reworking and resistance in personal lives in crisis times.

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