

Disaster solidarity - “Mutual aid is a social movement”

Friday 14 August 2020, by [SEYMOUR Richard](#) (Date first published: 6 April 2020).

Mutual aid is a social movement. As they keep saying, from Los Angeles to Lewisham, it is about solidarity, not charity. The slogan is not, “let me rescue you,” but “we need each other”. Mutual aid groups are not NGOs, but networks of solidarity. They aren’t set up to collect donations in the way that charities do. They don’t have boards of directors in the way that charities do.

Mutual aid groups are not ‘political’ in the narrow sense. But they also don’t exist simply to shore up gaps in state provision without criticising the authorities. They are not out to panhandle for public funds, in exchange for complicity. They are also not limited in the way that charities are. Although mutual aid groups have a well-known set of functions - picking up shopping, delivering medicine, providing cooked food for those who need it - it can also extend to offering pet care, legal support, remote learning, counselling. Dieticians, therapists and mental health specialists are offering their services free. From each according to their ability, to each according to their need. This is a version of what the activist Kieran Crowe described as “social project” radicalism back in the early teens.

It is not a coincidence that almost every mutual aid spokesperson who is interviewed in the local or national press is well known in left-wing activism. In Brooklyn, the mutual aid activists are coming out of the tenants unions, sex workers coalitions, black lives matter groups, the DSA, and others. In Los Angeles, the activists are coming from grassroots community organisations and existing mutual aid infrastructures set up by those denied access to state services. In Lewisham and Leicester, it is Labour members, churches, autonomists, and trade unionists. The mutual aid groups are also drawing on existing repertoires of disaster solidarity, some of the US groups having originated with Hurricane Sandy, for example.

As a movement, mutual aid has quite a large, though uneven, reach. It is estimated that a nominal three million people are currently ‘members’ of mutual aid groups across the United Kingdom. As always, in any movement, the number of active participants will be much smaller than that. Nonetheless, the speed of the spread of this movement is almost always remarked on by the organisers. Hundreds signed up in one day. Money, a building, participants, rickety infrastructures, coming out of nowhere. Of course, there are lurking issues here. How does a grassroots group practice safeguarding, for example? How do they prevent parasites exploiting people while pretending to act as part of a mutual aid group? How do they handle disagreements in the group over its objectives? That’s not my subject here, though. The viral spread of this thing, while governments pursued denialism or ‘herd immunity’, was remarkable. And that’s what I want to ask about. Are social movements, contagions? Do they follow the logic of contagions? In which case, what sorts of social structure, what sorts of networks, facilitate their appearance, and endurance?

The idea of social contagion is, understandably, viewed with suspicion by social movement scholars. The locus classicus of the idea, above all the work of Gustave Le Bon, is profoundly anti-democratic. In essence, it consists of the claim that anti-social, irrational behaviour spreads through crowds

much as a virus spreads, with no rational input. This is not just a narrow-minded, phobic attitude to the masses. It is also empirically defunct.

On the one hand, there is a lot of accumulating evidence - behavioural, psychological and neuroscientific - that much, perhaps most, of social life goes on non-consciously [1], and mimetically. On the other hand, if mass movements really spread in the manner of simple pathogens, we would expect that the best way for movements to proliferate would be through a society with lots of 'weak ties'. The clustering of social networks around groups with 'strong ties' creates a lot of network redundancy, which impedes diffusion. That's partly why social distancing and lockdown works, by eroding weak ties (and concomitantly intensifying strong ties). The ideal medium for diffusing a simple contagion would be a 'small world' network with as many weak, long-distance ties as possible: rather like the social industry, perhaps. As the sociologist Mark Granovetter puts it: "Whatever is to be diffused can reach a larger number of people, and traverse a greater social distance, when passed through weak ties rather than strong."

The problem is, social movements have been studied up one side and down the other, and there is no evidence that they diffuse in that way. Far from exploiting weak ties, social movements tend to ignore them entirely. Rather, they spread fastest through strong ties, friendship networks, neighbourhoods, reading groups, and so on. In past social movements, that has tended to mean that mobilisation spread in spatial waves. That is how the Paris Communes spread. It is also how the Civil Rights movement spread. The same dynamics were observable in the rise of mass unionism in Europe, and in the recent uprisings in the Middle East. It would be an odd contagion that failed to exploit the fastest route to its own success. This overwhelming empirical finding explains why the term less prejudiced term, 'diffusion', is preferred over 'contagion'.

However, simply using a more polite term doesn't really get around the problem. Because, in some fundamental ways, diffusion does resemble contagion, not least in the famous S-curve distribution of uptake. Another way in which movements are like contagions is that there is a big imbalance between the small number of initiators, responsible for most of the spread, and the much larger number of imitators. This is why the sociologist Damon Cento distinguishes between simple and complex contagions. Simple contagions, like Covid-19, have a very low threshold for 'adoption' and transmission. One just has to come into close contact with an infected person, particularly in a closed, unventilated space. Certain fashions and memes might have a similarly low threshold for adoption, spreading in a similarly non-conscious manner. These contagions can be described with the simple 'SIR' model of contagion.

Social movements, however, are complex contagions. They entail much higher thresholds for adoption, precisely because they require conscious meditation on a range of factors: information about the cause, costs of participation, and existing social norms and values. Merely becoming aware of a cause, and that it is an option for you, isn't sufficient for you to adopt it. At minimum, as Doug McAdam and Ronelle Paulsen point out in their work on Civil Rights, the decision to participate in a movement is mediated by "a significant subset of our relationships". In other words, it's not enough just to hear the good word on the internet; you have to hear it from a number of people you trust. And when you model a movement like that, Cento explains, the ideal network structure is one with lots of 'strong ties'. In fact, 'weak ties' are an active impediment to diffusion in these circumstances. As Cento puts it, "While simple contagions spread most effectively when bridges are long, complex contagions depend on bridges that are wide." It would be a mistake, of course, to assume that 'strong ties' means neighbourhoods, and 'weak ties' means the internet. Many of us have stronger friends half way around the world than next door. Nonetheless, on balance, the above would imply that the social industry can be actively harmful to the prospects of effective mobilisation.

Back on the subject of the mutual aid movement, it's telling that it seems to have spread most efficaciously through existing movement networks and friendship groups. And that, in getting organised, it has had to be situated in neighbourhoods, and work through typical neighbourhood mobilisation tools such as phone trees. Where the social industry has been useful, it has been in the form of Whatsapp and Slack groups winnowing people into ever more local, street-level organisation.

Another factor expediting the spread of a complex contagion is what social movement scholars call an "opportunity cascade" - or what Eric Alliez vividly describes as a "cascade of successive mesmerizations". A successful innovation deployed in one location creates opportunities for those in contiguous locations. For this to happen, their conditions have to be experienced as similar. For example, the anti-Stalinist uprisings in Eastern Europe spread because, once Gorbachev made it clear that Russia would not intervene to aid suppression of the strikes in Poland, regime opponents in nearby states saw that the same opportunity window had opened for them. That sort of contiguity and similarity did not, until recently, apply to the mutual aid movement. The indiscriminate horror of the pandemic, the inadequate and reluctant responses of neoliberal states, and the extreme severity of the ensuing economic crunch, is what has made mutual aid so universally relevant. Hence its extraordinarily rapid spread.

However, mutual aid is an interesting sort of contagion. It may not be 'political', but it is a site of politicisation. If the goal is to build solidarity into everyday life, that resonates with the left's aim of overcoming the privatisation of social life. If the criterion is solidarity, then it implements a form of baseline communism, a bedrock of egalitarian activity against which neoliberal practices would falter. More importantly, if mutual aid works, then it becomes the vector for other contagions. By creating more network redundancy based around clusters of strong ties, it makes it more likely in future that the social movement contagion will spread. So, the question is, what remains once the mutual aid contagion has spread as far as it can? Once, that is, it reaches the upper plateau on the S-curve of its diffusion? Perhaps, with three million volunteers, it is already there. The pandemic will hopefully recede over the next year. Some time after that, a new form of capitalist normality will emerge. How much of the mutual aid infrastructure will remain in place? How much can it be folded into everyday life, institutionalised even, so that it is effectively endemic?

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P.S.

• Apr 6, 2020 at 8:19 PM:
<https://www.patreon.com/posts/35701015>

Footnotes

[1] <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/U/bo25861765.html>