



Commoning in a Pandemic - by Marina Sitrin

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This piece explores the new networks of mutual aid, solidarity and care that have emerged around the world in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Describing them, often using the voices of those organizing on the ground, illustrates that within these day-to-day relationships of care we see not so much social movements as traditionally understood, where one organizes a party or union with the goal of having particular demands met by those in formal positions of power, or seeks the seizure of the state, but rather societies in movement, within which are the seeds of a new society. This phenomenon of looking to one another, commoning and protecting and/or seeking commons, goes back through human history. The experiences explored here are grounded in the past twenty years, as there has been a massive increase in the number of groupings and societies/communities, organizing in this way, and that the diversity of the those engaged in the practices is so diverse as to represent a marker of a new historical moment. Horizontal, autonomous, and affective (care and trust based) forms of organizing, which has been striving to prefigure a new society in the shell of the old, are increasingly taking precedence over the more traditional forms of state seeking and demanding, and while not overshadowing the former ways of organizing, the experience is so widespread, it should be taken together. The recent mutual aid and solidarity networks and groups that have emerged in the wake of the COVID 19 Pandemic are yet another part of this wave of commoning and prefiguration. (Please read the earlier pieces by both Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides on this site for more background on commons, commoning and commoners.)

As with many prefigurative movements, as will be described so as to better locate this global rise in mutual aid, they generally do not come from people organizing with a plan to change society or even people who have been involved in political organizing, but arise from necessity, and in that need find that the most useful—and most empowering and enjoyable—way of organizing is horizontally, sharing power and creating space for equal participation and mutual care.

To write or talk about this current historical moment is to hold a lot of things together at once. There has been a constant overarching fear, a fear that is collective and something we, people living today, have not experienced at this level of collectivity. And, while yes, we have all been in the same terrible storm that is COVID-19, we are not all in the *same* boat. Structural inequality shows itself in crisis and disaster, and this one is revealing all the ugliness and systemic oppressions and inequalities most all of our societies were built upon, that privilege the very few, and try and pit the rest of us against one another—locally, regionally and globally.

And, as this crisis deepens and reveals all that is oppressive and intentionally divisive in the systems we live under, it also opens a new space—the crisis and inability of governments to meet people’s needs creates a vacuum that people have been not only filling, but going beyond. In towns, cities, and villages all over the world people are reaching out and helping one another, door to door, with friendship and neighborhood groups, to networks and larger evolving networks of networks, to meet people’s daily survival needs, including social and emotional needs, finding ways to get food and medicine to people, and also break

solitude, find connections and create new ways of relating. And, in the creation of these networks, new relationships have emerged that are rethinking how our necessities are distributed and organized, as well as how it could be different going forward.

It is unclear how many millions of people are and have been involved in these various networks globally, and it is important we hold the sheer number of people in our minds when thinking about how we might restructure society—just how many people are ready to organize beyond the current institutions and structures that we have, such as FEMA in the US and other such disaster agencies globally. I co-edited a book with over a dozen, mostly women, from around the world.¹ We did not begin the project as co-editors but found in the process of working together that it was not ‘my’ book, but rather a collective story, vision, and collaboration—not dissimilar from the networks and groups whose voices we were striving to facilitate. In a matter of a few months, a handful of people reached out to another handful of friends and political collaborators, from various parts of the globe, and we put together a book of stories of solidarity and mutual aid in these pandemic times. It is important to note that I, and we, did not make a list of places around the world where we thought there would be more expressions of solidarity, but rather we used our networks and found that everywhere, from Brazil and Argentina to Taiwan and South Korea; Southern Africa and Italy to Northern Iraq and Rojava, people were self-organizing, and doing so in horizontal and affective ways.

We found that it was almost always women leading and facilitating these processes, even if they were not always the ones to step forward first for an interview. The following chapter draws upon the various interviews that were collected as a part of this book project. I did not conduct these interviews myself, but as a part of *Colectiva Sembrar*, the collective we became in putting the book together, helped to edit them and put them together in this collection.

In other areas, and including my forthcoming book, I compile experiences from around the globe, demonstrating that in vastly different places people are coming together in ways that are remarkably similar—the current networks and groups that have responded to the COVID-19 crisis, while not the same, have enough in common that I argue here we should consider them all together as a part of a general trend and shift in the ways in which people are organizing for change. Not to create a new theory per se, but to use a descriptor to distinguish what is taking place from traditionally understood social movements, I use the term coined by Raúl Zibechi, “societies in movement.”² One could easily use the terms and concepts for commons and commoning here, as well as prefigurative movements as explored by Marianne Maeckelbergh.

In a break from conventionally understood forms of organizing and movements, since approximately 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and a specific definition of socialism and social change losing ground, forms of change, and the understandings of the location of change have been shifting. Something new is happening—something new in content, depth, breadth and global consistency. Societies around the world are in movement. Since the early 1990s millions of people have been organizing similarly, and in ways that defy definition and former ways of understanding social movements, protest, and resistance. There is a growing global movement of refusal—and simultaneously, in that refusal is creative movement. Millions are shouting “No!,” as they manifest alternatives in its wake.

¹ See Marina Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, eds., *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

² See Raúl Zibechi’s books *Dispersing Power: Social Movements as Anti-State Forces* (Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2010) and *Territories of Resistance: A Cartography of Latin American Social Movements* (Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2012).

Beginning in the highlands of Chiapas Mexico, with the Zapatistas emergence in 1994, declaring a resounding “*Ya Basta!*” (Enough!) and rather than making demands on institutional power, they created dozens of autonomous communities, with forms of directly democratic governance, on land they have taken back and recuperated. Then, in Argentina, in 2001 the popular rebellion sang, “*Que Se Vayan Todos! Que No Quede Ni Uno Solo!*” (Everyone Must Go! Not Even One Should Remain!). As with the Zapatistas, the movements focused on creating horizontal assemblies, not asking power to change things, but creating that alternative in the present with new social relationships – taking over and running workplaces by the hundreds, retaking land, creating new collectives and cooperatives, from media to art, and breaking from past hierarchical ways of relating—forming what they call a new subjectivity and dignity. The year 2011 witnessed the beginning of a similar form of movement around the world—with millions refusing to remain passive in untenable situations. And in that space, in various towns, villages and cities, in regions all over, people created new social relationships and ways of being.

People from below are rising up, but rather than going towards the top, ‘from the bottom up,’ they are moving as the Zapatistas suggested, ‘From below and to the left, where the heart resides.’ Power over, hierarchy and representation are being rejected, ideologically and by default, and in the rejection mass horizontal assemblies are opening new landscapes with the horizon of autonomy and freedom. As Kurdish scholar-activist Dilar Dirk so beautifully put it:

Today, around the world, people resort to alternative forms of autonomous organization to give their existence meaning again, to reflect human creativity’s desire to express itself as freedom. These collectives, communes, cooperatives and grassroots movements can be characterized as the people’s self-defense mechanisms against the encroachment of capitalism, patriarchy and the state.³

What has been taking place in disparate places around the world is part of a new wave that is both revolutionary in the day-to-day sense of the word, as well as without precedent with regard to consistency of form, politics, scope, and scale. The current frameworks provided by the social sciences and traditional left to understand these movements have yet to catch up with what is new and different about them. Specifically, the theoretical frameworks for Protest and Contentious Politics within Social Movement theory are not sufficient to understand the emergent horizontal and prefigurative practices.⁴ This chapter will not go into detail in these frameworks, nor the more traditional, past, and ongoing, movements to which they refer. There is a significant and well researched body of work on these frameworks, instead within these pages I would like to add the current phenomenon of mutual aid networks that have arisen during the COVID-19 crisis to our larger lexicon of societies in movement to have arisen since the early 1990s.

The main reason that the politics of contention are not sufficient to explain the contemporary autonomous social movements lies in these movements’ choice not to focus on dominant institutional powers, such as the State, and rather develop other relationships and powers, looking to one another and self-organizing before

³ Dilar Dirk, “Building Democracy Without the State,” *ROAR*, no. 1 (Spring 2016)
<https://roarmag.org/magazine/building-democracy-without-a-state/>.

⁴ Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam, and Sidney Tarrow are three of the most important and widely read US contemporary social movement theorists. The following definition is taken from the introduction to their 2001 book *Dynamics of Contention*: “By contentious politics we mean: episodic, public, collective interactions among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants.” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5.

looking “up.”⁵ This reconceptualization of power is linked to the non-hierarchical and directly democratic vision and practice in their organizing. It is not that they begin with an ideological break with a particular form of organizing, but, are responding to a concrete situation with tools that they find useful and rejecting those that have not worked.

These newer movements are often described as prefigurative, that is, movements that are transforming the world and focusing both on the long term and attempting to model—prefigure—this future in the present.⁶ They are not looking to the State as their desired end or creating political party platforms to this end. They do not look to one leader, but make space for all to be leaders, sometimes using the language of leaderful. They place more importance on asking the right questions than on providing the correct answers. They resolutely reject dogma and hierarchy in favor of direct democracy and consensus. In the process they create themselves anew and reflect on this changed subjectivity. Taken together, their ideas of justice and freedom change as they change and thus the movements are theoretically constantly moving, changing, and evolving, conceptually and subjectively. Thus, the focus on relationships and things being relational.

These societies in movement are in many regions and states throughout the world. Including the rainforest of Chiapas and lowlands/desert of Guerrero Mexico, from the Cordillera to Patagonia in Argentina, cities and towns in Southern Europe, Canada and the US and the autonomous zones of Northern Syria (Rojava) and those self-organized across Bolivia and Brazil. There are working class people recuperating workplaces; middle class urban dwellers, many recently declassed, organizing in assemblies; and the unemployed like so many, facing the prospect of never encountering regular work, self-organizing, taking over land, and creating micro projects; and entire autonomous zones and towns, commoning as they defend and create commons. And, as will be described, people coming together in moments of crisis and continuing to organize in horizontal and affective ways to survive and recreate relations in the process.

It is not so much what these societies in movement are doing—creating networks of care to get people food and medicines, defending land from exploitation, creating barter networks or taking over workplaces to run them in common—but that this is all being done with a new found agency, one grounded in community and the society as a whole, as well as horizontally.

These “new” forms are not new in and of themselves, however, when taken together in their diversity and similarity, they become something new. Similarly, mutual aid and horizontal, autonomous, and care-based forms of organizing in times of crisis are not new, this is the way groups and communities have come together for centuries,⁷ (Clarke, L., 1999) but as these moments of togetherness last, become more intentional and create long term networks and structures, something new can be seen and should be examined further. This chapter uses examples from current local-global responses to COVID-19, and places this experience with others over the past twenty-five years. It is not an attempt to summarize or generalize all global

⁵ In their 1997 book *The Social Movement Society: Contentious Politics for a New Century*, David S. Meyer and Sidney Tarrow define contentious politics as “collective challenges to existing arrangements of power and distribution by people with common purposes and solidarity, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities.” (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1997), 4. Further, Tarrow and Meyer view social movements functionally as a “way of making claims in national politics.”

⁶ See Marianne Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many: Alterglobalisation Movement is Changing the Face of Democracy* (London: Pluto Press, 2009) and “Doing is Believing: Prefiguration as Strategic Practice in the Alterglobalization Movement, *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (2011).

⁷ See Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (London: Penguin Books, 2009);

experiences but make links and connections with those things in common with this new global phenomenon of prefigurative societies in movement.

Below I explore, using the experiences and voices of those organizing around the globe in response to the COVID-19 crisis, what some of the mutual aid networks have been doing, and how they reflect on this doing. I conclude with an examination of prefigurative societies in movement and argue that these networks are part of a growing phenomenon of process and means focused movements, ones that are about developing horizontal and affective (care and love based) relationships, rather than demand and institutionally focused social movements. While each of the regions selected below have a wide variety of articulations of their meanings, internally, from within the networks, I have taken a bit of liberty in using a few key interview selections to demonstrate areas consistent with the newer prefigurative societies in movement, such as affect, changing social relationships, anti-capitalist and/or institutional powers, and horizontalism. I need to clarify that these are my interpretations of meaning, and I was not the person who conducted the interviews, so any mistaken interpretations are mine.

To begin, the description that Eleanor, a creative activist, organizer, and journalist shares in an interview done with carla bergman in the Turtle Island chapter of *Pandemic Solidarity*, is a version of one that is consistent all around the globe. In this case it was of a mutual aid network that was formed by the coming together of other networks and groups, though in many places the networks emerged via social media calls to come together, or flyers on street posts, or groups of friends inviting others, and of course, teachers. Eleanor explains:

DC Mutual Aid is a women of color led effort that grew out of existing networks of mutual aid and grassroots organizing to respond to the pandemic. We've set up a hotline to take requests from community members, a place to sanitize and pack goods and then deliver those to our neighbors. DC Mutual Aid is split up by wards and while each ward's workflow is autonomous, we're all part of the same city that is uniquely DC. We're scrappy and underfunded but like all mutual aid efforts, we roll with what comes. As my friend Maurice Cook puts it, "when the systems fail, the people show up." And people really have shown up – proving in spotlit contrast the uselessness of the state. We're constantly changing our protocols, for instance setting up emergency delivery protocols to address dire needs between scheduled delivery days, working to get folks fresh food by building relationships with local, small scale farmers who have been hit hard by the downturn in farmers' market access and restaurant purchases.⁸

In the chapter on Turkey, authored by Seyma Özdemir, the interviewees responded collectively, as networks, not individuals, reflecting already their practices of non-hierarchical organizing and shared leadership. Below is a reflection from the Kadıköy Solidarity Network, in Istanbul. Their reflections speak to the changing subjectivities that arise in horizontal networks of solidarity and mutual aid, and how it is a clear break from relations that the state and institutions of power facilitate:

Solidarity makes people feel incredible emotions nowadays. My phone number is one of the contact numbers on posters. We hear this sentence many, many times: 'You reminded us that we are human beings!' I heard this both from those who have resources to share and those who are in need. This is so real! Solidarity makes us human beings indeed! People calling me, especially the ones 80–90 years old, tell me that they would like to see my face when these days

⁸ Eleanor in carla bergman and magalí rabasa with Ariella Patchen and Seyma Özdemir, "Turtle Island," in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*, page 222.

are over, and meet over a coffee. Yes, I reply, ‘We will definitely meet one day.’ [...] The system, the state that you pay taxes to wants to get rid of you, leave you to death ... However, there are others who care about you, who stick by you in solidarity without any expectation. Then you start feeling like a society ... You start realizing that you are in the same boat, whether young or old, employed or unemployed, health worker, baker, as ones who have been left to their own destiny. You realize that you are stronger together and you must act collectively!⁹

Nancy Piñeiro facilitated the below interview with teachers in Mendoza, in the chapter she co-authored on Argentina. In so many places around the world it was and is teachers who began to organize first, knowing the needs in the neighborhoods and communities. In the case of Argentina, it was declared illegal to organize support outside state institutions, and yet, the teachers did. And the ways in which they did this, both horizontally, and focused on care and support not only of the material but emotional and artistic—feeding the soul:

So many people offered their help, some of them are artists (and they don’t have money to spare! On the contrary). We asked them if they could send us songs for the families, the other fundamental aspect of sustenance, which is art. It became a spontaneous virtual network where some are sending us lullabies, beautiful, tender, caring. Each teacher selects and decides what to send and to whom, it’s not just about sending stuff. It’s about feeding with art, fostering tenderness.¹⁰

How these affective relationships can then shift perceptions of one another was seen in the conversations Debarati Roy had with network participants and observers in India. She spoke with Ayantika, from Kolkata, West Bengal, who reflected on a number of networks and areas of solidarity. In once such reflection she spoke of how large segments of Indian society stigmatizes hijras (perceived as a third gender). Ayantika shared: “we generally encounter hijras in public settings – such as when we see them boisterously dancing and singing while asking for money on a train or blessing a wedding. [...] and the very sight of a hijra would cause discomfort and fear in many people.”¹¹ She then spoke of the role of hijras in supporting the solidarity efforts, bringing food, supplies and other material aid to centers. In this context, she found that people were open, accepting and shifting their preconceived notions and prejudices.

In South Korea, chapter author Ji Young Shin manifest the solidarity about which she writes, as she traveled throughout South Korea, during the height of the pandemic, as we were still learning about it, to gather stories and stand with movements of disability rights. Her chapter, titled “Standing in Solidarity with Those Who Must Refuse to Keep Social Distance: Disability Activism in South Korea,” goes into detail on the conditions suffered by people with various disabilities, and what it means when there is a lockdown. People who survived because of the support they received from those able to move about were no longer coming, isolation and desperation took hold, and individuals and groups refused, came together, and as Pak Kyōngsōk told Shin: “Say no to social distancing. Although we’d have to keep physical distance, we must

⁹ Kadıköy Solidarity Network in Seyma Özdemir, “‘Capitalism Kills, Solidarity Gives Life’: A Glimpse of Solidarity Networks from Turkey,” in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*, page 28.

¹⁰ Nancy Piñeiro in Nancy Viviana Piñeiro and Liz Mason-Deese, “Argentina: Injustices Magnified; Memories of Resistance Reactivated,” in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*, page 239.

¹¹ Ayantika in Debarati Roy, “Rethinking Minority and Mainstream in India,” in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*, page 92.

socially stick together and stand in solidarity!.”¹² People not only refused, but then also held demonstrations to bring attention to the conditions people with disabilities faced, and quoting from the rally, she shared:

We have gathered here again today, as if we had never been discriminated against, as if we had never lost hope [...] We felt so much pain as we saw on the news the patients dying behind the closed doors of psychiatric wards [...] We are all standing here today because we fought our way out, and were able to come out the other end.¹³

It was only because of these brave acts of mutual aid that people survived.

The above two examples are often seen in times of collective action, where the biases we are taught by mainstream society shift as we learn that we have more in common with one another than with those institutions and structures teaching us divisions. While this phenomenon is not new in the history of movements and action, the placing of importance on this shift and discussing it as a part of what is powerful and central in movement is and is a part of what brings together the larger landscape of societies in movement.

Similarly, not only how we see one another changes in movement and in times of crisis, but entire groups and networks with whom we have had differences, historical, political, and otherwise, can shift and new solidarities emerge. This is the case with Southern Africa, as Boaventura Monjane reflects in his chapter entitled “Confronting State Authoritarianism: Civil Society and Community-Based Solidarity in Southern Africa.” In particular he speaks to the new spaces of solidarity and alliance building that have opened up during the pandemic:

With very few exceptions, civil society groups are not in the habit of working together on common agendas. This is true in Mozambique as it is in Zimbabwe and South Africa. For example, in South Africa, an attempt to articulate civil society groups from various sectors – such as the C19 People’s Coalition, with more than 300 organizations – was attempted in the period following the abolition of apartheid.¹⁴

As Kelly G. explains in the same chapter:

[In South Africa] There has been post-apartheid attempts coalition building. None of them has really worked. Often they fall apart because there was not something specific to work on. What is most interesting about this coalition is that almost organically, out of the program of action, it is the organic emergence of working groups around particular issues. So there is a whole range of issues and in those working groups, some people have worked together before, but a lot of people haven’t work together before. And a lot of people haven’t been compelled by a

¹² Pak Kyöngsöök in Ji Young Shin, “Standing in Solidarity with Those Who Must Refuse to Keep Social Distance: Disability Activism in South Korea,” in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*, page 71

¹³ Chang Hyeyöng in Ji Young Shin, “Standing in Solidarity with Those Who Must Refuse to Keep Social Distance: Disability Activism in South Korea,” in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*, page 71.

¹⁴ Boaventura Monjane, “Confronting State Authoritarianism: Civil Society and Community-Based Solidarity in Southern Africa,” in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*, page 107.

progressive vision of how this is in services of poor and working class communities. So there is something about the time of the crisis and the possibility that the coalition has afforded to have people to sit down and actually work together regardless of their differences. The kinds of relationships that have emerged out of that have been very important. [...] It has also been very common to see the segregation of struggles and movements among Mozambique civil society groups, which has long contributed to the segregated processes of resistance among social movements and activists. ... It is therefore a novelty that in the C1-19 Civil Society Alliance there are almost 70 intersectorial organizations, including the largest – and first formed – trade union in Mozambique, the Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Moçambicanos (OTM, Mozambican Workers Union).¹⁵

In the chapter on Turtle Island, co-author carla bergman, spoke with Klee Benally (Diné/Navajo), a volunteer with Táala Hooghan Infoshop and Kinlani/Flagstaff Mutual Aid, as well as a writer, musician, and filmmaker. In their conversation, Klee makes clear the break from capitalist relations in their organizing, as well as visioning beyond forms of power and exploitation endemic to capitalism. He points to the historical as well as current rejection of these forms of relating, highlighting care and shared power—going beyond capitalism in practice and theory—a theory based practice. To begin, he describes how these practices are not ‘new’:

The idea of collective care and support, of ensuring the well-being of all our relations in non-hierarchical voluntary association, and taking direct action has always been something that translated easily for me. That’s how I was raised. T’áá hwó’ ají t’éego means if it is going to be, it is up to you. No one will do it for you. We also have a Diné philosophy rooted in Ké’, or our familial relations, which means that no one would ever be left to fend for themselves, we are all relatives in some way so we have to care for each other. We built these understandings into Táala Hooghan Infoshop from the beginning. [...] We’re organizing with the vision that these efforts have the power to make capitalism and colonialism irrelevant. We are actively establishing interventions to ensure that these systems don’t recuperate. To that end we’ve established an Indigenous Mutual Aid network. to build connections through and beyond this crisis. Since most of the current Indigenous mutual aid organizing is an extension of work that has been ongoing in sacred land and water struggles, for unsheltered relatives, or elder support, we already have a lot of those deep relationships and experiences working together. We want to radically redistribute resources and power but we also don’t want to be burdened by leftist political baggage.

In many ways that and the threat of non-profit industrial cooptation are perhaps our biggest challenges. That’s part of why we’re asserting the need for a specific tendency of Indigenous Mutual Aid; we’ve dealt with white saviors and so much “decolonial” fetishism from radicals. We need them to get out of the way so we can do what we need to do. They have a role, but if we’re not organizing on our terms than it’s the same charity bullshit we’ve faced before, no matter how much people say it’s ‘solidarity.’¹⁶

¹⁵ Kelly G. in Boaventura Monjane, “Confronting State Authoritarianism: Civil Society and Community-Based Solidarity in Southern Africa,” in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*, page 110.

¹⁶ Klee Benally in carla bergman and magalí rabasa with Ariella Patchen and Seyma Özdemir, “Turtle Island,” in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*, page 188.

Similar to the reflections above, by Klee Benally above, The Lena Modotti Brigade, in Milan, Italy, also discuss this historical moment and the needs to go beyond the state. Eleanor Finley spoke with them about their organizing for the chapter she authored on Italy. The Lena Modotti Brigade is a neighborhood-based network that distributes food, medicine, and supplies to home bound vulnerable families. They did not begin organizing with the conclusions below but came to them in the process of working together:

The experience of the brigades must be a turning point, an impetus for reflection by everyone about all of the struggles we've fought until now. The state has taken everything from us over the last years [healthcare, public education funding, etc] and it has been *totally* absent during this moment of emergency. Only the work of solidarity has helped the poorest people. The lowest classes are the ones are paying for what the government hasn't been able to do. The ones who do this work are solidarity people [*persone solidale*] like us who understood the situation and entered the field to help — even though it is risking our lives.¹⁷

A question that arises for me, and perhaps many of us, is if these horizontal mutual aid networks that arise in times of crisis are indeed movements, and if so, then how do we understand them in the lexicon of movements. The concept of societies in movement is useful here, as it reflects, as it sounds, groupings of people and communities who come together and move—to oppose a dam, a pipeline, police brutality and racism in the neighborhood, people that come together not because they have been mobilized or are a part of a movement or group, but because they have to move—because standing still is not an option, silence is no longer an option. These people and societies in movement are not the same as our understandings of traditional social movements where people are mobilized for or against something or someone, with demands on people or institutions in power to remedy the situation, but people who come together because that is the only place to go—that is the only place to look at one another—and so, horizontally. And from there we make decisions together.

In crisis, time after time, institutions are non-responsive, or not able to respond as they are not directly on the ground. Their hierarchical structures get in the way of their ability to respond quickly and in a way that meets people's needs. It is not so much that people choose autonomy or horizontality because they think it is better theoretically, but because in practice it is necessary and creates the most affective relationships – as well as effective practices.

As the interview by Seyma Özdemir with Ataşehir Solidarity Network, reflects:

This is a great opportunity in two ways: what really matters is not the state, it is the people living together. Secondly, people can claim agency and have the power to create solutions to their problems without a state, a governing power above, of course in a local level.

We say that another world is possible, so we are now building that political culture, the prototypes of that possibility in this process of pandemic. This is a historical moment. It is a moment that demonstrates the inability of governing. This is actually becoming an agent. This exists in our culture but the system pushes you to forget it, the system tells you that we will give you orders, what to do and how to do it. If there is any problem, you won't raise your voice and

¹⁷ The Lena Modotti Brigade in Eleanor Finley, "Solidarity Flourishes Under Lockdown in Italy," in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*, pages 152-153.

question so much, and you won't dare to search for solutions with the ones around you. But now people remember that, well, this is what a society is, this is what we were before.¹⁸

The influence of the movements on one another goes without question, as does the role of prior movements. What this looks like and how it happens is an entirely different question. Many of us used the language and categories of diffusion or contagion to describe these relationships, though since so many were not direct, or were more in the imagination of the movement participants than grounded in actual experience or readings of history, it becomes unclear. Many movements identified with what others were doing at the time and replicated their experiences, or as they imagine their experiences, and this is a sort of resonance.

And perhaps it is something much bigger. Without discounting the above, perhaps what is going on globally is most of all a massive response to a system that does not represent people, identified both as states and international financial institutions, together with the failure of a model of change that says we need to take over and change these institutions from the inside, and thus the result is massive movements of people looking to one another, using direct democracy and seeing power as something to construct from below, and keep below. What is taking place perhaps then is a new way of doing politics, creating a new theory around which it is organized.

As Klee Benally (Diné/Navajo) described, when carla asked his thoughts on creating a more autonomous, anti-capitalist and anti-colonial world:

I've grown up in a world of ruins. We have teachings and prophecies of the endings of cycles, but that's always how it's been here. An anti-colonial and anti-capitalist world already exists, but as my father who is a traditional medicine practitioner says, 'there aren't two worlds, there is just one world with many paths.' Colonial and capitalist paths are linear by design. If that path of greed, domination, exploitation, and competition doesn't accept that it's reached its dead end, then we have to make sure of it.¹⁹

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¹⁸ Seyma Özdemir, "Capitalism Kills, Solidarity Gives Life": A Glimpse of Solidarity Networks from Turkey," in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*, page 22.

¹⁹ Klee Bennally, page 190.

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