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**from *Mutual Aid*
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Introduction

Crisis Conditions Require Bold Tactics

The contemporary political moment is defined by emergency. Acute crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change–induced fires, floods, and storms, as well as the ongoing crises of racist criminalization, brutal immigration enforcement, endemic gender violence, and severe wealth inequality, threaten the survival of people around the globe. Government policies actively produce and exacerbate the harm, inadequately respond to crises, and ensure that certain populations bear the brunt of pollution, poverty, disease, and violence. In the face of this, more and more ordinary people are feeling called to respond in their communities, creating bold and innovative ways to share resources and support vulnerable neighbors. This survival work, when done in conjunction with social movements demanding transformative change, is called mutual aid.

Mutual aid has been a part of all large, powerful social movements, and it has a particularly important role to play

right now, as we face unprecedented dangers and opportunities for mobilization. Mutual aid gives people a way to plug into movements based on their immediate concerns, and it produces social spaces where people grow new solidarities. At its best, mutual aid actually produces new ways of living where people get to create systems of care and generosity that address harm and foster well-being.

This book is about mutual aid: it explains why it is so important, what it looks like, and how to do it. It provides a grassroots theory of mutual aid as well as concrete tools for addressing some of the most difficult questions facing mutual aid groups, such as how to work in groups and make decisions together, how to prevent and address conflict, and how to deal with burnout so that we can build a lasting mobilization that can win.

Left social movements have two big jobs right now. First, we need to organize to help people survive the devastating conditions unfolding every day. Second, we need to mobilize hundreds of millions of people for resistance so we can tackle the underlying causes of these crises. In this pivotal moment, movements can strengthen, mobilizing new people to fight back against cops, immigration enforcement, welfare authorities, landlords, budget cuts, polluters, the defense industry, prison profiteers, and right-wing groups. The way to tackle these two big tasks—meeting people's needs and mobilizing them for resistance—is to create mutual aid projects and get lots of people to participate in them. Social movements that have built power and won major change have all included mutual aid, yet it is often a part of movement work that is less visible and less valued.

In this moment, our ability to build mutual aid will determine whether we win the world we long for or dive further into crisis.

We can imagine what is possible when we come together in this way by examining the response of Hong Kong's protest movement to COVID-19. In 2019, a massive anti-government mobilization swept Hong Kong, with people opposing police and seeking greater control over their lives. By the time the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, Hong Kong's chief executive, Carrie Lam, had an 80 percent disapproval rating. Hong Kong's protest movement had escalated significantly, with protesters coordinating sophisticated mass mobilizations, including the use of bold tactics like fighting police with poles, projectiles, laser pointers, and petrol bombs. Lam was remarkably non-responsive to the pandemic, despite the vulnerable position of Hong Kong, a densely packed city with a history of epidemics and a high-speed railway connection to Wuhan, where the COVID-19 pandemic started. Hong Kong residents criticized Lam for her delay in closing the city's borders and her order barring city workers from wearing masks. But, despite the government's failures, the people of Hong Kong, mobilized by the protest movement, launched a response that suppressed the original wave of COVID-19 and mitigated its resurgence.

On the day the first COVID-19 case in Hong Kong was confirmed, people from the protest movement created a website that tracked cases, monitored hot spots, reported hospital wait times, and warned about places selling fake personal protective equipment (PPE). The protesters defied the government's ban on masks and countered misinformation from

the World Health Organization discouraging their use. They set up brigades that made and distributed masks, specially making sure they reached poor people and old people. They created a system of volunteers to set up hand sanitizer stations throughout crowded tenement housing and maintain the supply of sanitizer at the stations. They also created digital maps to identify the station sites.

This essential mutual aid work was complemented by bolder strategies. When the government refused to close the border with China, seven thousand medical workers, as part of labor unions that had been formed during the protest movement, went on strike demanding PPE and that the border be closed. Members of the protest movement threatened the government with stronger action if steps were not taken to address the epidemic, and explosives were found at the border with China, possibly for this purpose. The Hong Kong government then created quarantine centers in dense neighborhoods, but never consulted the people in those neighborhoods, and the protest movement responded by throwing explosives into the quarantine centers before they were used, causing the government to change the location of the facilities to less densely populated holiday villages.

As a result of these efforts by a mobilized and coordinated movement, and no thanks to the government, Hong Kong had an immensely successful response to the first wave of COVID-19. Through the combination of mutual aid and direct action to force concessions, the protesters did what the government would not do on its own, saving untold numbers of lives.

This book provides a concrete guide for building mutual aid groups and networks. [Part I](#) explores what mutual aid is, why it is different than charity, and how it relates to other social movement tactics. [Part II](#) dives into the nitty-gritty of how to work together in mutual aid groups and how to handle the challenges of group decision-making, conflict, and burnout. It includes charts and lists that can be brought to group meetings to stimulate conversation and build shared analysis and group practices. Ultimately, helps imagine how we can coordinate to collectively take care of ourselves—even in the face of disaster—and mobilize hundreds of millions of people to make deep and lasting change.

PART I

What is Mutual Aid?

Mutual aid is collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them. Those systems, in fact, have often created the crisis, or are making things worse. We see examples of mutual aid in every single social movement, whether it's people raising money for workers on strike, setting up a ride-sharing system during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, putting drinking water in the desert for migrants crossing the border, training each other in emergency medicine because ambulance response time in poor neighborhoods is too slow, raising money to pay for abortions for those who can't afford them, or coordinating letter-writing to prisoners. These are mutual aid projects. They directly meet people's survival needs, and are based on a shared understanding that the conditions in which we are made to live are unjust.

There is nothing new about mutual aid—people have worked together to survive for all of human history. But capitalism and colonialism created structures that have dis-

rupted how people have historically connected with each other and shared everything they needed to survive. As people were forced into systems of wage labor and private property, and wealth became increasingly concentrated, our ways of caring for each other have become more and more tenuous.

Today, many of us live in the most atomized societies in human history, which makes our lives less secure and undermines our ability to organize together to change unjust conditions on a large scale. We are put in competition with each other for survival, and we are forced to rely on hostile systems—like health care systems designed around profit, not keeping people healthy, or food and transportation systems that pollute the earth and poison people—for the things we need. More and more people report that they have no one they can confide in when they are in trouble. This means many of us do not get help with mental health, drug use, family violence, or abuse until the police or courts are involved, which tends to escalate rather than resolve harm.

In this context of social isolation and forced dependency on hostile systems, mutual aid—where we choose to help each other out, share things, and put time and resources into caring for the most vulnerable—is a radical act.

Three Key Elements of Mutual Aid

One. Mutual aid projects work to meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need.

Mutual aid projects expose the reality that people do not have what they need and propose that we can address this injustice together. The most famous example in the United States is the Black Panther Party's survival programs, which ran throughout the 1960s and 1970s, including a free breakfast program, free ambulance program, free medical clinics, a service offering rides to elderly people doing errands, and a school aimed at providing a rigorous liberation curriculum to children. The Black Panther programs welcomed people into the liberation struggle by creating spaces where they could meet basic needs and build a shared analysis about the conditions they were facing. Instead of feeling ashamed about not being able to feed their kids in a culture that

blames poor people, especially poor Black people, for their poverty, people attending the Panthers' free breakfast program got food and a chance to build shared analysis about Black poverty. It broke stigma and isolation, met material needs, and got people fired up to work together for change.

Recognizing the program's success, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover famously wrote in a 1969 memo sent to all field offices that "the BCP [Breakfast for Children Program] represents the best and most influential activity going for the BPP [Black Panther Party] and, as such, is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for." The night before the Chicago program was supposed to open, police broke into the church that was hosting it and urinated on all of the food. The government's attacks on the Black Panther Party are evidence of mutual aid's power, as is the government's co-optation of the program: in the early 1970s the US Department of Agriculture expanded its federal free breakfast program—built on a charity, not a liberation, model—that still feeds millions of children today. The Black Panthers provided a striking vision of liberation, asserting that Black people had to defend themselves against a violent and racist government, and that they could organize to give each other what a racist society withheld.

During the same period, the Young Lords Party undertook similar and related mutual aid projects in their work toward Puerto Rican liberation. The Young Lords brought people into the movement by starting with the everyday needs of Puerto Ricans in impoverished communities: they protested the lack of garbage pickups in Puerto Rican neigh-

borhoods, hijacked a city mobile x-ray truck to bring greater tuberculosis testing to Puerto Rican communities, took over part of a hospital to provide health care, and provided food and youth programs for Puerto Rican communities. Their vision—for decolonizing Puerto Rico and liberating Puerto Ricans in the United States from racism, poverty, and police terror—was put into practice through mutual aid.

Throughout the 1960s and '70s, many overlapping movements undertook mutual aid efforts, such as feminist health clinics and activist-run abortion providers, emerging volunteer-run gay health clinics, childcare collectives, tenants' unions, and community food projects. Although this moment is an important reference point for the contemporary left, mutual aid didn't start in the '60s, but is an ongoing feature of movements seeking transformative change. Klee Benally, project coordinator at Indigenous Media Action, argues that mutual aid is an unbroken tradition among Indigenous people across many cycles of colonialism, maintained through traditional teachings that contemporary Indigenous mutual aid projects are working to restore and amplify. Settlers have long worked to undermine Indigenous people's self-sustaining practices by first destroying food systems and then forcing dependency on rations given at forts and missions and, now, by settler nonprofits. Indigenous mutual aid efforts are both a matter of survival and a powerful form of resistance to forced dependence on settler systems.

The long tradition of mutual aid societies and other forms of “self-help” in Black communities, which, as early as the 1780s sought to pool resources to provide health and

life insurance, care for the sick, aid for burials, support for widows and orphans, and public education efforts, is another important example. These efforts have addressed Black exclusion from white infrastructures by creating Black alternatives. Long traditions of mutual aid are also visible in working-class communities that have long supported workers on strike so that they could pay rent and buy food while confronting their bosses. Perhaps most of all, the pervasive presence of mutual aid during sudden disasters of all kinds—storms, floods, fires, and earthquakes—demonstrates how people come together to care for each other and share resources when, inevitably, the government is not there to help, offers relief that does not reach the most vulnerable people, and deploys law enforcement against displaced disaster survivors. Mutual aid is a powerful force.

Two. Mutual aid projects mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements.

Mutual aid is essential to building social movements. People often come to social movement groups because they need something: eviction defense, childcare, social connection, health care, or help in a fight with the government about something like welfare benefits, disability services, immigration status, or custody of their children. Being able to get help in a crisis is often a condition for being politically active, because it's very difficult to organize when you are also struggling to survive. Getting support through a mutual aid project that has a political analysis of the conditions that produced your crisis also helps to break stigma, shame, and isolation. Under capitalism, social problems resulting from

exploitation and the maldistribution of resources are understood as individual moral failings, not systemic problems. Getting support at a place that sees the systems, not the people suffering in them, as the problem can help people move from shame to anger and defiance. Mutual aid exposes the failures of the current system and shows an alternative. This work is based in a belief that those on the front lines of a crisis have the best wisdom to solve the problems, and that collective action is the way forward.

Mutual aid projects also build solidarity. I have seen this at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), a law collective that provides free legal help to trans and gender-nonconforming people who are low income and/or people of color. I worked with the group from 2002 to 2019. Again and again I saw people come to SRLP for help because something bad happened to them in a shelter, in prison, or in interactions with cops, immigration authorities, the foster care system, or public schools. People seeking legal services for these problems would be invited to participate in organizing and become part of SRLP, working on changing the conditions that had brought them to the group. As people joined, things were often bumpy. Members may have had some things in common—being trans or gender-nonconforming, for example—but also differed from one another in terms of race, immigration status, ability, HIV status, age, housing access, sexual orientation, language, and more. By working together and participating in shared political education programs, members could learn about experiences different from theirs and build solidarity across those differences. This changed

—and continues to change—not only the individuals in the group, but the kind of politics the group practices.

Solidarity is what builds and connects large-scale movements. In the context of professionalized nonprofit organizations, groups are urged to be single-issue oriented, framing their message around “deserving” people within the population they serve, and using tactics palatable to elites. Prison-oriented groups are supposed to fight only for “the innocent” or “the nonviolent,” for example, and to do their work by lobbying politicians about how some people—not *all* people—don’t belong in prison. This is the opposite of solidarity, because it means the most vulnerable people are left behind: those who were up-charged by cops and prosecutors, those who do not have the means to prove their innocence, those who do not match cultural tropes of innocence and deservingness. This narrow focus actually strengthens the system’s legitimacy by advocating that the targeting of those more stigmatized people is okay.

This pattern of anti-solidarity incentives and practices has been devastating for movements as nonprofitization has taken hold, as I’ll discuss further in the next chapter. Solidarity across issues and populations is what makes movements big and powerful. Without that connection, we end up with disconnected groups, working in their issue silos, undermining each other, competing for attention and funding, not backing each other up and not building power. Mutual aid projects, by creating spaces where people come together on the basis of some shared need or concern in spite of their different lived experience, cultivate solidarity.

Groups doing mutual aid to directly address real problems in real people's lives tend to develop a multiissue and solidarity-based approach because their members' lives are cross-cut by many different experiences of vulnerability. Sometimes even groups that start out with a narrow goal adopt a wider horizon of solidarity and a wider vision of political possibility if they use the mutual aid model. An initial goal of serving people impacted by homelessness quickly reveals that racism, colonialism, immigration enforcement, ableism, police violence, the foster care system, the health care system, transphobia, and more are all causes of homelessness or causes of further harm to homeless people. Solidarity and an ever-expanding commitment to justice emerge from contact with the complex realities of injustice. This is exactly how movements are built, as people become connected to each other and as one urgent issue unspools into a broader vision of social transformation.

Three. Mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors.

Mutual aid projects help people develop skills for collaboration, participation, and decision-making. For example, people engaged in a project to help one another through housing court proceedings will learn the details of how the system harms people and how to fight it, but they will also learn about meeting facilitation, working across differences, retaining volunteers, addressing conflict, giving and receiving feedback, following through, and coordinating schedules and transportation. They may also learn that it is not just

lawyers who can do this kind of work, and that many people—including themselves!—have something to offer. This departs from expertise-based social services that tell us we need to have a social worker, licensed therapist, lawyer, or some other person with an advanced degree to get things done.

Mutual aid is inherently antiauthoritarian, demonstrating how we can do things together in ways we were told not to imagine, and that we can organize human activity without coercion. Most people have never been to a meeting where there was not a boss or authority figure with decision-making power. Most people work or go to school inside hierarchies where disobedience leads to punishment or exclusion. We bring our learned practices of hierarchy with us even when no paycheck or punishment enforces our participation, so even in volunteer groups we often find ourselves in conflicts stemming from learned dominance behaviors. But collective spaces, like mutual aid organizing, can give us opportunities to unlearn conditioning and build new skills and capacities. By participating in groups in new ways and practicing new ways of being together, we are both building the world we want and becoming the kind of people who could live in such a world together.

For example, in the Occupy encampments that emerged in 2011 to protest economic inequality, people shared ideas about how to resolve conflict without calling the police. Occupy brought out many people who had never participated in political resistance before, introducing them to practices like consensus decision-making, occupying public space, distributing free food, and engaging in free political

education workshops. Many who joined Occupy did not yet have a developed critique of policing. Participants committed to police abolition and antiracism cultivated conversations about why activists should not call the police on each other. This process was inconsistent and imperfect, but it introduced many people to new skills and ideas that they took with them, long after Occupy encampments were dismantled by the police.

Mutual aid can also generate boldness and a willingness to defy illegitimate authority. Taking risks with a group for a shared purpose can be a reparative experience when we have been trained to follow rules. Organizers from Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR) share the following story in their 2018 workshop facilitation guide to illustrate their argument that “audacity is our capacity”:

When a crew of MADR organizers [after Hurricane Maria] travelled to Puerto Rico (some visiting their families, others bringing medical skills), they found out about a government warehouse that was neglecting to distribute huge stockpiles of supplies. They showed their MADR badges to the guards and said, “We are here for the 8am pickup.” When guards replied that their names were not on the list, they just insisted again, “We are here for the 8am pickup.” They were eventually allowed in, told to take whatever they needed. After being let in once, aid workers were able to return repeatedly. They made more badges for local organizers, and this source continued to benefit local communities for months.

MADR asserts that by taking bold actions together, “we can imagine new ways of interacting with the world.” When dominant ways of living have been suspended, people discover that they can break norms—and even laws—that enable individualism, passivity, and respect for private property. MADR asserts that “saving lives, homes, and communities in the event and aftermath of disaster may require taking bold action without waiting for permission from authorities. Disaster survivors themselves are the most important authority on just action.”

Mutual aid projects providing relief to survivors of storms, floods, earthquakes, and fires, as well as those developed to support people living through the crises caused by poverty, racism, criminalization, gender violence, and other “ordinary” conditions, produce new systems that can prevent harm and improve preparedness for the coming disasters. When Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico in 2017, it was the existence of food justice efforts that made it possible for many people to eat when the corporate food system, which brings 90 percent of the island’s food from offisland sources, was halted by the storm. Similarly, it was local solar panels that allowed people to charge medical devices when the electrical grid went down.

By looking at what still works in the face of disaster, we can learn what we want to build to prepare for the next storm or fire. In *The Battle for Paradise*, Naomi Klein argues that locally controlled microgrids are more desirable for delivering sustainable energy, given the failures of the energy monopolies that currently dominate energy delivery. In the wake of the devastating 2018 California fires, the pub-

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lic learned that the fires were caused by Pacific Gas and Electric Company's mismanagement, and then watched as California's government immediately offered the company a bailout, meanwhile failing to support people displaced by the disaster. Klein describes how large energy companies work to prevent local and sustainable energy efforts, and argues that in energy, as in other areas of survival, we should be working toward locally controlled, participatory, transparent structures to replace our crumbling and harmful infrastructure.

Doing so helps us imagine getting rid of the undemocratic infrastructure of our lives—the extractive and unjust energy, food, health care, and transportation systems—and replacing it with people's infrastructure. For social movements working to imagine and build a transition from “dig, burn, dump” economies to sustainable, regenerative ways of living, mutual aid offers a way forward.

Mainstream understanding of how to support people in crisis relies on the frameworks of charity and social services. We should be very clear: mutual aid is not charity. *Charity, aid, relief, and social services* are terms that usually refer to rich people or the government making decisions about the provision of some kind of support to poor people—that is, rich people or the government deciding who gets the help, what the limits are to that help, and what strings are attached. You can be sure that help like that is not designed to get to the root causes of poverty and violence. It is designed to help improve the image of the elites who are funding it and put a tiny, inadequate Band-Aid on the massive social wound that their greed creates.

The charity model we live with today has origins in Christian European practices of the wealthy giving alms to the poor to buy their own way into heaven. It is based on a moral hierarchy of wealth—the idea that rich people are inherently better and more moral than poor people, which is why they deserve to be on top. Not surprisingly, the charity

model promotes the idea that most poverty is a result of laziness or immorality and that only the poor people who can prove their moral worth deserve help.

Contemporary charity comes with eligibility requirements such as sobriety, piety, curfews, participation in job training or parenting courses, cooperation with the police, a lawful immigration status, or identifying the paternity of children. In charity programs, social workers, health care providers, teachers, clergy, lawyers, and government workers determine which poor people deserve help. Their methods of deciding who is deserving, and even the rules they enforce, usually promote racist and sexist tropes, such as the idea that poor women of color and immigrant women have too many children, or that Black families are dysfunctional, or that Indigenous children are better off separated from their families and communities, or that people are poor because of drug use.

We can see examples in government policy, like the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families programs (TANF), which impose “family caps” in fourteen states. These laws restrict poor families from receiving additional benefits when they have a new child. For example, in Massachusetts, a single parent with two children receives a measly \$578 in TANF benefits each month. But if a second child is born while the family is already receiving TANF, that child is ineligible, and the family receives \$100 less per month, for a grant of \$478. This policy emerges from the racist, sexist idea that poor women, especially women of color and immigrant women, should be discouraged from having children, and the faulty assumption that their poverty is somehow a

result of being overly reproductive. We can also see harmful, moralizing eligibility requirements when people have to prove they are sober or under psychiatric care to qualify for housing programs.

Charity programs, both those run by the government and those run by nonprofits, are also set up in ways that make it stigmatizing and miserable to receive help. The humiliation and degradation of doing required work assignments to get benefits too small to live off of, or answering endless personal questions that treat the recipient like a fraud and a crook, are designed to make sure that people will accept any work at any exploitative wage or condition to avoid relying on public benefits. Charity makes rich people and corporations look generous while upholding and legitimizing the systems that concentrate wealth.

Charity is increasingly privatized and contracted out to the massive nonprofit sector, which benefits rich people more than poor people in two big ways. First, elite donors get to run the show. They decide what gets funded and what doesn't. Nonprofits compete to show that they are the best organization to win a grant. To win, nonprofits want to make their work look legitimate to the funder, which means working according to the funder's beliefs about the causes of and solutions for a particular problem rather than challenging those beliefs. For example, the funder may favor nonprofits that make sobriety a condition of receiving a spot in a homeless shelter, because rich people would rather believe that homelessness is caused by poor people's drug use than that it is caused by a capitalist housing market. To win grants, nonprofits also seek to make themselves look “successful”

and “impactful,” regardless of whether their work is actually getting to the root causes of the problem. For example, social service nonprofits will often claim they have worked with large numbers of people, even though most of those people did not become less vulnerable or get what they needed from their contact with the nonprofit. Similarly, homelessness service groups sometimes claim that they reduced shelter use, but the people who stopped using the shelter are still unhoused and simply not using the shelter for various reasons.

In this way, poverty-focused and homelessness-focused nonprofits are essentially encouraged to merely *manage* poor people: provide limited and conditional access to prison-like shelters and make people take budgeting classes or prove their sobriety. They do not do the more threatening and effective work that grassroots mutual aid groups do for housing justice, like defending encampments against raids, providing immediate no-strings health care and food to poor and unhoused people, fighting real estate developers, slumlords, and gentrification, or fighting for and providing access to actual long-term housing. Rich people’s control of nonprofit funding keeps nonprofits from doing work that is threatening to the status quo, or from admitting the limits of their strategies. In worst-case scenarios, nonprofits are integrated into programs that make vulnerable people even more vulnerable. An example of this is the Homeless Management Information System, a federal computerized information management tool that requires homeless services and charities to record the names and information of their clients in

order to receive federal aid, putting criminalized and undocumented people at further risk.

Second, the nonprofit system creates a tax shelter for rich people. They can put a bunch of their money in a charitable foundation, allowing them to avoid paying taxes on it and instead getting to direct it to their favorite pet projects. Most foundation money goes to things the board members and executive directors (who, in the case of US foundations, are over 90 percent white) value, such as their alma maters, the opera, and museums. Foundations are not even required to give much of their wealth away: they give out only 5 percent a year and still reap the benefits of a tax haven for their money and the social cachet of being a philanthropist. And that 5 percent can also be used to pay their friends and family hundreds of thousands of dollars per year to be “trustees” of their foundation.

The creation of the nonprofit sector that has ballooned in the last half-century was a direct response to the threat posed by mass mutual aid work in anti-racist, anti-colonial and feminist movements of the 1960s and ’70s. Nonprofitization was designed to demobilize us, legitimizing unjust systems and hiding the reality that real change comes from movements made of millions of ordinary people, not small groups of paid professionals. These days, the nonprofits that purport to address poverty are mostly run by white elites. The idea promoted by nonprofits and universities is that people with advanced degrees are best suited to figure out the solutions to social problems. It mystifies the causes of poverty, making it seem like some kind of mysterious math problem that only people with advanced degrees can figure out. But any

poor person knows that poverty is caused by the greed of their bosses, landlords, and health insurance companies, by systems of white supremacy and colonialism, and by wars and forced migrations. Elite solutions to poverty are always about managing poor people and never about redistributing wealth.

The nonprofit sector not only fails to fix injustice but also replicates it within the groups themselves. Nonprofits are usually run like businesses, with a boss (executive director) at the top deciding things for the people underneath. Nonprofits have the same kinds of problems as other businesses that rely on hierarchical models: drastically unequal pay, race and gender wage gaps, sexual harassment in the workplace, exploitation of workers, and burnout. Despite the fact that they pitch themselves as the solution for fixing the problems of the current system, nonprofits mostly replicate, legitimize, and stabilize that system.

One way the charity model is manifested is in the idea of “having a cause.” Celebrities and philanthropists show us that picking an issue to care about and giving or raising money for it is part of their brand, in a similar vein as their fashion choices. This idea of a charitable cause that is disconnected from other aspects of life keeps us in our places. We are encouraged to be mostly numbed-out consumers, but ones who perhaps volunteer at a soup kitchen on Thanksgiving, post videos about animal rights on our social media accounts, or wear a T-shirt with a feminist slogan now and again. Only those few experts or specialists who work in nonprofits are supposed to make concern for justice a larger

part of their lives by turning it into a career, but even they are supposed to still be obedient consumers.

The false separation of politics and injustice from ordinary life—and the idea that activism is a kind of lifestyle accessory—is demobilizing to our movements, hides the root causes of injustice, and keeps us passive and complicit. Robust social movements offer an opposing view. We argue that all the aspects of our lives—where and how we live and work, eat, entertain ourselves, get around, and get by—are sites of injustice and potential resistance. At our best, social movements create vibrant social networks in which we not only do work in a group, but also have friendships, make art, have sex, mentor and parent kids, feed ourselves and each other, build radical land and housing experiments, and inspire each other about how we can cultivate liberation in all aspects of our lives. Activism and mutual aid shouldn’t feel like volunteering or like a hobby—it should feel like living in alignment with our hopes for the world and with our passions. It should enliven us.

The charity model encourages us to feel good about ourselves by “giving back.” Convincing us that we have done enough if we do a little volunteering or posting online is a great way to keep us in our place. Keeping people numb to the suffering in the world—and their own suffering—is essential to keeping things as they are. In fact, things are really terrifying and enraging right now, and feeling *more* rage, fear, sadness, grief, and despair may be appropriate. Those feelings may help us be less appeased by false solutions, and stir us to pursue ongoing collective action for change.

That doesn't mean that mutual aid work never feels good. In fact, it is often deeply satisfying and connective, creating caring relationships, raucous celebrations, and an enduring sense of purpose. In my experience, it is *more* engagement that actually enlivens us—more curiosity, more willingness to see the harm that surrounds us, and ask how we can relate to it differently. Being more engaged with the complex and painful realities we face, and with thoughtful, committed action alongside others for justice, feels much better than numbing out or making token, selfconsoling charity gestures. It feels good to let our values guide every part of our lives.

Mutual aid projects, in many ways, are defined in opposition to the charity model and its current iteration in the nonprofit sector. Mutual aid projects mobilize lots of people rather than a few experts; resist the use of eligibility criteria that cut out more stigmatized people; are an integrated part of our lives rather than a pet cause; and cultivate a shared analysis of the root causes of the problem and connect people to social movements that can address these causes. [Part II](#) of this book focuses on how we can build our mutual aid groups in ways that can most successfully accomplish these goals, avoiding the pitfalls of the charity model and the learned hierarchical behaviors that can reproduce injustice even in activist group settings.

What we build now, and whether we can sustain it, will determine how prepared we are for the next pandemic, the climate-induced disasters to come, the ongoing disasters of white supremacy and capitalism, and the beautifully disruptive rebellions that will transform them.

We Get More When We Demand More

Disasters are ruptures—existing systems break down and then are either repaired, replaced, or scrapped. Disasters exacerbate and expose inequalities, showing the preexisting crises that elites strive to ignore and hide from view. When disasters emerge, governments and corporations quickly move to downplay them, hoping to get back to the status quo of extraction and profit-making as soon as possible, to take credit for having resolved them, and to silence demands for relief. Governments and the 1 percent also use disasters as opportunities to push their favored reforms. COVID-19, for example, has generated right-wing wins like closing the border; suspending environmental regulations; giving the FBI, DEA, and local police hundreds of millions of dollars; and expanding the capacity of police to harass and criminalize the poor for allegedly violating public health regulations.

At the same time, disasters are opportunities for exposing injustice and pushing forward left-wing demands.