To the Lifehouse: Anarchist Thoughts on Care

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With international politics' inability to deliver meaningful and timely responses to the climate emergency, local communities are at the forefront of adaptation. Could successful experiences of mutual self-organisation eventually lead to a decentralised network of global solidarity?

Konrad Bleyer-Simon: **Your new book Lifehouse: Taking Care of Ourselves in a World on Fire starts with the transformative experience of Superstorm Sandy in October 2012. Why was this devastating hurricane so important for the development of your ideas?**

Adam Greenfield: When Sandy made landfall in New York City, my partner and I were on the West Coast, visiting my father, who is one of those people who have a TV running in the background all the time. At some point during our visit, I glanced up at the screen and saw that the image on CNN was the view outside the window of our flat in New York City. I was shocked: there was the same intersection we looked at every day, waist-high in floodwater, with the traffic signals overhead swinging wildly in what must have been 40- or 50-mile-per-hour winds.

As soon as we got back home and were able to assess that our building was undamaged, our next instinct was to do something to help our community. As bourgeois, middle-class New Yorkers would ordinarily do, we got in touch with the local office of the American Red Cross to find out where we could volunteer, but they did not have any use for us, and said that the best thing for us to do was to stay home. Fortunately, we had heard through some friends that there was an effort in Brooklyn that was accepting volunteers, so we showed up at a church on Clinton Avenue and started doing relief work immediately.

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What was happening there and at dozens of other sites across the area – which came to be collectively known as Occupy Sandy (OS) – was an entirely self-organised, bottom-up, citizen-led response to the circumstances of the superstorm. I have always harboured a leftlibertarian and anarchist sympathy, but there has never been much scope for such sentiments on the American political scene. However, what we saw from the moment we showed up at the church was the practical realisation of a hope I had nurtured in my heart for decades. This scrappy, spontaneous initiative was more congenial to my beliefs about the world than anything I had seen before. What occupied my mind as I was moving and sorting boxes of relief supplies was the question of what might happen if we could organise more of our lives this way.

What is left of Occupy Sandy?

Once the storm and its aftermath had passed, the normal institutional framework of everyday life reasserted itself with astonishing speed, and before long there was not really anything left of Occupy Sandy per se. It probably played a role that public institutions and private funding bodies tried to pick off what was best about OS. The Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency, for example, an official effort of the New York City government, tried to recruit the people they considered OS's most effective organisers.

I don't think such attempts to integrate Occupy Sandy's practices into the official disaster relief and recovery framework ever came to very much. But the recruitment attempt did manage to create social fissures within OS – especially between those who were a priori ideologically opposed to joining forces with the government, in any way, shape or form, and those who thought the question of state involvement was secondary, as long as people were able to get the help they needed.

By now, there's no organisational centre of gravity that came out of Occupy Sandy, neither in New York City nor anywhere else. But the self-assembling skeleton of new initiatives – what makes them arrive on the scene fully formed, even though they seem to come from nowhere – is created by the relationships we build during our response to previous emergent situations. OS itself was built on the relationships that were forged through the occupation of Zuccotti Park, during Occupy Wall Street, in the fall of 2011.

From my perspective, what is going on at such moments shows a lot of similarities with the concept of "stigmergy", which is a mechanism of indirect coordination that we can see, for example, in ant colonies. When a foraging ant finds a source of food, it lays on the ground a marking pheromone, signalling the presence of food to other ants, and the trail strengthens over time as more ants traverse it and reinforce the marking. In essence, that is part of what we are doing in efforts like OS: laying down trails for people to follow, so they can more swiftly find their way to what works when they are confronted by their own emergent situation. My book is an attempt to reinscribe those trails and make them more tangible, so people know that these tactics have been successful in the past, and that they remain available for reinterpretation by anyone who needs them.

Why was Occupy Sandy more effective than established relief institutions?

The first reason is simply the number of people Occupy Sandy was able to mobilise, just by being open and giving them meaningful things to do, no matter their background, level of training, or ability. About 60,000 people participated, and with that abundance of labour force you can achieve a lot.

The other important aspect is that Occupy Sandy never framed its actions as charity – something bestowed from above upon a passive recipient. Every interaction between an OS volunteer and somebody who was affected by the storm started with a respectful conversation between peers. Essentially, the volunteers would start by asking: "How are you doing?" It was only in the course of such a conversation that they approached the question of whether there was anything they could help with. And that's significantly different from the approach of established institutions that maybe show up at an intersection, five or ten blocks away, and announce over a loudspeaker that they're offering hot soup for the next half hour. But what if you do not need hot soup or a blanket right now? What if what you need is diapers for your kid, or insulin, or help to muck out your basement? These are the kind of issues that for the most part remained invisible to the top-down relief agencies.

How is this process of mutual care connected to anarchy?

The simplest way to put it is that there were no leaders in Occupy Sandy. As an organisation, it was instantiated entirely by the people who were present at any given moment. All of the important decisions

were made through a participatory and deliberative process that aimed to secure the full consent of everyone present. And I think that this sort of thing – the provision of mutual aid delivered horizontally through a democratically managed process of consent-seeking – is the primary form that anarchism takes in our time. The great 20th-century British anarchist Colin Ward said that you don't have to "be an anarchist" or "believe in anarchism" in order to do anarchy quite successfully. And in this context, "doing anarchy" means 60,000 New Yorkers of every background organising themselves for the difficult, dirty, occasionally dangerous work of disaster relief with astonishing effectiveness, without anyone telling them what to do or how to do it.

Having achieved that, even under fairly extreme pressure, is proof that these tactics and practices are suitable for use in other circumstances. I found it an incredibly inspiring experience, just boundlessly energising and provocative, and I have never let go of the expanded sense of possibility it left me with.

Do you consider mutual self-organisation a form of climate adaptation?

Absolutely. Even if we somehow managed to become carbon neutral instantaneously, globally, with the wave of a magic wand, we would still have to suffer the consequences of climate degradation for at least a century before the atmosphere restabilised itself.

So the question is what kind of adaptation we work towards. In my view, it's important not to reinforce the systems of injustice and oppression on which our societies are founded. Instead, we should imagine a more fruitful and generative future for ourselves, and initiatives like Occupy Sandy hold great promise in this regard.

You write in the book that opportunities for the individual to effect meaningful political change are virtually non-existent in the current economic system. Should we not expect outcomes from climate negotiations, activism, or policymaking?

The key word here is "expect". It's fine to dedicate time, energy, and attention to these processes, but I think it's wise not to expect any outcome from them. By contrast, the processes that I believe in and advocate for are ones where there's a closer coupling between the investment of energy and effort and the result you see in the world, so that you'll know whether or not your actions have been effective. If you're doing urban gardening and you see that potatoes and carrots are growing, or you're working on a community solar microgrid and you manage to generate energy for places and people that didn't have reliable access to power before, these material facts reveal the effect of your actions on the world in a way that a psychic investment in your country's net zero policies probably will not.

Not to mention that it is hard to imagine what impact I might have on Chinese, or Indian, or Saudi policy, or World Bank decisions. If China recommits itself to coal-fired power generation, what influence do I have over that? All I can do, within the ambit of my direct ability to affect the world, is to take measures to ensure that the consequences of that decision are not overly burdensome or fatal for the community I live in.

In your vision, self-organisation would be powered through so-called Lifehouses. What exactly are they?

The concept of the Lifehouse gets its start in something that happened during the aftermath of Sandy, but which I was never lucky enough to see with my own eyes. After Superstorm Sandy, the power was out for weeks in some neighbourhoods. People who lived there couldn't even charge their phones. They had no way of keeping in touch with each other or knowing what was going on. But there was a squat on

the Lower East Side of Manhattan that happened to have an old exercise bicycle lying around, and somebody figured out how to wire it up to a dynamo and a storage battery. So long as somebody pedalled the bike, they could keep the battery full and use it to run a bank of phone chargers they had set up on a folding table outside on the sidewalk.

What if you could create a physical place in every community where people can gather and turn to one another in the event of a crisis?

What's brilliant about this is that, through addressing a material need, the table outside the squat became something more than a place for people to charge their devices: it became the hub of a social community. We saw similar examples at a still larger scale in 2017 in Puerto Rico during Hurricane Maria, where democratically managed, solar-powered microgrids allowed entire communities to survive extended periods of electricity outage, powering medical devices, air conditioners, and dehumidifiers, as well as personal electronics.

The sustenance people drew from their interactions and exchanges in these moments was not just about being able to charge their phones. It was about knowing that others were in the same situation they were in, that there were resources available, and that they did not have to face the storm alone. Bottom line, if you create a resource that helps people resist the violence that is falling upon them, you will ultimately draw them into a different kind of relationship with one another: one of mutual support, care, assistance, and empowerment. That is the kernel of the Lifehouse idea.

What if you could create a physical place in every community where people can gather and turn to one another in the event of a crisis? Such resources do not have to arise after a disaster, as was the case with OS. We can create and stock them now, in advance of the moment of maximum need, to be managed democratically by the people who live in the community. Perhaps at some point this becomes the crux of decentralisation or distribution of initiative and resource – which is to say, a fundamentally different orientation towards everything up to and including the governance of everyday life.

How would a system of Lifehouses come into existence?

Each of us, as individuals or in small groups, might organise such things in our own backyards. But if a network of Lifehouses is to come into being, there's a need for people who can hold the local and the global in mind at the same time, and devise processes to help bind community efforts to one another and to a broader, overarching initiative. We would have to create democratic and accountable relations that respond to the needs of people in each local context. But we would also have to bring communities into alignment with others around the world, make sure they share resources and support each other. Lifehouses that do not have an immediate need for certain resources should find ways to offer them to others who are in acute need.

It will take a lot of effort to make such a confederation possible. But none of this can even begin unless people perceive the desirability of such a network based on what they are experiencing in their own backyard. Fortunately, the local bit is in many ways the easy part: there are already hundreds of thousands of organisations that could become the seeds of a Lifehouse network. Food hubs, food banks, and soup kitchens that were set up to respond to the ordinary disasters of late capitalism could be repurposed to respond to extreme weather events. What remains is for each of these local initiatives

to discover themselves as an organic component of something larger and still more powerful.

You are not a fan of political involvement in this process.

The main issue with conventional electoral politics is that even when a progressive party is fortunate enough to enter power, it is still subject to the ordinary rough-and-tumble of democratic alternation. It is always possible to be ejected at the next election, while many of the adaptational or reparative processes that we're talking about require more than the few years of an electoral term.

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My other reservation is that policymaking in a representative democracy involves a great deal of horse-trading – or, to switch clichés, a sausage-making process that leaves nobody with clean hands, and which nobody really wants to see. This is especially problematic in the case of climate, where it is all about timely action, and the consequences of delayed or inadequate action are likely to be every bit as fatal as those of complete inaction. Rarely does climate policy get passed without being watered down.

Still, is there anything a progressive political party or coalition can do to support the creation of Lifehouses, such as changing regulation or providing "startup capital"?

That is absolutely the case. No community initiative is going to be able to craft legislation that, say, decriminalises appropriation of abandoned structures for vital community use, or clarifies what self-defence measures communities can take against hostile climatic conditions. That is up to our political representatives. Similarly, a political party can function as part of the mesoscale organisational fibre that binds up individual Lifehouses as part of a larger, functioning whole. It can begin to create the enabling conditions that unlock the initiative and latent energy every community has.

Some of us have skills that are more geared towards local action, toward physically assembling the structures and systems that will keep us safe, but there will also be those who were born to be policy experts, those who study law and devise new systems of regulation and public order. Each one of us has a job to do.

The organisational infrastructure of a Green Party can be a tremendous asset. I do not see any contradiction in people who want to devote their time and energy to formal Green politics working in collaboration with those of us who are outside that structure. Maybe sometimes we can temper the fervour of our particular beliefs and realise that we share common objectives. The prospect of survival under the sign of justice and dignity makes it worth engaging in some powerful collaborations, regardless of differences in opinion and choice of tactics.

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