

Social love and social movements in the pandemic

Geoffrey Pleyers

9.1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has deeply shaken our world (Bringel & Pleyers, 2022). We lack distance to be able to seize the magnitude and the diversity of its impact on our societies and on the subjectivity of human beings.

Much has been written about the way the pandemic has unveiled some of the darkest side of humanity, starting with the rise of racism, xenophobia and hate discourses, and the increasing threat of authoritarianism. The magnitude of the phenomenon is such that the United Nations General Secretary claimed

the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering. Anti-foreigner sentiment has surged online and in the streets. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have spread, and Covid-19-related anti-Muslim attacks have occurred. Migrants and refugees have been vilified as a source of the virus – and then denied access to medical treatment.¹

These trends will not suddenly disappear with the end of the pandemic (Pleyers, 2020). It is crucial for social sciences to monitor and analyse them, and to stand up against the infodemic, fake news and hate discourses that feed them.

However, the threat and magnitude of these phenomena should not impede us from seeing other dimensions of the way humanity has reacted to the pandemic. The time of the pandemic has also been a time of the surge of “an altruistic creative energy that comes from putting the other at the centre of our attention, from taking care of people and what surrounds us” that Silvia Cataldi beautifully calls “the power of love” (see Chapter 2).

Far away from the media headlines, collectives that received little consideration have proved to be crucial in maintaining society afloat. Nurses and care workers risk their lives to take care of patients and elderly people. Domestic workers, and particularly migrant women, have been scarcely visible but major

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actors in assuming the increasing need for care and medical assistance, acting as “pandemic shock absorbers” (Rosińska & Pellerito, 2022) that alleviated the experience of the pandemic for societies and families in the middle and upper classes, while they were often missed in their own families.

Social movements and mutual aid have also played an important role in incentivizing; fostering and organizing solidarity and care. Throughout the lockdown stages, popular movements and civil society organizations carried out mutual aid initiatives to meet the basic needs of their fellow citizens. Social and popular movements demonstrated that their primary strength is forging social ties and implementing concrete solidarity.

9.2 Solidarity and care in the pandemic

The first stage of the pandemic was both a time of highest anxiety and a time when solidarity spread to neighbourhoods and workplaces.

Unions have taken their part in it. The members of the main truck drivers’ union in Chicago earmarked 2 million dollars from their strike fund to extend social coverage to their colleagues laid off during the pandemic to ensure their access to healthcare (Teamsters for a Democratic Union, 2020). In Brazil, the landless peasants’ movement provided food to the marginalized population during the pandemic and continues to promote a different model of organizing work and the food supply chain. In Europe, volunteers and associations have been at the forefront of the response to the coronavirus epidemic. While most citizens only left their homes to buy food, volunteers mobilized to reopen autonomous social centres where they sheltered homeless people (Cassilde, 2022) and organized food distributions for migrants (Zajak, Stjepandić & Steinhilper, 2020).

On every continent, feminists have been particularly active in sheltering the victims of domestic violence in solidarity housing and have unveiled the increase in domestic violence during the lockdown, alerting the state to this drama. In Mexico, feminist collectives strengthened solidarity networks across the country to address the most serious socio-economic consequences of the virus at the local level: shortages of food, medicines and other essential commodities, amidst increased violence inside homes (Ventura Alfaro, 2020). In China, feminist activists formed support groups with the slogan: “Caring for each other in lockdown” and raised the alarm about the rise in domestic violence (Bao, 2020). All over the world, feminist activists have highlighted the importance of the contribution of women in managing the pandemic and the magnitude of the tasks they bear, whether in families, as workers in “essential sectors” or as caregivers in public hospitals. Their contributions go far beyond dealing with the emergency of the pandemic. Feminist activists and intellectuals promote a model of society rooted in the concept and practices of care rather than economic growth and competition (Suarez-Krabbe, 2020; Batthyanny, 2021).

9.3 Autonomous communities and communal health

Across the world (Cali Tzay, 2020b), organized *indigenous movements* and communities assumed a central role in managing the pandemic in their rural territories. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, José Francisco Cali Tzay, shared his concern about the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic among these communities. He also explained that

the indigenous communities that have managed to best resist the Covid-19 pandemic are those that have achieved autonomy and self-government, which allows them to manage their lands, territories and resources, ensure food security through their traditional crops and traditional medicine.

(Cali Tzay, 2020a, para. 7)

In various *Latin American countries* (Zibechi, 2020; López Bárcenas, 2020), indigenous organizations were much faster to react to the spread of the pandemic than national governments. On 16 March 2020, the Zapatistas movement closed the communities and implemented drastic health prevention measures. At a time when the president of Mexico continued to deny the danger of the pandemic, framed it as an “epidemic that only affects the richest” and publicly explained he counted on an ancestral amulet to protect him from the virus, the Zapatista communities urged everyone “in Mexico and around the world to follow the necessary scientifically-based sanitary measures that will allow us to survive this pandemic” (EZLN, 2020a). In addition, they asked not to give up the struggle against femicide and “not to lose human contact, but rather to temporarily change our forms of relating as *compañeras*, *compañeros*, *compañeroas*, sisters, brothers, and *hermanoas*” (EZLN, 2020a). Their handling of the pandemic was based on a communitarian and not individual concept of public health that has become a pillar of the autonomous Zapatista organization, because

life, and the struggle for life, is not an individual issue, but a collective one. ... it has been our approach of facing the threat as a community, not as an individual issue, and orienting our primary efforts toward prevention that has put us in a position to say now, as Zapatista peoples.

(EZLN, 2020b)

Omar Coronel and Anette Malca (2020: 18) report that in Peru, indigenous and native communities organized solidarity networks and built up health infrastructures. They “opted for self-management with solidarity networks, organising surveillance for local compliance with the quarantine, gathered contributions to fund health infrastructures and food distributions”. They have disseminated information about the pandemic and preventive measures

in a range of media, including leaflets, radio programmes and digital media. In addition, they held press conferences and wrote opinion columns to alert citizens and the state about the vulnerability of indigenous people in the face of the pandemic.

Very similar dynamics occurred in *India*. In several Indian states, indigenous communities and tribes organized to disseminate information about the virus spread and to implement measures to support the rural local economy and informal workers on which the lockdown had devastating impacts. Various communities and local popular assemblies (*panchayats*) organized to remunerate women who produced masks, thereby supporting both the local economy and public health sector efforts (Cultural Survival, 2020). Ashish Kothari (2021) recounts how the citizen council (*Panchayat*) of Sittilingi in the state of Tamil Nadu (South India) mobilized to implement an information campaign, social distancing and solidarity measures that were successful in both limiting the impact of the pandemic on villages and keeping the local economy active.

9.4 Mutual aid and organization at the neighbourhood level

On all continents, citizens' movements and networks set up mutual aid help groups to help neighbours to cope with the pandemic and reduce the dramatic consequences of social isolation.

In *Brazil* in April 2020, confronted with the rise of the pandemic and the weak presence of public services in their slum, the residents of Paraisópolis, the second-largest *favela* in São Paulo, organized themselves into a confluence of local organizations and urban movements. They elected 420 "street presidents", each in charge of about 50 houses. Their mission was to care for residents showing symptoms of Covid-19 or in need of medical care, as well as to identify lower-income families who needed food (Alma Preta, 2020). In addition, these "street presidents" played a crucial role in disseminating information about the virus and about neighbourhood organization. In autumn 2020, Paraisópolis mutual aid group organized the production and distribution of more than 10,000 meals a day (Langlois, 2020) and hired ambulances and medical doctors in the *favela*. This effort was however difficult to sustain in the long term without the support of local government.

In Alemão, the largest *favela* complex in Rio de Janeiro, slum dwellers' organizations joined *Ocupa Alemão*,² the autonomous media outlet *Voz das Comunidades* (Voice of the Communities) and housing right organizations, to create a "citizens' council" (Ribeiro, 2020) in charge of promoting initiatives to confront Covid-19 and minimize the effects of the pandemic. Three missions were assigned to the network of mutual support: to raise community awareness to prevent the spread of the virus; to produce, collect and distribute

food baskets, soap and sanitary protection; and to request social programmes in favour of the *favelas* at the level of the city and the state of Rio de Janeiro.

In *Chile*, 130 popular kitchens (*ollas populares*) were reactivated during the lockdown to prepare and distribute a daily meal in Santiago's popular neighbourhoods. These canteens were very keen to maintain their autonomy from the government and political parties (González Farfán, 2020). While their promoters focused their energy to meet the challenge of delivering food in a context of increasing poverty, the canteens became spaces of encounters from which a social critique emerged towards government policies to confront the pandemic and its inability to meet the basic needs of the popular classes. The slogan "Only the people will save the people" was adopted by a growing number of popular kitchens. It echoes both disillusionment with social policies and a growing awareness of society's capacity for self-organization that emerged with the October 2019 Chilean Uprising (Ganter, Henríquez & Zarzuri, 2022).

Although mutual aid practices and community ties are less deeply rooted in *Europe*, thousands of groups emerged across the Old Continent during the 2020 lockdowns. More than 4,000 "Covid-19 mutual aid groups" were active in the UK in October 2020 (Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK, 2020). Their participants organized to look after each other by shopping, buying the drug prescriptions or caring for the pets of those who had to remain at home because they were sick or particularly vulnerable to the virus. Phone calls and digital media were efficient tools to limit social isolation that had a devastating impact during the lockdown in European towns and cities.

UK Mutual Aid insists that the network is autonomous from the state and organized bottom-up. Their national coordination is deliberately limited in order to focus energy, time and decision capacity to neighbourhood groups and encourage their self-management (Kavada, 2020). These mutual aid groups have made creative use of a range of socio-digital networks to organize themselves, from shared Excel files and WhatsApp for coordination to Facebook to reach out to neighbours and spread information in times of social distancing. However, participants highlight the importance of posters, leaflets and personal conversations to reach out to neighbours of a generation that is less connected to the digital world.

9.5 (Counter-)information networks

Participating in a mutual aid or solidarity group in a neighbourhood is a process of individual and collective learning. Neighbours learn to organize themselves, often horizontally, and become familiar with new uses of socio-digital networks. Self-help groups also constitute alternative information networks. Popular media activists, anarchist groups (CrimethInc, 2020), trade unions and mutual aid groups have produced and disseminated information

about the virus, its prevention, health policies, where to get help and how to organize.

In *Brazilian favelas*, networks of mutual aid against the coronavirus opposed the campaign led by President Bolsonaro to minimize the danger of the disease. They disseminated the recommendations of the World Health Organization through banners (Stabile, 2020) and street art at the entrances of the *favelas*. Some produced video clips, articles, images and even funk music to keep the inhabitants informed and alerted. In addition to the socio-digital networks, the activists Maré online,³ a popular media initiative, circulated in the *favela* with loudspeakers reminding the population to be cautious and take the pandemic seriously. In another *favela* in Rio, the local urban movement *Morador Monitor* organized daily house-to-house visits to raise awareness of coronavirus and prevention practices, identify those who needed support to get food, hygiene and protection items and organize their distribution. After a few weeks, they added the mission of collecting statistics on the spread of Covid-19 in the *favela*, as national figures statistics and public policies do not take *favelas* into account in their studies on this issue. In *India*, community initiatives in the Karbi, Tiwa and Bodo villages organized a media campaign and produced radio content in local indigenous languages in order to eliminate the breakdown of existing communication and alienation of communities (Cultural Survival, 2020), publish illustrated leaflets on traditional medicine and revitalize traditional knowledge and practices.

9.6 Alternative practices and resistance

In an emergency with a fast-spreading pandemic, activists and popular movements focus most of their energy on meeting immediate needs and organizing concrete solidarity. Such initiatives are sometimes considered as “depoliticizing”, since they divert the energy of activists and organizations away from demands for structural change and implement practices that compensate for the deficiencies of the dominant system and hence contribute to reproducing it. In mainstream social movement studies, setting up self-help groups is considered one of the classic paths of institutionalization (Kriesi, 1996) and taming of social movements. By dedicating 2 million dollars from their strike fund to ensure access to healthcare for laid-off workers during the pandemic, are the Teamsters diverting funds that could have been used to support a strike aimed at achieving more structural change? Do mutual aid groups contribute to the gradual integration of protest movements into institutionalized civil society by transforming them into “service providers”?

Considering mutual aid networks and concrete solidarity among movement members through these lenses prevents an understanding of the scope and potential of such initiatives. Over the past three decades, indigenous and peasant movements in *Latin America* have demonstrated that communities, local solidarity and popular pedagogies may become the pillars of

collective emancipation and resistance to global capitalism (Escobar, 2018). It challenges the separation between activism and daily life and the focus on protests and contentious actions in social movement studies. Actions in daily life have indeed always been an essential part of social movements, including workers' movements (Thompson, 1953) and feminist movements.

Most neighbours do not join mutual aid groups with a political or activist purpose, and most of the groups avoid connection with partisan politics. It does not mean that they have no political dimension. From middle-class neighbourhoods to slums, a similar *leitmotif* resonates in participants' discourses and the mutual aid groups' self-presentation: "It is not charity but solidarity" (Gravante & Poma, 2022). An activist from the network *Ayuda Mutua Ciudad de México* explained that they were "not looking for rich people to make donations to save the poor, but to be together to face the virus and the crisis".⁴ The Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK coordination explains it clearly on its website:

Mutual aid isn't about "saving" anyone; it's about people coming together, in a spirit of solidarity, to support and look out for one another. (...) Mutual aid is where a group of people organise to meet their own needs, outside of the formal frameworks of charities, NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and government. It is, by definition, a horizontal mode of organising, in which all individuals are equally powerful. There are no "leaders" or unelected "steering committees" in mutual aid projects; there is only a group of people who work together as equals.⁵

Mutual help Aid is indeed far more than delivering food packages to neighbours. These groups rebuild the social fabric and (re-)generate a sense of community or "commonality" where citizens self-organize, rebuild social fabric and experience their neighbourhood differently. "Commonality" resides in practices, but also in a worldview, an experience and an "art of living together" centred on a sense of commonality, which is anchored in the lived experience of indigenous communities and is at the same time the object and meaning of their struggles (Esteva, 2016; Navarro, 2016).

They create other ways of living and relating to each other. Knitting social relations among neighbours across ethnicity divide plays a fundamental role in a time of strong resurgence of racism. As French sociologist Jean-Louis Laville (2016, p. 221) argues, "solidarity is first of all the construction of different social relations".

In the face of widespread social disaffiliation (Castel, 1995), activists (re-)create convivial relations in neighbourhoods and communities, thereby linking their quest for a more convivial life to a struggle against the reduction of social relations to their utilitarian dimensions: "The greater the spread of capitalist networks, the more isolated individuals become. In other words, in order to contribute to the progress of globalisation, they must recognise

themselves as atomised objects, they must de-subjectify themselves” (Ceceña, 1997). In a society dominated by individualism, the concern for the other (Martins, 2019), an active solidarity and the establishment of interpersonal relationships then reach a prefigurative dimension.

Forging social relations between neighbours across social background and ethnic divides is all the more important in a time when the pandemic has fostered a withdrawal in small family circles and a resurgence of racism.

9.7 From mutual aid to democratization

Recent history has shown that citizens’ solidarity networks and initiatives may be the seeds of democratization processes.

After the devastating 1985 earthquake in *Mexico City* and faced with a corrupt and failed state, thousands of citizens in Mexico City organized first to rescue victims and then confront the hardships of living in collapsed neighbourhoods. The neighbourhood committees that emerged from these initiatives played a crucial role in the democratic life of the megalopolis until the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century (Zermeño, Gutiérrez & López, 2002). Sociologists came to consider the 1985 citizens’ solidarity networks as the beginning of the democratization process that eventually kicked the “party-state” out of power at the city (1997) and national (2000) level over the next 15 years.

The communal kitchens that re-emerged in *Chile* during the pandemic provide another example. They have reinvigorated a practice that dates from the 1930s and had its heyday in the 1980s economic crisis under the dictatorship (Hardy, 1986). In an era marked by repression, many of these canteens served as spaces of encounters where neighbours meet and talk about their daily life and the problems they face. Some of the groups that met in popular canteens then took part in protests against the dictatorship and its neoliberal model (Salazar, 1994). During the pandemic generated by the coronavirus, the *ollas populares* have been reactivated to face hunger and pauperization caused by the lockdown and weakness of social policies (Cisternas, 2020). Many have built on the spirit of solidarity and cooperation among citizens that rose in the 2019 citizen revolt (*el estallido*) which revealed the new strength that Chilean society now has to confront the state.

Actions in everyday life and local solidarities have often played a decisive role both in the formation of social movements, and in particular of the labour movement (Thompson, 1953), as well as in the alternatives proposed and lived by these actors (Pleyers, 2010).

Asef Bayat (2010) showed the importance of local solidarity and resistance in everyday life in popular neighbourhoods in the *Arab world*. They became the ground on which the 2011 revolutions rose. While most social movement scholars focus on protest and contentious actions, Vinthagen and Johansson (2019) suggest long-term social or political change happens more frequently

by setting up and maintaining alternative practices than by protest and armed revolutions.

Will similar dynamics emerge from mutual aid and solidarity initiatives during the pandemic? Will future movements succeed in mobilizing the infrastructures created by self-help groups? This will depend on contingent dynamics whose nature and scope vary according to local and national contexts. What was specific to 2020, however, is that similar initiatives have emerged in all regions of the world in the face of a global pandemic, and not only in a city or a country affected by a natural disaster. It remains to be seen whether these grassroots and citizens' initiatives will seek to maintain their experiences and perspectives to contribute to an alternative social model at local, national and international levels. Whatever their impact on political regimes and institutional politics, these mutual aid groups have already changed the way of life of thousands of citizens.

9.8 Conclusions

Through confinement, the necessary social distancing and the fear of contagion, the pandemic has shaken our relationships to others. From kindergarten and nurseries as well as and within family, our children were taught that physical contact must be avoided, that public space is a space with health risks and that singing may be dangerous. What consequences will this have on their way of being, their subjectivity, their sociability and their way of doing society? Restoring solidarity and interpersonal relationships so that care and attention to others and love may be ways of rebuilding hope in spaces of solidarity and emancipation, of opposing a model of society centred on selfishness and hyper-utilitarianism and of initiating another world in the midst of this crisis. Recreating and enacting a sense of *commonality* and caring for each others are even more crucial in a time when the threat of the pandemic has led many to retreat to their close family and to the rise of racism.

As social scientists, it is easy to oversee daily life and to focus on the macro-level and the political arena. However, as Gennaro Iorio and Silvia Cataldi remind us, “[t]he overabounding is expressed through large or small gesturesthat can also be viewed as daily heroism” (Chapter 1). In a world dominated by selfish interests and hyper-individualism, caring for others and establishing active solidarity and interpersonal convivial relationships have a prefigurative dimension. They have become a fundamental part of activism and a crucial contribution of contemporary popular movements.

Most social movement scholars focus their research in the political outcomes and the efficiency of protests or civil society. In this contribution, I maintain that this instrumental approach of social movements misses some of its core dimension: mutual aid, self-help and care among activists, in the neighbourhood, in the community or with other fellow citizens. Their actors are moved by a sense of shared humanity and equality among human beings.

Notes

- 1 United Nations (2020) Press Release “Secretary-General Denounces ‘Tsunami’ of Xenophobia Unleashed amid COVID-19, Calling for All-Out Effort against Hate Speech.” www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20076.doc.htm
- 2 Ocupa Alemão is an activist and citizen network that emerged in 2013 in the Alemão *favela* complex in Rio de Janeiro, inspired by Occupy Wall Street and aiming to promote solidarity and social change in the *favelas*.
- 3 www.mareaonline.org.br
- 4 Seminar “Solidarity networks in the face of COVID-19”, UNAM, 15 June 2020, organized and chaired by Tommaso Gravante.
- 5 <https://covidmutualaid.org/faq/>

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