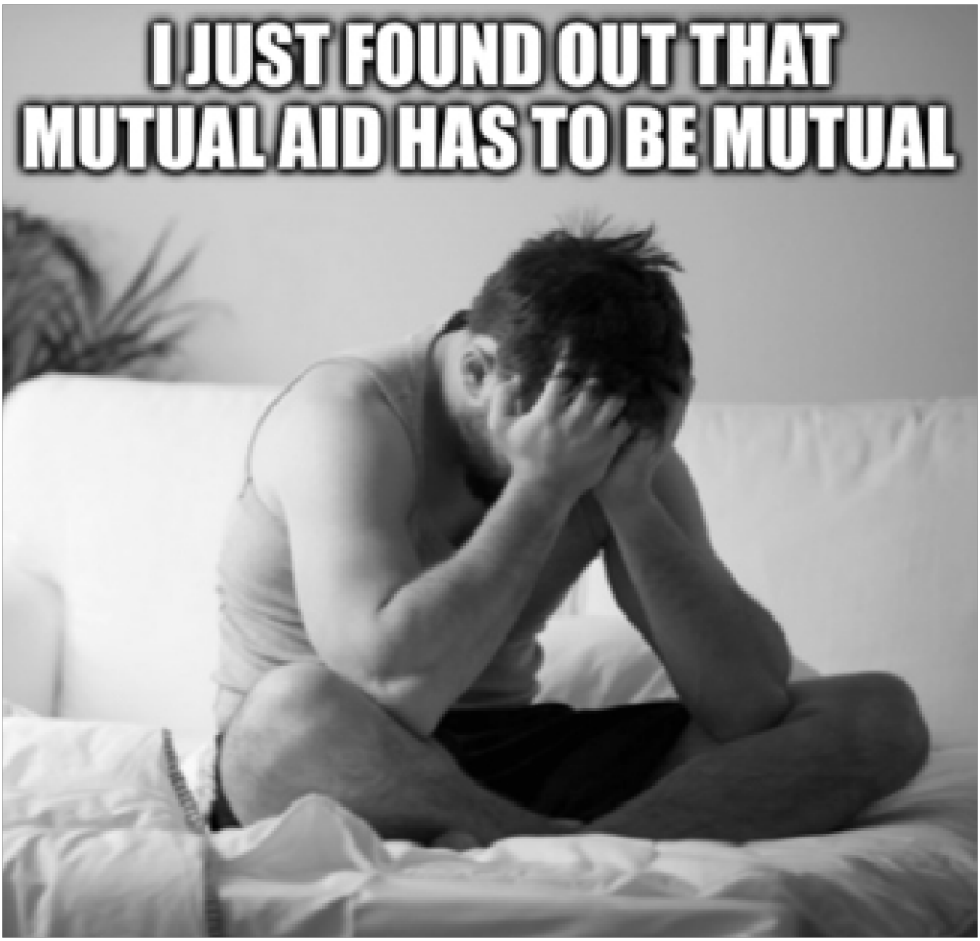
Words Mean Things

a compilation of Anathema articles


I JUST FOUND OUT THAT
MUTUAL AID HAS TO BE MUTUAL

This compilation is coming together in a moment when it feels that many anarchist ideas are losing their meanings. Dragged out of anarchy into leftism or activism, drained of their radical content. Mutual aid is giving away supplies, direct action is a more aggressive form of begging, anti-fascism is reduced to publishing personal details about our enemies, attack is left to gather dust or spectacularized as a social media aesthetic.

Lining up anarchist ideas and practices is not always easy, which is no reason to lower the bar. It's with this in mind that it felt useful to compile these articles, to clarify just how radical anarchist ideas really are, to encourage people to keep imagining and moving toward absolute hostility with authority and anarchic relations with everyone else.

Words Mean Things: Mutual Aid

(from Volume 7 Issue 1, 2021)

Ever since the start of the pandemic I've seen a lot of projects pop up that claim to be mutual aid projects. They do all kinds of nice things like give out food, provide masks and gloves, or give away warm clothes. These are really helpful, especially since corona has messed a bunch of people up financially. Most of them aren't mutual aid though.

When I think of mutual aid I try to keep it real simple; I think "is it mutual?" and "is it aid?". Giving useful stuff away during a crisis is definitely aid but most of the stuff calling itself mutual aid isn't mutual. The people giving stuff away don't get stuff back; who is the giver and receiver doesn't change. The project just gives and the people it provides to just take. It's nice but it's not mutual.

I feel like we've taken the term mutual aid and made it into something it's not. It seems like it's been blown up into this word that means some high visibility showing up to give things away. Not everything needs to be mutual aid. There are lots of reasons to just give stuff away — for propaganda, to start conversations, to lessen suffering, because stuff should be free, the list goes on. An anarchist project that gives things away can achieve a lot, and just because something isn't mutual aid doesn't mean it's not worth doing.

So what does doing mutual aid mean then? I think a good start is to think of mutual aid less as a thing you do and more as a way you have relationships. Imagine helping and sharing with someone and them also sharing with and helping you. How does

it look to have that kind of relationship with someone? Can you imagine scaling it up to a group? There's no set formula for a mutual aid relationship, it will look different with each person you relate to because the aid we can give and receive from each person is different.

For me mutual aid is helping each other. It's more about living in a way where I help people and they also help me. It doesn't need to be flashy. I help a friend with their event and they give me a ride a week later; we aid each other, mutually. I'm not keeping track of how many favors I'm owed or anything but if things are one-sided then I want to be real that it's not mutual aid.

As anarchists, a goal is to get away from hierarchies. Relying on our horizontal relationships to co-create the lives we need and want, instead of the powers that be, is a way to move away from those hierarchies.

Words Mean Things: Leadership

(from Volume 11 Issue 1, 2025)

As anarchist ideas become more popular and widespread they often lose meaning. We have witnessed the great violence done to old favorites like mutual aid or direct action. This Words Mean Things will flip the script a bit, this term has not received enough hostility and this author has seen it reconciled with anti-authoritarian notions of freedom too many times. So in the spirit of fomenting some negativity let's look at the word leadership.

To put it most simply leadership either refers to the leaders of a group, or the position or ability to lead. For leadership to work there needs to be followership, otherwise it is a failure. Directing, commanding, guiding, governing, these are the things leadership entails.

None of these things model non-hierarchical, let alone anti-hierarchical relations, yet too often radicals will advocate for leadership while claiming to espouse horizontal or non-hierachical politics or visions of freedom. Terms like misleadership or collective leadership, the putting of quotes around the word leader when it refers to someone who is especially oppressive, or talking about "real leaders" pulls discussion away from the fact that any leading that has resulted in following was successful leadership. It may not have led to anything good, but the fact that it was followed means it was leadership. For example, if someone were to lead a group of people into a meatgrinder, though the consequences would be grisly, no one can reasonably argue that they didn't lead.

As anarchists we are critical of all hierarchies, we aim to have direct and horizontal relations. Leadership and leaders have no place in our visions of freedom except as people and systems to undermine. Instead, anarchic ways of living and struggling revolve around self-organization, individually and collectively. Deciding for ourselves the what and how of our activities without top down or outside direction.

Like other anarchist concepts horizontal organization is having a moment of popularity in the left and among other not-necessarily-anarchist people discussing struggle. Many of those talking about horizontal relations genuinely envision freedom as a leaderless existence, but some are using these concepts to make their authoritarian ideas more palatable while secretly hoping to be the ones holding the reins, stay sharp.

What Is Direct Action?

(from Volume 4 Issue 9, 2018)

There seems to be some confusion recently as to what the term direct action means. Its use among radicals has stretched the definition to the point of meaninglessness. The way it's thrown around, one would think it simply means militant or intense, a more aggressive form of begging. This distortion of the term has led many to believe that some actions are direct actions when they aren't and vice versa.

Direct action means the unmediated (aka direct) use of power (aka action) to address a problem. What does unmediated mean? It means cutting out the middle man, not appealing to authority, negotiating, convincing, or asking. Here's an example: A group of friends is hungry. To solve this need with direct action, they can grow, gather, hunt, or steal some food and eat it. This is direct action because they don't seek out the help or permission of anyone in charge. If they marched through the street with signs about how hungry they are, that's a protest. If they pressure politicians or capitalists to give them food, that's lobbying: they are appealing to the authorities to reach their goal instead of doing it themselves.

Some people might want to abolish the police, so they march through the street making speeches demanding the end of policing and blocking traffic, and some of them get arrested after some shoving with the cops. This sounds like a militant protest, but it's not direct action. If the same people began taking apart police infrastructure, or disrupting police work, or ignoring police orders, that would be direct action. What makes the second direct action and not the first is that the second example involves

people beginning to take apart the police themselves. In the first example, the protesters don't actually abolish the police themselves; instead they stir things up, and demand that someone else abolish the police.

The flashiness, illegality, or intensity of an action is not what makes it a direct action. What makes something a direct action is the unmediated and self-organized nature of an act. This is why when workers take over a workplace with the intention of running it themselves, it's considered a direct action, but if workers take over a workplace to influence policy, it is an extreme form of lobbying. The same can be said of property destruction: if someone smashes a bank window to pressure the bankers to stop investing in the military, it's aggressive protest; if the same window is smashed with the intention of causing damage or interrupting business at the bank, then it's direct action.

When the terms used by rebels and activists have unclear and confused definitions and usages, it becomes more difficult to communicate, let alone share analyses and discuss goals and intentions. Calling protests direct action has the potential to limit the imagination, after all if someone thinks yelling and holding signs is the most direct way to participate in struggle they foreclose on all the possibilities to take responsibility for literally changing the situation or environment that oppresses and exploits them. When there is a clear understanding of what direct action means it will be harder to throw the term around to make something seem tough or militant, and easier to honestly look at the tactics being used in the struggle and decide for oneself if they seem effective (regardless of whether they are or aren't direct actions).

What is Attack?

(from Volume 4 Issue 10, 2018)

Following up on last month's discussion of direct action, it seems relevant and helpful to put out some thoughts on what attack is. Attack is an idea that is important to anarchists of many stripes, especially insurrectionary anarchists. Attacks are the offensive moves made by anarchists and other rebels in the social war. Social war is the conflict between those who hold and support authority and those who are trying to tear authority down. One might rightfully ask, why would someone attack? What is the point? The way things are going, an attack might not change much of anything. The idea of attacking will be explored here from both an individualist and a social perspective.

For the individuals who attack, the attack can be a healing moment. It is a short time when anarchist sentiments can be directly and honestly expressed. Instead of feeling frustrated after a boring demonstration or holding back grief after another round of terrible events, someone can take responsibility for their own feelings and emotional well-being, and be honest with themselves and society, by attacking something they want to destroy. Going after something that helps manage oppression is a healthy release in a world that fills everyone up with emotions that have very few beneficial outlets.

Most attacks do not completely destroy their targets, let alone the institutions they are part of. Punching a nazi or smashing a window won't get rid of white supremacy and capital. They do, however, cause damage and disrupt business as usual. Each attack leaves behind a scar that affects how things work. A nazi with a black eye will have trouble seeing for a few days; a

store will need to clean up glass and buy another window, etc. For many who attack, causing damage is enough; they live their hostility openly. For others, attacks are part of a longer trajectory they imagine can destroy the whole system.

The skills one learns and practices during attacks that might not be able to bring the system down in moments of relative social peace can serve as an example for more revolutionary times (if they ever come around) and leave the attackers more ready, should they find themselves in moments of social upheaval. Those who witness or learn about attacks will carry with them the possibility of acting offensively if they ever feel so inclined. Anarchists should not imagine they will set THE example for a population that will most likely never rise up to throw off the yoke of oppression, but they can set AN example. In Greece in 2008 and in France in 2016, anarchist attacks set an example many took up when popular rage boiled over (alongside the spontaneous organization of combative new approaches).

Because anarchists understand attacks as acts in a larger war - acts demanding nothing, seeking to damage or disrupt, to help satisfy personal and collective needs autonomously - they are difficult for the state to recuperate. Since attackers relate to authority as enemies, there are less avenues for the state or liberals to push reformist agendas. A feeling of disappointment or frustration with authority is easily soothed with reforms; a feeling of antagonism or opposition is more difficult to tame.

For some anarchists, attacking authority and its mechanisms is part of a broader strategy to help build up social energy toward an insurrectionary or revolutionary situation. Other anarchists understand attacking to be a joyful and worthwhile activity

in itself, without investing themselves in whether it spreads to other people.

War of the Words: Antifa

(from Volume 4 Issue 2, 2018)

There's been so much talk of antifa in the news and mainstream, and like all things that pass through the mainstream, antifa has become a very confused and distorted concept in the public eye. Painted as both violent thugs and basement-dwelling crybabies, the state and the right cannot create a stable narrative about what antifa is. Much more useful to them is to create narratives around antifa that further their goals of eroding freedom and controlling and commodifying always more aspects of life.

Before jumping into how miscontructed ideas of antifa are used to clamp down on freedom and rebellion, it's useful to quickly go over what antifa is. Antifa is short for anti-fascism, and sometimes used to mean anti-fascist action. Antifa groups autonomously oppose fascists and far-right groups, using a "no platform" approach to disrupt the spread of fascist ideas and to prevent the normalization of fascism. Additionally, antifa groups can engage in any kind of anti-fascist activity, from teaching anti-racist values, supporting a targeted minority group, publishing information about known racists, etc. The main work antifa groups undertake is disrupting fascist activity, nothing more, nothing less.

When the state faces problems from the population it works to subjugate, its first interest is to identify the rebellious elements of that population and isolate them. The identification doesn't even need to be correct, as long as one part of the population is depicted as peaceful and law-abiding, while a minority group is criminalized. This divide-and-repress apporach has been used by police and politicians for centuries to sow distrust and

grow a culture of snitching in oppressed populations. Creating an enemy within the population is how the state ensures it is always the hero when it later clamps down on the population it purports to serve.

The state and the right have taken the word antifa and applied it to as many types of rebellion as they can shake a nightstick at. From anti-capitalist vandals, community activists, sports fans, pro-choice feminists, to almost anyone opposed to racism, the narrative being pushed is that all these people are antifa, and that antifa is criminal and violent. This naming lays the ground work for criminalization and social isolation. The wide net being cast also takes a bunch of different and diverse groups of people and flattens them into one thing, "antifa." Of course some antifa are sports fans, vandals, feminists, and activists, but these differences are erased when the only label that matters is the one that makes repression easier.

In Turkey, when the state attempted to divide a rebellious social movement by naming some participants looters, the movement responded by identifying with the term. The Turkish word "capulcu" quickly became a term of self-identification, causing it to lose its ability to isolate those the state saw as "bad protesters".

This approach might not work for the word antifa. Because antifa already has a specific political meaning, a mass self-identification will water down the meaning and lead to more and more liberal actions and actors being called antifa. What approaches can be used to counter the narratives of the state and the right to mis-label and criminalize any opposition to the status quo? How can anti-fascists turn this confused representation into

an advantage? How can those who oppose authority make themselves understood by potential rebels without losing their edge?

What is a Collective?

(from Volume 5 Issue 2, 2019)

Maybe a better question is: what do we want a collective to be? It used to be that if you threw a rock you'd hit an anarchist collective (or, better still, if you mapped the ballistic trajectory of a rock, its arc would originate with a collective). The sheer number of collectives made it difficult to determine what ultimately defined the organizational form or what it was for. On top of this confusion, collectives became associated with a specific form of consensus decision-making, characterized by long meetings punctuated with twinkling fingers. Of course, these endless meetings haven't stopped but many anarchists find other things to do with their time. Anarchists in Philadelphia tend to avoid anything resembling a permanent organization. This allergy to permanence likely comes from the influence of insurrectionary anarchism and the criticism of formality as stagnant, membership-oriented, reformist, and even authoritarian. But the lack of interest in collectives is also the result of the lack of interesting collectives. Rather than treat the dearth of collectives as a problem or an achievement, we can take this moment as an opportunity to explore what a collective is, what it could be, and how it could be useful to anarchists.

It is easy enough to call any project or group a collective, but it is helpful to be more precise. Since, right now, we are less confused by inumerable collectives, we can see the general outline: the collective is a (semi) permanent organization based on shared resources. These days, we tend to see organization as a technique or tool for achieving a goal that we abandon at the end of the day like so many black t-shirts. It is perhaps because our affinity groups rarely last longer than it takes to mount an

attack that we can understand what makes collectives different. Crimethinc once simplified it: the affinity group is temporary whereas the collective is more permanent, closely related to an institution.

Understandably, anarchists hate institutions. We are trying to destroy this society not add more structure to it. however, there is a way to understand collectives as participating in this destruction or at least its de-structuring. Historically, anarchists developed collectives as an alternative to state socialism, attempting to decentralize organization into local groupings based on shared land. This decentralization allowed anarchists to shift their point of reference from the Left, unified around the industrial worker. Collectives could be based in other modes of life, including peasants or even, as anarchists later learned, the unemployed, students, drop outs. There is no direct line from a peasant commune to a zine distro but the collective form opened the possibility with small groups based on shared resources.

Decentralization is not enough to prevent hierarchies from forming, especially when there are shared resources at stake. Land-based collectives can easily be fitted into a municipalist framework that, in turn, can mobilize the collective as a form of government--"directly democratic," sure, but still a governing force. What is more these local collectives do not automatically replace the State--it has become clear that these collectives can coexist with the State and, as we can see in Venezuela, sometimes become enmeshed with the State. On a much smaller scale, our collective projects can be turned against us even if the only resources we share are an anarchist space, a photocopier, or groceries. This happens when our collectives become tools of an activist campaign, small business, or simply bureaucratize to

increase membership.

Insurrectionaries have been the most vocal about the problems of formal organization but anarchists in general can recognize the dangers of creating impersonal institutions that prioritize their growth and perpetuity above our goals of autonomy and freedom. It is a recurring problem that individuals or groups try to channel our skills and collective projects into whatever organization or campaign they think will best reform the system. We recognize this pattern even when our shared resources are merely a contact list or "intellectual property" like a credible or recognized group name. But it is all the more apparent when there is a shared property like an anarchist space. For example, LAVA (the Lancaster Avenue Autonomous Space) recently experienced a quasi-coup when former collective members forcefully took over the space for their profit-based enterprise.

Less straight forward are the recent events at A-Space Anarchist Social Center on Baltimore Avenue where the ejection of a former volunteer has led to calls for an independent committee to be set up to monitor and modify collective decisions. It is hard to see what this committee's goals would be other than the formation of a bureaucratic structuure for the space, basically a board of directors. This board would likely be made up of activists who are experts in the domain of long meetings with twinkling fingers, appointing themselves to a specialized role of developing policy to govern the collective. As usual, this group of experienced activists will make decisions in the name of the "community"--an undefined category, to be sure, and certainly with no prerequisite to foreground autonomy, decentralization, or anarchy. For our purposes, what is important is not whether or not anarchists care about this particular space but where the

collective form--the form that currently is used to organize most anarchist spaces--has any residual value for anarchists.

In the case of the A-space, it seems possible that an adherence to collective form can inoculate against the kind of bureaucratizing and hierarchizing we associate with formal organizations. Although a formal organization itself, a collective has more potential to open itself to autonomous and informal activity. At its best, a collective is a formal organization that allows informal group to share resources. But, in order to remain friendly to individuals and informality, the collective form must resist cooption and even cooperation with other formal organizations. It must resist becoming a tool for base-building, profit, and reformism--in short, it must remain autonomous.

We can't always be informality purists. Whether our shared resources are an anarchist space or a mailing list, anarchists interested in long-term projects will require some semblance of a permanent organization. The questions is: can we develop collectives that resist the impulses and tendencies of formal organizations?

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