

The solidarity economy (SE) is a set of cooperative economic practices that include worker, food, financial, and housing cooperatives, community land trusts and gardens, and other forms of collective work. Its practitioners and organizers have always framed the movement as a bulwark against the crisis of capitalism (Gordon Nembhard 2014; Williams 2014). Today, much of SE organizing is focused on building long-term and “scalable” formal institutions (Casper-Futterman 2019). However, often overlooked in this process is building the actually existing solidarity between practitioners that can fortify that infrastructure. Building these allegedly “informal” connections has become all the more important as the pandemic continues. Today, we see longstanding SE institutions that are struggling to do this work and to meet the moment while SE entities such as mutual-aid networks have emerged to address the concurrent health and economic crisis. The growth of the latter alongside the struggles of the former calls into question the importance of *formality* in such organizing as well as the *function* of solidarity.

Building Where We Are: The Solidarity-Economy Response to Crisis

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One sobering reminder of the importance of building solidarity is the Berkeley Co-op—an institution that had existed for fifty years before its collapse in 1989. The co-op’s decline throughout the 1980s was so shocking that Masao Ohya, executive director of the Berkeley Co-op’s Japanese counterpart, the Japanese Cooperative Union, met with nineteen Berkeley representatives to understand the events leading to the institution’s failure. The outcome was a post-mortem report titled *What Happened to the Berkeley Co-Op?: A Collection of Opinions* (Fullerton 1992), which compiled testimonies from former general managers, staff, board members, co-op members, and nonmember shoppers.

At its height, the co-op was the largest retail food cooperative in the country. Its stores accounted for 75 percent of Berkeley’s grocery market, and the entire cooperative enterprise included gas stations, garages, bookstores, hardware stores, credit unions, and even funeral homes. The Berkeley Co-op was wildly successful, but as it continued to expand, it relied more heavily on nonmember patronage. In the midst of its expansion, the co-op’s board of directors decided to cut its education department, which was responsible for educating new members on the values of the institution and on cooperation generally. This decision also coincided with a decline in member patronage as

a percentage of total sales. This wouldn't be an issue in a traditional grocery store but in a cooperative firm kicked off a devastating cycle: more and more nonmembers shopped at the co-op and weren't "onboarded" to cooperative principles, which resulted in a decline in the incentive to become a member at all. As a result, increasingly the co-op too closely resembled its competitors, and its members began to leave, taking their financial investment with them. Though people were still shopping at the Berkeley Co-op, it relied on an ever decreasing source of financial patronage to continue operation, which was largely due to drifting away from its political and social mission. As former *Co-op News* editor Paul Rauber (1992, 17) succinctly described, "Committed Berkeley members wanted CCB to be all things; indifferent nonmembers only wanted a convenient supermarket ... CCB was never able to resolve this fundamental identity crisis." This inability to reconcile both interests is grounded in the fact that the institution lacked clarity around its own identity. With solidarity no longer a focus, expansion only further weakened the institution.

Crisis

The Park Slope Food Coop opened almost twenty years before its Berkeley predecessor finally closed its doors. Located in the long-gentrified brownstone neighborhood in central Brooklyn,

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it is the largest member-run food cooperative in the country. Like the Berkeley Co-op before its demise, Park Slope has been a model of cooperation for SE organizers and advocates. The co-op's success is an example of how cooperative enterprises can be not only economically viable but also popular for the long term. While one can romanticize the ideals of community-controlled resources, the Park Slope's popularity is also due to its basic role as a cheaper grocery alternative. Park Slope members stock shelves, run

the checkout, receive deliveries, and perform other necessary functions as part of their equity in the firm. This "free" labor keeps food prices low and has been central to my own reproduction as a graduate student without a living wage.

Park Slope is of course not without its faults—like many other food cooper-

atives, it has yet to take a declarative stance on apartheid or on the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement, and it is currently resisting a unionization effort led by many of its staff members.¹ These tensions reveal deeper questions around whom the co-op stands in solidarity with, and when.

Today, these questions feel more immediate, as Park Slope has temporarily ceased to function as a cooperative at all. Since New York's stay-at-home orders issued in March, Park Slope has found itself in the interesting position of being an essential business run by "nonessen-

¹ In April 2019, staff members at the co-op filed a series of unfair-labor-practice complaints with the National Labor Review Board against the co-op's management, who they allege has intimidated workers against unionizing with the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union. See Quinn (2019) and "Park Slope Food Coop," National Labor Relations Board, accessed 24 June 2020, <https://www.nlr.gov/case/29-CA-240076>.

tial” workers. As *members* we work collectively to meet our most basic needs, but as *owners* we are obviously not employees. To ensure compliance with state orders, the co-op has suspended its member-labor system and hired employees to run the store. Sometimes these have been existing members, but sometimes not. This has translated to higher prices in the short term—the co-op now functions as a high-end, mostly organic grocery store in an expensive neighborhood in Brooklyn—and a growing financial crisis in the long term.

Compliance with the necessary social-distancing measures has also limited the number of people that can be present in the store at one time. However, the co-op’s own measures have *unnecessarily* created a divide between members who are able to wait in line outside of the store, sometimes upwards of an hour, and those who cannot. Though like many other food stores the co-op has implemented creative changes like specialized hours to shop, it still has yet to fully address the vulnerabilities of its large membership. Who can stand in line outside? Who can take time off from work to shop? Who lives close enough to the store so that doing either isn’t a burden?

Other smaller food co-ops in the city have found workarounds by safely engaging their existing member base. In these cases, member-owners perform grocery runs and deliveries to one another, facilitate contactless pickup of pre-made grocery boxes provided by cooperative farms, and fulfill online grocery orders. Despite Park Slope’s own hesitations, the overall cooperative value chain that connects SE institutions

together is organizing in response to the pandemic to meet people’s needs. Their flexibility despite spatial restrictions stresses the importance of making solidarity a project throughout the lifetime of SE institutions. For Park Slope, any such flexibility is predicated on whether its 17,000 members see themselves in alliance with one another or whether they only see themselves as reaping common benefits through co-ownership. This distinction between shared access to a commons and shared *management* of one is important (Huron 2018). Only the latter requires a change in social relationships between people, with the hope of creating an engaged, interdependent body for the long term.

Emergence

While one SE model negotiates the uneven geography exposed by COVID-19, another emergent entity, that of the mutual-aid group, has formed in direct response to the crisis. Mutual aid is of course not new, but, within North American SE literature, it is often only referenced as an example of a niche strategy within homogeneous groups that aren’t considered “political.” In this sense, mutual aid is reduced to savings clubs or barter networks, but these aren’t by any means the entirety of the sector. These volunteer, nonhierarchical networks and groups often emerge in times of crisis to meet people’s immediate needs outside of the state or private sector (“What Is Mutual Aid?” 2020). In New York City we saw this as recently as Occupy Sandy, which arose in response to the physical and economic damage wrought by the hurricane. There are also historical examples of mutual aid, like the Black Panthers’ free-breakfast program and the

Young Lords, which were ongoing and weren't organized around a particular crisis moment but rather in response to continuous organized abandonment (Gandy 2002; Heynen 2009). Through these two forms, we can understand mutual aid as both an ethos and a tactic, the latter of which (securing and distributing food, collective political education, providing financial resources, etc.) has transformative potential regardless of whether the collectives themselves are formed as rapid-response or as extended political projects. At its core, mutual aid aims to change the relationships between its actors and, in so doing, change what participants consider possible (Spade and Sirvent 2020).

Neighborhood-based mutual-aid groups in New York City like the one I've been part of in central Brooklyn have organized to shift relationships between neighbors—largely between gentrifiers and rent-burdened residents, the latter of whom are more susceptible to contracting COVID-19 (Afridi and Block 2020). The groups we see forming in response to the pandemic were initially created to secure food for one another as the pandemic exacerbated large gaps in food access. Many early tasks for such mutual-aid groups were centered around buying and delivering groceries for those who could not go to the store. For these groups, requests are made over

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the phone via a number that has been spread by methods ranging from flyers posted in the neighborhood to word of mouth. A neighbor fulfills the request and then is reimbursed by others in the group. This peer-to-peer model has obvious functional and political issues. Functionally, it isn't sustainable: as the crisis continues, volunteer labor waxes and wanes, creating not only a backlog of requests but slower reimbursement. This model also depends on grocery stores: corporate entities experiencing their own distribution crisis. This latter issue has opened up discussion about shifting the model away from direct food provisioning to connecting people to existing SE entities (e.g., food cooperatives, community-supported agriculture groups, collective buying, etc.).

Politically, this strategy isn't different from charity, as you have a class of "givers" and a class of beneficiaries. When we map who is requesting help and who is fulfilling those requests over who is a longtime resident and who is not, we see that we're in danger of deepening a class divide rather than building across it. Not only does this model as it currently stands fail to change the relationships between people, it runs the real risk of co-optation by either the nonprofit-industrial complex or by city officials, both of whom deputize collective labor and energy toward their own ends to legitimize state

failure. These threats posed a question early on for mutual-aid organizers: mutual aid is predicated on solidarity, not charity (Spade 2020), so how do we bring our work in alignment with those values?

The goal of mutual aid is to change relationships between people—in this case hundreds of neighbors—and to take care of one another as an act of solidarity and of commitment to interdependence. To align with these values in the pandemic crisis, mutual-aid groups have had to shift their perspective from a service they are providing someone else to instead building a community that they will eventually rely on as they themselves become ill. This process begins with political education: What are the historic and contemporary examples of mutual aid? What are its values? Where are points of alignment and misalignment between those values and our work? We have been able to construct from these conversations a consensus-based governance structure intended to reflect the solidarity we want to have with one another. To facilitate this, we've created working groups that extend beyond food provisioning (e.g., housing, building community relationships, education) along with spaces of support and interest (e.g., gardening, recipe sharing, pet photos, music) where people share knowledge

and resources with one another, all mediated over the online platform Slack. The group itself is also part of an equally emergent mutual-aid ecosystem both in the borough and throughout the city. Weekly calls between neighborhood groups result not only in skill sharing but also in building toward aligned strategies.

Despite all of this work, one could technically label these efforts as “informal” survival strategies. Unlike firms, mutual-aid groups don't

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require legal incorporation to function and have no outside regulation and no GDP. They are also colloquially perceived as informal because of their decentralized leadership structure and rapid formation. Regardless of their recent quick emergence, mutual aid has itself always been part of the SE ecosystem. Yet organizers in New York have lately focused much of our time creating and uplifting “formal” SE firms and infrastructure. Many of these entities—

such as cooperative membership networks—are necessary to facilitate cross-sectoral cooperation, but such an emphasis on formal cooperative spaces runs the risk of minimizing the radical potential of informal SE spaces such as mutual aid (Hudson 2018). Not only do we minimize such work, we inaccurately label it as “informal” to begin with, reinforcing a cycle in which SE efforts such as mutual aid are labeled as “infor-

mal” and are thus minimized, which then makes them appear niche and not transformative, contributing to their “informality.”

There is nothing occupationally different between the work that these neighborhood and citywide groups are doing and the work that their equivalent SE firms are doing. Over the course of only three months, they have established their own processes to recruit, train, and relate to one another. Mutual aid groups have simultaneously responded to the immediate needs of the pandemic crisis while building a foundation for equitable governance. So, despite not being SE *firms*, mutual aid groups *are formal*, as they operate by their own logics and processes that are communicated to and regulated by those involved. Though accurate, the “reveal” here is not that mutual-aid groups have been formal all along and are therefore worthy of engagement and inquiry; rather, it is that the internal mechanisms and organizing within such projects show us that formality is an altogether insufficient yardstick to judge the legitimacy of SE entities. Instead of emphasizing any “formality,” SE models must be judged by how well they engage their members for the long term while holding solidarity and comradeship at their center. Both the Park Slope Food Coop and emergent mutual-aid groups are regulated entities that feed people, which could be considered formal, but only the latter are asking “Are we failing at solidarity?” and shifting their work accordingly.

Uprising

The global uprisings organized in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor,

Ahmaud Arbery, and nearly a thousand others who are killed yearly by police in the United States again show SE practitioners how well their institutions are able to activate their membership. While the general coordinators of the Park Slope Food Coop initially refused to issue a statement in support of Black Lives Matter, other entities met the moment and again shifted focus and mobilized in response to both systemic and acute police violence. These responses had been developed and used by organizers prior to the uprisings, and mutual-aid groups like mine shared them with each another. In a matter of days, these groups coordinated mask and PPE drop-offs to protesters, led trainings on protest safety for one another, coordinated jail support, and made countless other acts of solidarity within and beyond their immediate neighborhoods—all in addition to continuing the food work that brought them together to begin with. These groups were already building a newly energized network of relationships in response to one crisis; what we see with the uprisings is that they’ve also created space for people to move toward liberatory politics. These efforts are in addition to the vast responses from New Yorkers broadly, who may not be directly involved with mutual-aid groups or any other SE entities but are performing solidarity nonetheless by offering their homes and COVID-shuttered commercial spaces as sanctuaries for protesters. If the SE entities created by the pandemic have shown us that cooperation emerges in crisis, the uprisings have shown us that cooperation releases abundance. Relationships and places that were formerly cordoned off and privatized have now been “set loose.” These actions are of course

² Protesters in Bristol, England, removed the statue of slave trader Edward Colston, while others in Seattle, Washington, reclaimed six blocks in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, creating the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ). Homeless residents in Philadelphia have also reclaimed the Benjamin Franklin Parkway to demand low-income housing and an end to police harassment.

part of global efforts to transform urban spaces through protest, to remove racist and imperialist monuments, and to physically reclaim urban spaces.²

Questions for SE Entities, New and Old, “Formal” and “Informal,” in this Moment

For longstanding SE institutions, the question is how to become dynamic and flexible while keeping solidarity at the center of the work. It’s not enough to simply provide a version of a service after a crisis, especially if that service excludes people in the time they need it most. SE institutions thus also need to ask themselves, are we failing at solidarity? Doing so opens the door for flexible and creative solutions to meet needs. Park Slope missed this opportunity when it transferred its collective responsibility to feed people to the nonprofit volunteer organization Invisible

Hands. Instead of a system in which members *help one another*, a member in need may call the organization, which then pairs them with one of their 10,000 volunteers in the city to shop for them. While this may seem to alleviate the issue of immunocompromised and otherwise vulnerable people accessing groceries, it’s an odd choice for a member-run institution of nearly 20,000 people. If the co-op had prioritized solidarity, it could’ve marshaled members into a base of support that shops for one another in spatial clusters

and could have overcome the physical boundaries that the firm is currently reinforcing. However, as long as the institution prioritizes shared *access* to a resource over shared *responsibility* for it and for one another, it lacks the political will to overcome these boundaries.

Similarly, the question for emergent mutual-aid groups is how to maintain the political will to cooperate. If the aim of mutual aid is to create permanently organized communities of care and reciprocity, then we have to not only

sustain newfound energy but also make these spaces desirable places to be. We can do so by making these communities accountable to ourselves and our neighborhoods. Relatedly, mutual-aid groups must resist neoliberal co-optation of these efforts from both the state and nonprofits. The recent uprisings are again instructive; they are an international refusal of the status quo. While we

see reformist logics pushed by government officials and public intellectuals alike—from boilerplate policy demands to performative kneeling to “Black Lives Matter” boulevards—we have in equal measure seen the rejection of those logics and the dissemination of abolitionist visions.³ This is the energy needed in the SE space broadly and in mutual-aid work in particular, to “remain threatening and oppositional to the status quo and cultivate resistance, rather than becom[e] complementary to abandonment and

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³ Campaign Zero’s #8CANTWAIT campaign pushes eight police reforms intended to lower police killings by 72 percent, ignoring that police violence persists in states and cities that have already enacted these measures; see the #8CANTWAIT website, accessed 12 June 2020, <https://8cantwait.org>. Meanwhile, #8toAbolition is a set of eight nonreformist reforms that, unlike the former, truly limit police power; see the #8toAbolition website, accessed 12 June 2020, <https://www.8toabolition.com>.

privatization” (Spade 2020, 142).

These reflections aren’t meant to argue that emergent mutual-aid groups are inherently radical while older SE entities are doomed to fail. Rather, they’re intended to raise a flag. Before the pandemic, SE practitioners and organizers were already working against a culture that socializes us to think in terms of charity instead of interdependence. Although we’ve successfully built SE institutions that function cooperatively, those institutions—Park Slope as just one example—can still reproduce the subjectivity of charity. The presently emergent mutual-aid entities are likewise not immune.

While in some ways these entities have the advantage of prioritizing a strong cooperative culture from the outset, like other collective efforts they also produce their own boundaries. Neighborhood-based networks by design exclude others nearby who are as equally in need or equally resourced as those considered “in bounds.” These networks are having and should continue to have conversations about who they are, in alignment with, socially and spatially. For these entities, solidarity is a question that needs to be constantly raised, not just in the context of two unprecedented world events dovetailing together but throughout the lifetime of our efforts. Failing to do so risks weakening the energy we have and, like the Berkeley Co-op, losing our sense of ourselves.

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