

## **Precarity, Mutual Aid and the Pandemic**

Nidhi Srinivas  
Associate Professor of Management  
Milano School of Policy, Management, and Environment

---

“Grayness could not fill us with despair if our minds did not harbor the concept of different colors, scattered traces of which are not absent from the negative whole. The traces always come from the past, and our hopes come from their counterpart, from that which was or is doomed.”

– T. Adorno

### **Pandemic Reflections**

A few weeks *before* the Covid 19 pandemic hit New York City in 2020, I was in Turin, Italy. On a Sunday evening, I watched the sun set from the top of the Gran Madre church, and then went inside for the last of the service. When it ended I was surprised to find hands proffered to me by smiling parishioners, and I exchanged with them the traditional handshakes that close the service. Their trust moved me, since already there were intimations that something was not quite right in the city. The streets were emptying, lines in grocery stores were long, and friends were divided, some laughing at the over reaction, others taking it in grimly. Those handshakes were generous actions of people still unaware of what was happening around them.

A few weeks *after* the pandemic reached New York City, watching a barge on the East River from a bedroom window, I thought back to that Sunday. It was a month earlier but now it seemed an eternity away, beyond reach, a moment of innocence to which I could never return. Confined in an apartment, unwilling to risk stepping out, I instead played back memories of people enjoying Parco Valentino on a balmy evening, kayakers on the Po, tight streets in the Centro of shops selling toys, glasses, shoes, clothes, barbers, and fish, recalling a physicality of material presence, the feeling of being in a place, next to other people. Right then, in March 2020 and for many of the months that followed, I could not feel that material presence around me, and all I could do was recall it. No longer able to enjoy New York City, nor able to escape it, then, and for many weeks and months that followed, I felt despair.

Not melancholy (though there is enough of that even without a pandemic). Nor hopelessness, as such. I hated what was happening, from the people who refused to wear masks in an elevator, to the shopper who bumped elbows despite my heroic efforts at social distancing, to the political leaders offering foolish suggestions on bleach, and the racial tensions spilling over into curfewed streets. I wished it was different in every way. And all this and more filled me with despair, that even the simple efforts required to stem the pandemic were efforts that went awry. For despair is not hopelessness nor melancholy. It rests in a hope that is unfulfilled yet remains unabated. Robyn Marasco (2015) reminds us that the sensation of Despair can

actually be critically productive. Despair in actuality is always seeking Hope. “Despair names something different... a crisis in movement and direction, not chiefly a response to loss” (13). In this sense Despair is not Pessimism, where the latter is an acceptance of hopelessness and an anticipation of loss. Despair is in fact dynamic, naming an inability to stop hoping. Nor is Despair something subjective and solipsistic. Instead, it is better understood as a passionate encounter between a subject and a chosen object, a negative dialectic seeking a productive outcome. Marasco reminds us to snatch despair from the jaws of pessimism, as it were.

### **Hope and Despair, Structure and Agency**

It may seem inappropriate to start a research paper on emotive terms. But in a certain sense it is worth asking how we can distinguish and cherish a sense of hope during a pandemic, especially a pandemic that is still continuing, despite extraordinary efforts to combat it. Yes, there is hope: a planet with enough wealth and knowledge was able to generate vaccines within a year of the pandemic. And yet there is still despair: without enough political and social agreement to ensure measures to forestall its spread, the pandemic has thrived on social and political frailties.

One notion of hope is that we act on the world and thus shape it in a certain sense. One notion of despair is that we recognize that acting on this world is insufficient; it will still proceed on its own. Stated this way, despair actually has a close relation with what sociologists call the structure and agency problem (Smith 1991). On one hand, hope demands we act on the world. On the other, despair appears to encourage us to accept that the world cannot be changed. This latter view would also accept that social structures determine human action, and not the other way around. However, following Marasco, we could argue that despair can be critically productive. In fact, it can name a particular form of agency, one that does not forsake hope, but restlessly stokes it, unable to find a credible avenue, yet not still. Marasco’s approach to understanding Despair is interesting particularly because of its suggestive agential quality. Thinking back to the isolation and confinement of that early period of the pandemic, it is not surprising that I began to study mutual aid and the ways this phrase was being used to describe responses to the pandemic. Because one way to consider the pandemic is to ask whether theorizing about it considers a role for agency, whether theorizing places the pandemic within or outside human control. Which also reminds us of an urgent theoretical need, to consider: *what* is actually amenable to direct intervention in such a context?

### **Structural pessimism**

Much of the immediate discussion and theorizing about the pandemic was deterministic in nature. It relied on a recognition of social structures and largely spoke from a position of pessimism. This was apparent right at the start, for example, in the distrust and resignation of citizens about government lockdowns. The lockdowns, whether needed or not, were seen as beyond human control or ken. Similarly, the frustration with fumbling disunited state responses, demagogic inconsistent actions (such as by Indian and Brazilian leaders) did not translate into political change as much as contention and further resignation. Again, dubious information, and falsehoods masquerading as facts, from 5G radio masts infecting covid to the hot water remedies to combat the virus, thrived. The pandemic and its effects took place in a landscape where agency appeared absent, with actions being over-determined by existing economic and social

divides. Even when agency did appear, it appeared firmly anti-social, manifested in individualistic suspicions leveled at established authorities, feeding further reliance on fake news and antipathetic resignation with political authorities.

Such pessimism gestures towards hopelessness and further fear. It does not offer a notion of despair in the sense I have understood of the word, that is, a theorizing that acknowledges the endurance of hope while steering some distance away from the temptations of hopelessness. Rather, these pessimistic views cluster into themes which shed a structural focus on the pandemic but not the possibility of agency. Let me briefly point to some of these themes. A set of compelling left-wing critiques (McNally 2011, Tyner 2019) for instance, have shown how Neo-Liberal policy commitments have led to labor being even further exposed, and unable to demand safety, let alone security. During the pandemic, for their protection, labor was forced to rely instead on “Home-based Networks” or “Rural networks of care” (Shah & Lerche 2020), placing further demands on women and social reproduction. Another set of critiques point to the role rumors and fears play in social life. These sense-making efforts underlay an attempt by local people to understand the changing landscapes of capitalism (Comoraff & Comaroff 2002, White 1993, Drezner 2014). But such interpretive actions during the pandemic lacked coherence and finality, instead marking further dissensus and conflict that impaired response.

Can these theories help throw a light on the casualties of the pandemic especially for those exposed to it without credible social protection—the “unpeople?” In a broad sense, all human lives are precarious. Our lives are mortal—this is a human fact. We confront mortality daily, especially during a pandemic. On the other hand, some lives suffer greater deprivation and chance of death, which is a political fact. There are groups of people basically consigned to die, simply because they are not seen to deserve the intervention needed to save them. This becomes especially clear in a pandemic. Consider NY state’s lawsuit against Amazon, for inadequate safety protection of workers (Weise 2021). It is worth asking if corporations consider front-line employees important enough to be protected. Giorgio Agamben describes such latter groups as inhabiting the margins of a life. They are immersed in the fact of living (*Zoe*) but lack a political life (*Bios*). Their “bare life” does not offer protection to move past *Zoe*, and towards the means that preserve enough of it through *Bios* (Tyner 2019). Guy Standing’s (2011) well-known term names such vulnerable groups as the *precariat*, a distinct socio-economic group, a “class in the making,” with “truncated status,” lacking various forms of labor security. In this sense, structural pessimism focuses a particular attention on the precariat: while the latter demand and need intervention, structural forces prevent such intervention.

These are those who must make an effort to persuade those with power over them that they too deserve to live (Mbembe 2019, Shah & Lerche 2020, López 2020). These worst affected are also the most disposable, and their labor power is the least in their direct control: migrant labor in India, Europe, front-line workers in the US. Their low status overlaps with race, class, gender inequalities. As the pandemic continues to evolve, it is reasonable to expect continued racial naming (“Chinese virus”), questioning of causes (5G Masts), how it spreads (face masks), type of response needed (cost of lockdowns), all of which raise key aspects of politics and identity (freedom, race, religion) that are divisive. However, in all these accounts, structural pessimism reigns and questions of agency are less apparent in the discussion.

Meanwhile, the global pandemic exacerbates precarity. Studies have shown a rapid increase of inequality globally during the pandemic. The pandemic further strengthened social

divides, particularly hurting those in “front line” service occupations like health care and food delivery. It stretched economies of care, with community support networks hard-pressed to respond. It increased social isolation for some, while further straining the financial means available to flexible labor. But these conditions of precarity, still, differed greatly depending on the locations and occupations under discussion. In India, for example, migrant labor was forced to trek back days and weeks during an abrupt urban lockdown. Such labor relied on rural networks of care that were deeply gendered. These sort of rural networks of care may have been less relevant to health care workers and the elderly in urban neighborhoods in Europe or the US. For one thing the lockdown was less abrupt and there was a greater attention to its effects on the poor. But on the other hand, gendered networks of care continued to play an important role, sustaining labor, protecting it in a sense.

How do we understand the impact of the pandemic on precarious groups? Studying the pandemic’s effects means considering the persistent structuralist views about the pandemic, whether economic or political or cultural. Social inequality appears to have worsened during the pandemic, due to prior economic stratification. Power differences became stark when accessing vital resources such as vaccinations, social services. Social media amplified rumors, false information, and related prejudice. Yet this can be misleading. There is a danger here of determinism, where participants in a pandemic appear to become “judgmental dopes,” who lack agency. There is also a danger here of pessimism, where politics is relegated to forces outside immediate control. How do we study the responses of such groups, consider their agency? I am especially interested in studying mutual aid as a response to the pandemic.

### **Mutual Aid**

There has been a rise in global interest regarding Mutual Aid during the pandemic. For example, a search of Google trends for the phrase “mutual aid” during the early period of the pandemic (February 2020 to June 2020), for the United States, India and Italy (I searched “Mutuo Soccorso” for the last of these), show that the peaks of interest in the term tend to match the worst moments of the pandemic in each country during this period. Now this is a rather limited indicator, but it does show higher public interest than usual in the phrase.

During the same time and later in the year, there was growing media coverage of mutual aid and even US politicians took interest in it (Ocasio-Cortez 2020). The media coverage of mutual aid was quite telling. For example, *The New York Times* covered the topic repeatedly in the first year of the pandemic (such as Marcis 2020, Medina 2020, Werzel 2020). These stories tended to focus on youthful idealism and local solidarity. Absent was much discussion of class divides, racial inequality or the effects of neoliberal policies. Instead mutual aid was portrayed as a creative response to circumstances beyond control or, in fact, political critique. I characterize such an approach as a form of liberal piety or common sense.

Corporate usages of the term during the pandemic were also quite telling. Liberal piety was matched by corporate piety. Here is an email I received in March 2021, during the pandemic, from the New School, my place of work (Staff Senate 2021). The email is from the Staff Senate. It reads in part:

“Dear Colleagues and Friends,

We hope this email finds you well in the midst of what continues to be the challenging times we are living

in. Today the New School Staff Senate writes on behalf of The New School Mutual Aid Collective to ask for your generosity now and in the coming months. The Collective was created by a small group of New School faculty and staff who embrace the justice and care components of our university mission and have quickly responded by forming a mutual aid working group to be responsive to the needs of our community. Our aim is to establish a proactive rather than reactive response to evolving needs on our campus so that we may continue to thrive in times of crisis.”

What does such an email say about corporate life? Employers are being asked here to help one another. This is a worthy impulse. But this is in fact an email sent by the Staff Senate to its members and to Faculty, asking them to help each other. At the least, it is a tacit admission that the Senate does not expect the employer (the university) to do much more to help the employee; instead the employees must help each other out. Absent in such an email is a discussion of organizational divides, for instance salary differentials between senior administrators and faculty, which shape the extent of help needed and offered. Nor of the staff dismissals and salary reductions that occurred at the New School over the summer, despite student and faculty protests. While the Staff Senate represents people who have made their views on both matters quite explicit, such views are not apparent in the email.

The email terms this helping one another as “mutual aid.” Strictly speaking, this is true, mutual aid does mean helping one another. But this corporate common sense matches that of *The New York Times*, when it extols the efforts of people to help one another. In neither instance does the term “mutual aid” have a resonance larger than the amiable and unthreatening act of succor. The term mutual aid is stripped of context, and becomes solely an expression of corporate piety, without credible political substance.

### **A definitional strategy**

Given all this interest and its usage, what exactly is Mutual Aid? There are broadly speaking three ways of defining this term, historically, practically (that is, organizationally) and in common speech. Historically, the term signified a particular kind of response to the emerging capitalist economies and societies in Europe, that became named as anarchist resistance to the atomized competitive market. When demanding mutual aid, Pierre Joseph Proudhon meant worker control of means of production, and cooperation with capitalists (Srinivas 2020). When calling for mutual aid, Pyotr Kropotkin wanted local community ties to replace the market. While neither meant quite what the other did, the emphasis here was to resist the dysfunctions of capitalist markets, through group resistance. Practically speaking, “mutual aid” usually has a narrow meaning, and signifies a non-hierarchical alternative to work bureaucracy. Employees are encouraged to exchange work rules including positions of authority, as part of what is called prefigurational politics, the goal being to encourage everyone to try out different roles of authority to generate forms of equality. In common speech in English at least, and especially in North America, the phrase has a wider meaning. Here, “mutual aid” tends to be lumped with cognates such as solidarity, non-profits, and social movements. This can in fact be understood as *common sense* in the Gramscian meaning of the phrase (Crehan 2016), as fragmented and conflicting taken-for-granted local perceptions and meanings, that serve a political purpose, and stabilize systems of power.

A definitional strategy is helpful here, since there are dangers in defining the term either too narrowly or too broadly. Too narrow a definition does lose out on the possibilities offered by the phrase, and may well ignore the reasons in different places the term excites interest. Too

broad a definition loses the capacity to distinguish it sensibly from cognate terms. A particular challenge is to acknowledge the highly charged and politicized meaning the term enjoyed historically, while also noting the distance the term has moved away today, from such politicized meanings.

### **Depoliticizing Mutual Aid**

The perils of defining the term too closely or too broadly are apparent in the definition offered by the US politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (2020). Her definition tries to have it both ways, but tends to take up a broad strategy, ending up offering a depoliticized meaning. She quotes Kropotkin but avoids any mention of anti-capitalist or anti-state politics. Instead, her focus is strictly on local actions, as in the phrases “the pod map” and “start small,” with an emphasis on engagement: “support zone,” “get the convo started,” and an attention to neutral factual concerns: “→needs, →goals, →what else?”

I do not wish to take this too far. My example here is a viral tweet and it is quite possible elsewhere Ocasio-Cortez had been expansive on anti-capitalist positions. She is an admirable and skillful politician, and her interest in mutual aid is inspiring. Besides as a representative on Capitol Hill, and a member of the Democratic Party, there are pragmatic limits on what can be said on this topic, given the perils of public exposure in the US’ toxic climate. Regardless, there are definitional challenges, and the question still remains: what is the content of mutual aid? And how do people go about it?

Let me now illustrate these challenges through three short examples. Each example is of a mutual aid group, in different parts of the world. In each example, the work of the group gestures towards severe inequalities and the potential for organized resistance. This is early research and all the information shared here is solely from media reports and websites.

### **Three locales of mutual aid: Hyderabad, Astoria, Torino**

I have deliberately chosen three disparate locations, very different from each other and indeed rather far away from each other. What interests me is that in each locale the examples I offer term used to describe their work is “mutual aid.”

#### *Hyderabad, India*

Hyderabad is a city in Southern India. Historically, the region was a kingdom with a Hindu majority, ruled by a Muslim monarchy. Today, it is well-known as a software and services hub, and Amazon has one of its largest global offices there and the United States will open its largest consulate in Asia there in 2023. It is also today a city with a significant Muslim population, which is also an under-class. In March 2020, the Indian state imposed a severe lockdown of two months abruptly, with three hours notice. It led to an urban exodus of migrant labor back to rural areas, and caused a lot of hardship to poor communities. The Hyderabad Urban Lab has mapped the impact of the pandemic and the lockdown. In doing so it also seeks to pressure the state to respond with more attention to precarious groups, while offering such groups resources and skills to advocate their needs. It is unclear how the HUL is registered legally, and its website does not describe its work as mutual aid. However, its activities certainly encompass the narrow and wide meanings of the term.

Elsewhere in the city, the Helping Hand Foundation (HHF) relies on Muslim networks of solidarity and has been described as an example of mutual aid. It has been described as offering “voluntary cooperation and care” that is “actively lived and deeply embedded in everyday life” (Parvez). This can mean “freely giving one’s time as well as raising money among those who can afford to give toward distribution of medicine, groceries, and basic supplies.” The HHF works with poor communities on health issues, including “community-based health centers, promoting public health education...helping people “navigate a challenging and often inaccessible medical system.” Their website describes a recent ambulance morgue service started to assist Muslims seeking safe burial. Relying on volunteers, the organization pursues solidarity projects. These include reading to the elderly in hospitals, street plays on safe health practices, para-testing facilities in hospitals, community kitchens. The HHF is registered as a nonprofit organization.

### *Astoria, Queens*

Astoria is a neighborhood in the borough of Queens in New York City. The area sits near the East River and includes a vibrant Greek-American community, Bangladeshi communities, as well as very large areas of Public Housing. The area also has a high range in age, with demographics stretching from young residents in their thirties through the elderly, with a high level of inequality. The Astoria Mutual Aid Network began operations during the pandemic. It relies on donations and volunteers to help its diverse communities in need. Its website emphasizes two roles: those seeking help and those wishing to volunteer. The challenge is to find ways to bring the two parties together quickly without relying on costly organized intermediation. Social media (Twitter, Facebook) is not that effective in sharing information (open-source software is better). Network members run errands and purchase food delivery items for people in need, especially the elderly. They have raised money for space heaters for Queensbridge house residents (NYCHA). Their focus is particularly on the precarious and isolated that lack social support. “You go to one of the Irish bars on Broadway and it’s the guy who shows up at 2 p.m. and stays til close—these are the people I’m really scared for because a little love and attention might go a long way, but they’re not inclined to ask for it” (Mudrick quoted in Vick 2020).

### *Turin, Italy*

Turin is a city in North Italy, close to the French Border. It was the first Capital of unified Italy, later the well-known headquarters for the Fiat Car company. Today it is better known for guiding the Slow-Food movement in the Piedmont region. Turin has a history of mutual aid societies. The region has known Mutual aid groups since the 18th century. It is not uncommon to see buildings in the city center decorated with affiliations to the historical trades that were associated with mutual aid. They originated in worker-led efforts to control their labor in customary trades known in the region: Hatters, Silk weavers (Luciano 2012). “Voluntary associations with the aim of improving the material and moral conditions of the working class... based on mutuality, solidarity... closely linked to the territory in which they were born... Strong professional cohesion and political neutrality were the common characteristics of the 115 workers' societies present in Savoy Piedmont on the eve of unification” (Abrate 2020, my translation).

In the Piedmont region today, Mutual Aid is named as a kind of initiative funded by a consortium of private foundations and city governments. Torino Solidale is such a project of “social solidarity” and is funded by local foundations, Torino city government, and banks (Rossi

et al. 2021). Its goal is to protect people facing “personal, social and economic fragility.” During the early stages of the pandemic, it supported over 15 thousand families through food parcels. It also built a housing shelter (within nine days) for the homeless, and offered nurseries, kindergartens, and elderly care (Oliva 2020).

### **Concluding remarks on Capitalism and Management**

What does the interest in Mutual Aid say about capitalism at the moment? On one hand, we can consider such interest as a palliative, as an effort to somehow withstand the collapses of this present moment. Such collapses include state protection, welfare systems, entitlement claims. On the other hand, we can also consider such interest a sign of alternative ways to imagine markets, charity, welfare, and aid. In that sense, it really matters how mutual aid groups see themselves, how they prefigure questions of solidarity, and how they envisage alternatives to the market. Similarly, it matters how these groups define mutual aid, and in terms of their local imperatives. There is an echo here of historical tensions on the left: recall the split in the First International on whether the workers should seize the state (Marx), or reject it entirely (Bakunin). Similarly, the question now remains, whether mutual aid can constitute a credible force against powerful capitalist actors... or transform capitalism itself.

A peculiar irony is the growing interest among management programs and business schools in mutual aid. On one hand, we can also consider such interest cynical: as a sign of capitalist structures reaching an end-point of exploitation: managers need to find new ways to keep the capitalist system going. They wish to use market forces to achieve social goals, calling it “solidaristic economies,” “social innovation.” On the other hand, we can also consider such interest sincere: what counts is how mutual aid is structured, the ways solidarity remains resonant despite bureaucratic pressures.

A concern of mutual aid advocates who are critical of such managerial interest is that it encourages “NGO-ization,” the diversion of organizing from its social ends to bureaucratic means. This too is an echo of historical tensions on the left: Robert Michel’s iron law of oligarchy reminds us how old the debate is on avoiding bureaucratization. Similarly the question remains, can mutual aid be organized in such a way to constitute a credible alternative to hierarchical organizational structures? Can it show another way of managing?



## References

- Abrate, Piero 2020. Società di mutuo soccorso, una storia che a Torino affonda le radici sin dal Settecento. *Piemonte Top News*. 14 October 2020. <https://www.piemontetopnews.it/post-audio-format/>
- Comaroff, Jean & Comaroff, John L. 2002. Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101-4:779-805.
- Crehan, Kate. 2016. *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and Its Narratives*. Durham: Duke University.
- Drezner, Daniel W. 2014. Metaphor of the Living Dead Or, the Effect of the Zombie Apocalypse on Public Policy Discourse. *Social Research*, 81-4: 825-849. López, Andrea M. 2020. Necropolitics in the "Compassionate" City: Care/Brutality in San Francisco, *Medical Anthropology*.
- Luciano Adriano 2012. Dalle società di mutuo soccorso alla mutualità. Risposte alla crisi del welfare. Euricse Working Paper, N.032 | 12.
- Marasco, Robyn. 2015. *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory after Hegel*. New York City: Columbia University.
- Mbembe, Achille 2019. *Necropolitics*. Duke University. McNally, David 2011. *Monsters of the market: zombies, vampires, and global capitalism*. Leiden: Brill.
- Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria [AOC] 2020. Tweet message. *Twitter* 19 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1240446071022784512>
- Oliva, Luca 2020. Torino Solidale, una rete di welfare per arginare gli effetti collaterali del Covid-19. *Percorso di secondo welfare*. 15 October 2020. <https://www.secondowelfare.it/povert-alimentare/torino-solidale-una-rete-di-welfare-per-arginare-gli-effetti-collaterali-del-covid-19/>
- Parvez, Z. Fareen 2020. Long Before COVID-19, Muslim Communities in India Built Solidarity Through Mutual Aid. *Indepthnews.net*. Accessed at <https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/opinion/3699-long-before-covid-19-muslim-communities-in-india-built-solidarity-through-mutual-aid>
- Rossi, Adanella, Coscarello, Mario & Biolghini, Davide 2021. (Re)Commoning Food and Food Systems. The Contribution of Social Innovation from Solidarity Economy. *Agriculture*, 11: 548.
- Shah, Alpa & Lerche, Jens 2020. Migration and the invisible economies of care: Production, social reproduction and seasonal migrant labour in India. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*.
- Smith, Dennis 1991. *The rise of historical sociology*. Philadelphia: Temple University. Tyner, James, 2019. *Dead labor: toward a political economy of premature death*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Staff Senate 2021. *The New School Mutual Aid Collective*. Email sent January 15 2021. Srinivas, Nidhi 2020. An anarchist prehistory of management. In M. Parker (Ed.) *Management and Anarchism*. London: Routledge.
- White, Luise 1993. Vampire Priests of Central Africa: African Debates about Labor and Religion in Colonial Northern Zambia. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 35-4: 746-772.