

## Afterword

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In this Afterword, I hope to engage with some themes that have been covered in the book in a way that looks forward to the kinds of crises and struggles that anarchists might face in the future. I want to do this in a way that riffs off the title: *Fight for a New Normal*.

A book like this on mutual aid and anarchist responses to Covid-19 is more important than ever. Although Covid-19 is coming to feel more and more like an historical event, it is undeniable that the effects of the pandemic are ongoing. People are still dying, not only from the virus itself but from its economic aftermath. We have been catapulted straight into a new ‘cost of living’ crisis, where ‘food security’ in even the world’s richest nations is no longer assured for huge swathes of the populations. The ongoing pandemic, financial crisis, and climate crisis all intersect to create multiple, compounding disasters while the risk of pandemics becoming increasingly common in the future is magnified by the effects of climate change, human displacement and decreasing biodiversity (Davis, 2022). Disasters under capitalism have greater impact upon the poorest and most marginalised members of society, and they also intensify inequalities and render more people precarious (Preston and Firth, 2020). These people themselves are then cast as dangerous, and are securitised against: disasters often result in intensifying government authoritarianism— we see a hardening of borders and the criminalization of protest and of lifestyles.

In this context, the phrase ‘new normal’ has sent shivers down my spine since I first heard it used to describe an era of reduced social interaction during pandemic 2020. A ‘normal’ declared by government and media elites in a crisis seems unlikely to be a democratic normal. I certainly don’t remember being asked. The activities that were being newly normalised during the pandemic were those essential to capitalism – work, schooling and shopping were prioritised over seemingly irrevocable aspects of the ‘old normal’ such as socializing, using public park amenities, and attending funerals. As Jim Donaghey recounts in the Introduction, protesting and organizing to meet needs beyond capital were further securitised against and criminalised. Public health discourse was conflated with morality in calls for greater ‘controls’, behaviour-shaming, and little acknowledgement that access to the goods being moralised, such as a safe home, protective equipment and water, an educated understanding of vaccines, or affective trust in state-led health policy, was the realm of the

privileged. Like 'old news', 'new normal' is an oxymoron, which could be amusing in some contexts, but less so when accompanied by a slew of draconian policies and money grabs.

The term 'norm', outside of statistics, refers to 'a standard embodying a judgement about what should be the case' (Reeve 2009: 373). Normative statements are the purpose of law and politics, which institutionalise norms as to what should and should not be done; and it is also the purpose of political theory to uncover explicit or implicit normative judgements within practical discourse, or to formulate new normative positions, while everyday discourse often attaches normative weight to behaving 'normally' (ibid: 374). Thus, we find anarchist and other anti-capitalist radicals mobilizing the phrase "This is Not Normal" as a protest slogan on placards. Borrowing from Ruth Kinna's excellent introduction: Similarly to Mutual aid, 'normality' is also a 'hoorah' not a 'boo' concept – although rather than being one that the state borrows/co-opts from anarchism, it seems to be one that anarchism borrows from the state.

The idea of an anarchist 'new normal' seems much more appealing, and in this volume we have seen many of the ways in which anarchist groups struggled within, against and beyond the state-capitalist new-normal to create spaces of mutual aid and possibility, prefiguring a more caring future. Nevertheless, I would like to playfully kick back against the idea embedded in the title that any kind of 'normal' is worth fighting for, even an anarchist 'new normal' - which one might imagine relying on social norms rather than political or legal norms. I would argue that this idea ought not to be unquestioningly accepted by anarchists. I want to problematise not just specific norms associated with the capitalist 'normal' and the normative weight that is attached to behaving 'normally', or being perceived as normal within this, but rather I would like to suggest that mutual aid requires that we attempt to suspend normative judgement *per se* in what Levinas calls 'the face of the other', which is the basis of ethics (Levinas 1987). For Levinas The Other is ultimately unknowable and irreducible (Levinas 2002, 206–207) and that which is other is valued precisely for unknowability and irreducible heteronomy. The ethical relation (in anarchist terms, mutual aid) proceeds from contemplating directly the needs of the other, rather than from any transcendental ethical system. Max Stirner's work is also important in this regard, and his oft-maligned critique of normativity ('spooks'), helps us to think through the ways in which false or fixed beliefs can render our relations with ourselves and with others inauthentic. Practices of representation and the imposition of norms are the foundations of alienation because they create separation between a person and the selves or relationships that they have the potential to create (Stirner 1993, 72).

Gustav Laundauer argues that the state is not an external thing that can be abolished in a fell swoop, but rather is an objectifying relationship between humans – where one human or group of humans views another in terms of the purposes or functions they possess that can serve a system, rather than in terms of their intrinsic values and authentic expressions (1978). James Scott argues that the state is characterised by a ‘god’s-eye’, systemic view, which standardises diverse meanings and cultures, rendering them ‘legible’ to a higher entity (Scott, 1998). What I would like to draw from this hodgepodge of philosophers against the norm is that, in essence, ‘the other’ is unknowable. Any urge to assume or impose norms as part of a social relation is therefore potentially oppressive; and indeed is the essence of the embryonic state.

Human beings, and their needs and desires, are diverse and variable in ways that are barely understood. Even where norms may be collectively decided at one point in time, in a crisis, people’s normal coping mechanisms break down, so attempts to impose social norms become at best ineffective, and at worst oppressive. ‘Mutual aid’ from this perspective might be reconceived not as a duty or obligation or even as selfless altruism, but as an embodied practice that aligns with the senses, with desire and with joyful experiences of connection and empathy. In a gift relation (Maus, 1970), the giver will often say ‘it’s a pleasure’. Tim Waterman, in his recent book *The Landscape of Utopia* argues that prefigurative politics is not (or not only) about how anarchist societies organise themselves or what they build, but primarily it is about exploring what we *value* (Waterman, 2022: 16). This is fundamentally a matter of taste and the senses – one can only truly know what one desires and enjoys by experiencing it, while at the same time there is an important role for ‘acquired taste’ that is ‘learned, constructed and additive, contextual and associative, but not necessarily intentional’ (Ibid., 48). I think that understanding social relations as a process of harmonization of tastes and values across difference that goes beyond socially instituted norms is an important one for anarchism.

There is a danger that any anarchist system that relies too heavily on ‘norms’ or discourses of the ‘normal’ could also seek to alienate and ‘other’ the symptoms it produces, such as we see in Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, which surprisingly (given the author’s usual alignment with anarchism) portrays an anarchist world that appears to stifle creativity and joy in an atmosphere of stultifying norms. The novel contrasts two worlds: Urras—a dystopia in which some of the worst features of

capitalism and patriarchy are magnified; and its anarcho-syndicalist colony Annares, which is the “ambiguous utopia” of the book’s subtitle. While it appears infinitely preferable to the exploitative and oppressive Urras, Annares is far from a perfect utopia, and produces its own problems, and dissent. Set in a harsh natural environment necessitating difficult manual and agricultural labour, Annares’ society has a stifling intellectual atmosphere, with rigidity around social norms discouraging risk, creativity and the advancement of scientific knowledge.

Alongside the need to de-naturalise the role of norms in any future anarchist utopia, radicals need to increase our vigilance within our own prefigurative practices about the ways in which technologies of surveillance and control have become increasingly decentralised, and can even appear to mimic anarchist forms of organization, whilst governments and corporate technocrats co-opt anarchist organizing into their authoritarian webs. For example, the smartphone app, Olio, facilitates neighbours to advertise free and low-cost food and non-food items for local collection that would otherwise have gone to waste. The ‘gifting’ element and the emphasis on sustainability mimic anarchist concerns and the app appears to have grown out of the pandemic wave of mutualism, mobilising the discourse and ethos of mutual aid and community sharing. However, it is not without note that the app is structured in a gamified manner, allowing participants to ‘rate’ one another from one to five stars. The in-app forums are replete with complaints and pile-ons about people not following protocol, and calls to have them ‘banned’ from the app (which, I emphasize, relies primarily on unpaid labour to redistribute food). This is a capitalist prefiguration of a society increasingly based on social credit systems, where people may be banned not only from an app but from the ability to participate in economic and social life entirely. This crisis of the disposability of people is something that anarchists may have to face more in the future.

I would therefore like to re-frame some of the chapters of this book by emphasizing aspects that speak to a fight against (or at least, a critical relation towards) normativity *as such*, rather than a fight to create a ‘new normal’, and to celebrate the ways in which mutual aid might be conceived as a relation without measure. Aiden and Sam say that mutual aid is a ‘relationally transformative experience’ (page); Christopher Morales says it is a relationship characterised mostly by spontaneity. For Imray Papineau mutual aid is “responsive and radically altruistic, in the sense that it is responding to a need or filling a gap, and doubles as a political act rooted in solidarity and compassion for others” (page). Katya Lachowicz talks about how the alternative organizational form of the co-operative, which discourages organizational hierarchy, is more suited to humane interaction,

mutuality, and dis-alienation of workers. Thomas Swann considers themes around harmonization across difference, imagining organizational structures that might enhance rather than subjugate participants' autonomy. As Ruth Kinna argues in the introduction, there is a crucial difference between mutual aid in its radical sense, and the attempts of governments to mobilise mutual aid as a low-cost stand-in for the erstwhile welfare state. The radical vision of mutual aid responds to and fills gaps in human needs, that are perceived and communicated empathically and through unmediated relations. The co-opted vision of mutual aid seeks to fill gaps in a failing system – a capitalist system that is, in fact, characterised by constant crises yet mobilizes a discourse of normalcy in order to 'other' its own disasters.

Jon Bigger shows the cruelty implicit in treating people generically: in this case as 'normal' profit-seeking rational individuals, obliged to calculate and regulate their own exposure to risk on a supposedly (but not actually) level playing field, and where 'risk' means exposure to death at the whims of the market (which is, of course, beyond individual control). Ellis Fox also argues that one-size-fits-all treatments, associated with an austere statist approach to mental healthcare, are injurious. Laney Lenox offers an account from personal experience of the stress and burnout that can result from attempting to live by a set of societal rules and expectations of a neurotypical world, when one experiences life in ways that are divergent from the supposed norm. Rowan Tallis Milligan shows how the historical normalization of 'nuclear' familial relations, as well as the use of generic policy prescriptions can be oppressive for women; at the very least locking them into stultifying social roles and at worst locking them in with abusers. Normalisation also risks silencing or othering dissent, and the dynamics of the state's racialization, securitization and criminalisation of movements are vividly recounted in Neil Middleton's excellent chapter. It is essential that we become aware of our complicity and avoid replicating these dynamics in our own movements. In my research, for example, an interviewee recounted how their mutual aid group became more like a neighbourhood watch group, with some of the less radical members having to be talked out of calling the police on a group of racialized youth and on workers for supposedly breaking lockdown rules (Firth, 2022: 137). As Darya Rustamova shows, this dynamic has not only ideological, but also massive material weight behind it, as budgets for counter-terrorism (increasingly aimed at domestic insurgents, including left-wing activists) have been prioritised over the funding of social goods like medical equipment and community education projects.

The real danger of this dynamic is that policing and surveillance will be outsourced to technologies and communities in ways that may appear more decentralised, autonomous, participatory, 'democratic' and even anarchistic but in fact are moving closer to totalitarianism (Firth, 2022; see also Hibernicus 2023). This form of authority very much operates through shaming, moral panics and the social enforcement of norms.

In conclusion, I would like to invite the reader to shift perspective on this project slightly as not only the rather more catchy 'fight for a new normal' but as a fight 'within, against, and beyond normativity' – a project of continually questioning those norms which we adopt, reproduce and perpetuate; and think through how we might develop new forms and tastes that are less alienated, more embodied and empathic and informed by our senses and direct relationships. As such, I would chime with Ruth Kinna's call to sustain mutual aid based on anarchist principles – her distinction between organizational principles and ethical ones, I would argue, is fundamental to this. Mutual Aid is first and foremost an ethical relation which defies the will to control or subsume the other within a set organizational structure or set of norms – it is about exploring new values and tastes together, enjoying the sensed and felt aspects of giving and connection, and in the embodiment of our desires in prefigurative communities and ethical relations beyond state, capitalism, and externally imposed norms.

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