History Acts 18:

Locked Down: Organising community support and mutual aid during pandemics

Online, 2 and 7 April 2020

Activists: Aviah Day (Hackney Covid-19 Mutual Aid/Sisters Uncut), Seth Wheeler (Labour Transformed)

Historians: David Hitchcock (Canterbury Christ Church), Michael Bresalier (Swansea)

Key questions:

- How are activists using community activism to respond to the coronavirus pandemic?
- How can the mutual aid groups that are emerging in response to the coronavirus crisis build on the connections that their work is creating? Can this continue to reinforce community support through hubs like social centres?
- How can understanding the history of social centres help activists build modern-day equivalents?
- Does understanding the historical impact of public health crises on social issues such as homelessness help us to understand and respond to the present-day situation?
- Can governments appropriate mutual aid and voluntary action in lieu of a state response?
- How can mutual aid activists archive their activities? Are there helpful historical parallels these groups could learn from and examples of where they could go in the future?

The first online History Acts session was divided across two Zoom meetings on 2 and 7 April. The panel members were Aviah Day, founder of Hackney Covid-19 Mutual Aid and a member of Sisters Uncut, Seth Wheeler, an organising member of Labour Transformed, David Hitchcock, a historian of homelessness in the Early Modern period at Canterbury Christ Church, and Michael Bresalier, a lecturer in the History of Medicine at Swansea. They explored mutual aid and community activism as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, with reference to historical examples of public health crises.

Aviah Day began by describing the aims and development of Hackney Mutual Aid, founded around 3 weeks before as a response to the sudden change in how people were discussing coronavirus and their own behaviour and responsibilities in regards to it. The group took its cue from other local action groups but also responded to the events unfolding in other countries and the slow response from the UK government.

The group is based on Facebook. Its aims are to get food and medicine to people in isolation and also to chat with people in isolation whose mental health and wellbeing may be affected. It is organised by ward within the borough of Hackney to allow people to seek and offer help and support in their local

area. Local organisation is also intended to reduce the spread of the virus. The group has grown exponentially to include thousands of members. There is already a tradition of mutual aid in Hackney, partly because of organisations like Sisters Uncut, and the group hopes to be able to build on the connections this movement is creating to enhance community support.

Aviah explained that the term mutual aid derives from an anarchist political tradition. It is based on the principle of community self-organising to meet each other's needs. Its non-hierarchical structure is effective in the current crisis because responsibility is divided and shared rather than vested in individuals who may fall ill. She pointed out that perceptions and realities of who is in need are shifting as needs (such as for specialist medical or pharmacy items in short supply) become less strongly linked to class or wealth. This also means that support can be mutual: if everyone needs or can give help at different points, it becomes easier to ask for support.

Aviah emphasised that of course the most vulnerable people remain the most at risk. She noted that this has also started new conversations around what safeguarding means when state or council support may be unavailable or slow. She gave the example of undocumented migrants who may not be able to trust their neighbours not to inform on them. For this reason no one's data is held or passed on by the group.

Aviah ended by asking how she can archive the development of this movement in order to use its successes in future campaigns. She also asked whether there are helpful historical parallels that groups like this can learn from and examples of how they could develop beyond this crisis.

Seth Wheeler explained that Labour Transformed was formed at the end of 2019 to create an open and democratic space for anti-capitalist and socialist militants within Labour. Many of these activists had been attracted to movements such as the 'movement of the squares' or Occupy but found these initiatives difficult to scale up; it is similarly difficult for a new party representing their ideas to emerge in the UK's two-party system. The election of Jeremy Corbyn therefore attracted many of these activists to Labour. Labour Transformed is interested in how new forms of community provision can escape incorporation into state and capitalist systems.

In response to the triple threat of Covid-19, the financial crisis, and government policy, the organisation has founded the [Virtual Social Centre](). This brings together self-organised community hubs and information points outside profit systems. Its aim is to find ways of being together that challenge unjust social norms. This is linked to the Direct Action movement and is modelled on earlier traditions of social centres and working men's clubs.

The Virtual Social Centre allows for solidarity between local and national campaigns. Its daily newsletter collates information on benefits and health and offers pointers to other relevant campaigns.

David Hitchcock introduced himself as a historian of homelessness (or the historical term 'vagrancy') and noted that this often overlaps with public health crises, as shown by the example of the intersection between plague and poverty. Following Paul Slack's seminal work *The Impact of Plague* David explained that disasters such as pandemics can create new forms of social interaction; as a rule, people rise to the occasion in ways that are difficult to reconstitute after the pandemic.

Diseases also provided opportunities to harness and control human behaviour, based around what Mary Douglas calls 'danger beliefs' that associate diseases with certain taboo behaviours. Responses to the plague included state efforts to control the spread of disease, and David offered some historical parallels. People fled epidemics such as the plague or smallpox by avoiding disease-stricken areas and

leaving cities, comparable to modern social distancing. Mortality bills tracked the progress of the disease and the death tolls. Plague Orders issued by the state or other authorities sought to control movements and regulate both human and animal bodies and the distance between them. For instance, plague-stricken houses were clearly visually marked out, and there were emergency rules regarding funerals and public gatherings.

Despite a tendency to see plague as 'the great leveller' that affected people across society, it was understood in Early Modern society that diseases were distributed along class and wealth lines, impacting most heavily on those who were already vulnerable. On the other hand people in poverty were also seen as a disease vector as they were both more vulnerable to disease and more likely to spread it; as a result they were perceived as a danger to the elite.

Recent scholarship has proved, however, that the plague did not break up community ties and shut down towns and cities. Essential work continued, as reflected by examples such as medical care given in the home and of a clerk who took down the wills of plague victims. These wills often showed substantial charitable giving. There was also an increase in parish-based charity and donations to local vestries which David compared to present-day local mutual aid initiatives.

Early-Modern charity was strongly connected to the social structure historians describe as 'mutual obligation'. This laid down that while poor should be humble and obedient and pray for the rich, this was balanced by a sense of *noblesse oblige* for the rich. While clearly paternalistic and hierarchical, this structure did enable individual acts of charity, as wealthy people could be shamed for not offering material support within their communities.

David concluded by suggesting several lessons to be learnt from the example of the Early Modern response to public health crises. He argued that it was important to resist 'creeping paternalism' in mutual aid initiatives and to prevent members of mutual aid groups from repurposing these networks for their own aims. As the poorest and most vulnerable people are always the most affected by and in the most danger from epidemics, the first help should be targeted on them.

Michael Bresalier, a historian of modern medicine teaching on the history of pandemics, responded to David's reference to Paul Slack's 'catastrophic model' and the questions it raises regarding the changes that can be brought about by pandemics and moments of social crisis in the short and long term. He noted that Aviah and Seth had begun by asking similar questions about the potential futures of their current activism. It is clear that pandemics can divide societies and prey on inequalities but they can also bring people together. He mentioned Kropotkin's work on mutual aid, explaining that it can take two different forms. It can be a politically conscious act, using particular forms of cooperation with a distinct political purpose such as to produce a new kind of society. It can also be a spontaneous and organic response to circumstances, which Kropotkin saw as a counter to ideas of social Darwinism.

Michael noted that the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 has been a constant reference point in the current crisis. This was a historical moment when mutual aid initiatives emerged in a relative absence of state action. In Britain the state issued recommendations for social distancing and the closure of public places but left local authorities to decide on implementing them. Mutual aid and community voluntary action developed to organise food provision and access to medical care. Michael argued that this harkened back to Victorian ideas of charity and a sense of obligation to look after one's neighbours. A range of very different organisations including church groups, the Red Cross, trade unions, and working men's collectives were involved in organising local support, bringing together activists from different political backgrounds. This shows that the impact of a pandemic will be

noticeable in terms of class but people's response to the crisis will not necessarily be shaped by their ideological commitments.

Michael argued that it is important to think about this and past pandemics as both local and global phenomena, and to see responses such as mutual aid in the same context. Effective responses to pandemics are based on sharing resources, both within communities and much more widely, as with the global sharing of medical supplies and knowledge. How can we link local forms of mutual aid to a geo-political global context?

The discussion responded to the historical and present-day tensions between mutual aid and charity. Aviah noted that Hackney Mutual Aid had shown genuine reciprocal aid as recipients of one kind of support often reciprocated in other ways. On the other hand there are trade-offs in creating a sense of community. There is a risk of what Edward Said calls the 'tyranny of community', of parochial thinking, and of people attempting to police who is or is not deserving. Within Hackney Mutual Aid, however, these problems have also produced transformative debate. Aviah also noted the parallels with the development of mutual aid in the absence of state intervention in the 1918 flu pandemic; Hackney Mutual Aid developed because people's attitude to the pandemic was changing faster than that of the government. Trade unions had also begun responding to the crisis early to protect workers for whom it was no longer safe to go to work.

Seth pointed out that catastrophes and crises can be an impetus for transition as they prompt reciprocal altruism. This represents a political tendency that imagines society as based on mutual aid; a form of crisis Communism. Mutual aid groups are quicker to act because they are self-organised and not weighed down by state bureaucracy. On the other hand there are tensions within mutual aid groups between people who do and do not have political motivations. He warned against allowing capitalism to take over these groups as crises are also a motor for capitalist development. Mutual aid groups are still organised within capitalist systems; members do not own the means of production and still rely on financial transactions.

The discussion went on to address mutual aid's relationship to state intervention. The question was raised of whether government strategy has actually relied on individual initiatives, mutual aid, and voluntarism. This was particularly relevant in the context of social advocacy around social distancing. Could the blame for state failures be transferred onto the public for failing to meet particular standards of success in their mutual aid initiatives and self-policing with regard to transmission and infection?

Participants also asked whether this crisis could be seen as a legacy of neo-liberal devaluing and dismantling of care. It was noted that while mutual aid has shown new possibilities for structuring individual lives and society, the infrastructures that give people the time and resources they need to give and receive care have been dismantled. How can and will these new mutual aid networks and initiatives develop when physical spaces are available again? Seth responded that Covid-19 has emerged into an economic crisis that has been developing over time. The crisis socialism that the pandemic has produced may encourage people to question previously accepted social structures and perceived 'necessities' around work practices and economic systems. Aviah noted that mutual aid initiatives have shown that communities can resource support work without state permission. She sees self-organisation and mutual aid as a means of achieving political and social liberation.

The concluding discussion recognised that it was a new experience for History Acts to address such a current and acute crisis while it is happening. What can history tell us about possible timelines for the crisis and its impact, and what sort of responses from the state and capitalism are activists currently

preparing for? Michael argued it is too early to tell what the outcomes of this pandemic will be, especially as the current response seems to be widespread acceptance of social isolation. So far there has been no mass mobilisation, global collaboration, or questioning of social inequalities, even as different countries and organisations scramble for resources. On the other hand, David argued that historically crises have provided new opportunities to different groups with social leverage who may not be necessarily or exclusively elites. Social restrictions may be slightly relaxed and some resources may be redistributed. It is important to find ways of scaling up structures for providing support and extending solidarity from the local to the global. Historical examples suggest that this is more achievable than it may seem.