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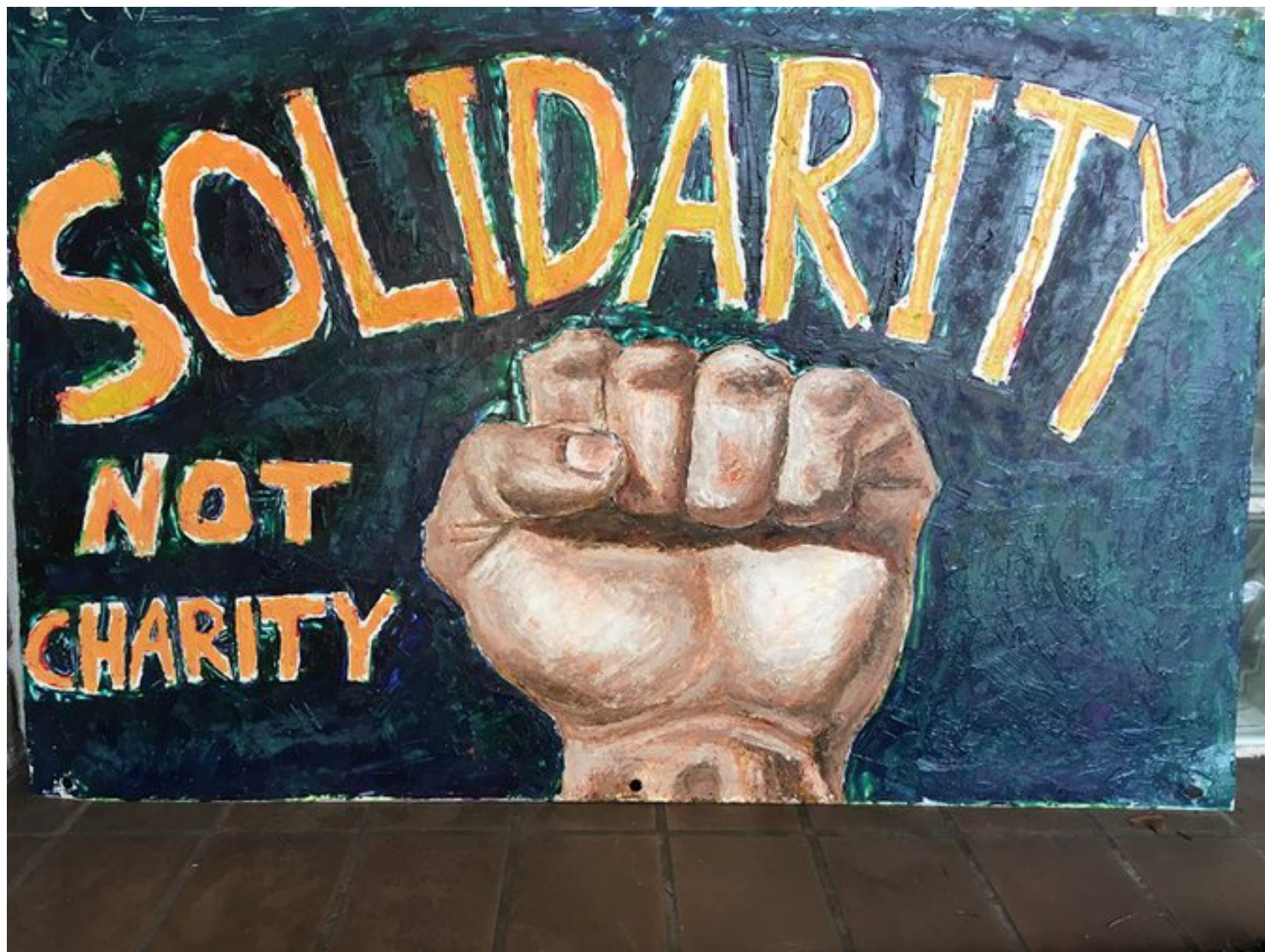
# Romper con el narcisismo: emociones y activismo de base en la época de COVID-19

Dos lemas que circulan dentro de estos grupos resumen mejor el activismo de base: la *solidaridad, no la caridad* y la *atención colectiva es nuestra mejor arma contra COVID-19*.

[Tomasso Gravante](#)

[Alice Poma](#)

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## open *movements*

**L**a pandemia de COVID-19 que afecta al mundo no es solo un problema de salud pública. Las diferentes respuestas de los estados a los cientos de miles de personas infectadas, personas muertas y personas en aislamiento demuestran y magnifican exponencialmente las consecuencias del modelo social, cultural y económico que ha guiado las políticas públicas en las últimas décadas: el modelo neoliberal.

Like all systems of domination, the neoliberal model is a cultural and economic model, and is characterised by its adherence to the principles of social Darwinism. It is a model in which the natural order of things is control of some living things over

others and over nature, hierarchies, extreme individualism, egoism and narcissism, among other aspects. Selfish values, rather than altruistic or biospheric values, dominate, and they must be aspired to if one wishes to climb the social ladder.

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## Between fear and narcissism

As Arlie Hochschild points out, all society is characterised by a series of structural norms and rules regarding social, legal and economic discipline, but also by a series of feeling rules that are needed to entrench that system. The neoliberal system has educated us and imposed its own emotional culture, characterised by feeling rules such as expressing respect and admiration for people who have achieved economic success, belittling lower social groups, blaming other individuals for things that do not work, being afraid of expressing our discontent, or shame when sharing what we feel. These rules are revealed in everyday practices, such as intolerance towards others, the need for delegation, denial of social problems such as poverty, inequality, gender violence, racism, and new forms of authoritarian neoliberalism. The message that is constantly repeated is that we live in the best possible system.

The cultural model encouraged by the neoliberal system clearly revealed in this COVID-19 pandemic enables us to explain the initial hegemonic response to this crisis seen in many countries, such as United Kingdom, Italy, US, Brazil or Mexico: the denial and a desire to continue as if nothing has changed.

Denial of the seriousness of the pandemic clearly reflects an ideology in which economic growth is worth more than human life, and where human life is arranged

by importance, where lower social classes and older people can be sacrificed, the latter because they are no longer productive.

## **Denial of the seriousness of the pandemic clearly reflects an ideology in which economic growth is worth more than human life.**

If we are paying attention to the emotional dimension, we can see how narcissism, egoism and cynicism are at the heart of this response. But, furthermore, we have seen other emotional strategies, including demonising the fear of the disease and devaluing caring and worrying about others, for example, the Brazilian president's accusations of cowardice against those who stay at home and request measures to avoid the virus spreading.

Neoliberal emotional culture is so deeply rooted that many people have been more afraid and anxious about losing privileges, that until now they believed to be untouchable or at least safe, than about losing their lives or their loved ones. This is also influenced by what psychologists call the “myth of invulnerability”, in other words: it will affect all the others but not me.

## **Perverse new narratives**

Since denial has become a politically incorrect narrative in many countries where the number of infected people and deaths has increased, other feeling rules have been revealed that we could say are even more perverse.

For instance, there is a new narrative, which we can observe in different countries, that channel anger and blame towards other individuals. This narrative is needed in order not to admit that the neoliberal system has made us more vulnerable, because that may generate a moral shock among those who feel they are supported by it, inevitably leading to blame being placed at the door of those who feed and promote this system.

There are many examples of this: from blaming the people who brought the virus because they travelled (which in Mexico's case is fed by resentment towards the middle and upper classes generated by social inequality), to blaming those who do not follow 'social distancing' or self-isolation rules.

This is joined by hatred towards communities that are considered by some people as inferior and therefore culpable for this pandemic; belittling the most vulnerable who force those who are not vulnerable to cease their productive activities; admiration for those who are most able to benefit from this situation, etc.

These rules have caused and made legitimate: violent attacks on Asian communities; social control and denunciations carried out by neighbours to report people breaking quarantine in Europe; attacks by communities on buses transporting residents from old people's homes so that they cannot enter their areas; roadblocks set up by area residents who don't want 'outsiders' in their communities; demands for and acceptance of authoritarian measures implemented by different governments, which will very probably take advantage of this crisis to clamp down on individual and collective freedoms.

## Why grassroots activism is important

In this Orwellian landscape of authoritarianism, individualism and despair, social movements continue to play a fundamental role in building social alternatives, since "as collective mobilization grows, also the hope for change ensues – for another world that is still possible and all the more needed".

On the one hand, we can observe how social movements at national and transnational levels have cancelled and suspended their public actions and have quickly adapted to the new social circumstances we are living in.

One example is the organisation of webinars, conferences, teach-in, assemblies and other online initiatives, as well as digital protests. These activities, from an emotional point of view, allow participants to connect with other people from all around the world and feel united and stronger, instead of alone and powerless. On the other



hand, at local level, many grassroots groups are organising themselves to deal with the social costs of this pandemic and cope with the needs that the most underprivileged communities are experiencing. We are not talking about associations of social workers, NGOs or other bodies funded by using public and/or private funds to resolve the needs created by the system by way of support from the system itself.

The grassroots activism we are talking about is the one promoted by autonomous, self-organised groups that carry out direct action not only at protest events but also in everyday practices. In this case, direct action is aimed at producing improvements in the human condition within a certain oppressed community and is able to develop self-organisation methods to weaken the links of dependence and blackmail relationships existing between the state and communities, such as, for example, illegal immigrant communities, homeless people, nomadic communities, prisoners and the many different marginalised communities in cities.

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Grassroots groups that were already working on matters of health and care among marginalised communities are proposing guides for self-care and prevention for COVID-19, support for ill people, who are often illegal or in a situation of vulnerability, who cannot go to hospitals or consult a doctor to request their medication. In Milan, a city located in the most affected area of the contagion in Italy, anarcho-syndicalist organisation *USI Sanità* (the health sector of base organisation USI, the Italian Syndicalist Union), has opened a help point for residents of the Torricelli neighbourhood where they issue medical prescriptions, deliver free medicines, and provide medical, psychological and labour-related consultations that are specialised in this topic and always free of charge.

These practices can also be observed in other countries, such as the USA, where

different groups are trying to provide access to medication, cures and first aid to marginal people and those marginalised by the current social model. Grassroots and autonomous unions, such as the USI mentioned above and Spain's CNT (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*), have also opened help points to support workers whose rights are being flouted in this crisis, and have supported strikes in non-essential sectors where production has not been stopped.

Another important category that can be observed in this context are groups that collect and distribute food and essential supplies. One example in Newcastle upon Tyne (United Kingdom) is the community soup kitchen project The Magic Hat Café, which reuses food products thrown away by supermarkets and is now distributing food parcels to families most in need. This group alone is able to distribute 800 food parcels to more than 200 families in Newcastle every day. Other anarchists' groups in Latin America and USA are redistributing among poor people food that they steal from department stores (which is a different practice than the one from criminal groups who are stealing goods and resell it in the black market).

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A third, broad category that carries out grassroots activism comprises the many groups that were involved in local and/or highly specific topics such as support for migrants, the fight against evictions, defence of labour rights, anti-racism, support for people in prisons, among others. These groups are reorganising their work in light of this social crisis. Some are producing information about the pandemic, explaining how to organise as a group to cope with the problems that are emerging and how to create affinity groups (coronavirus resource kit).

This material is exchanged by groups in different countries, translated into different

languages on a voluntary basis and adapted to local needs. One example is *Surviving the Virus: An Anarchist Guide*, currently translated on a self-organised basis into nine languages. Other groups, due to the loss of millions of jobs, are demanding a suspension of rent payments, such as the *Station 40* collective in San Francisco, which is among the organisers of the 1 April global rent strike.

Groups that manage independent media are trying to produce news stories free from the manipulation of official channels dedicated to the current social crisis and its drift towards authoritarianism, and are organising open mic programmes to exchange first-hand experiences. One example is the public radio assembly organised by *Radio Blackout* in Turin (Italy) with the programme *Rompi l'isolamento, parliamone insieme* (Break isolation, let's talk about it together). Other groups are producing and gathering open-access audio and video material for children.

These are joined by the experiences of purchasing groups to sustain autonomous, self-organised farming projects, such as *Campi Aperti - Associazione per la Sovranità Alimentare*. Yet others, such as occupied social spaces in Italy, are transforming themselves into mutual support centres for the neighbourhoods where they are located, providing support to those most in need and to people most at risk to the virus, such as older people and the immuno-compromised. One example is *CSOA Askatasuna* in Turin, with the *Solidarietà di Quartiere* (neighbourhood solidarity) project which involves neighbours in mutual support actions.

The responses that these grassroots activism experiences are producing to cope with the health, social and economic crisis can be summarised in two slogans that circulate within these groups: *Collective Care Is Our Best Weapon Against COVID-19* and *Solidarity Not Charity*. These slogans reflect the values behind the groups, such as mutual support, self-managed solidarity, anti-authoritarianism, etc. The call made by these groups is to overcome the powerlessness that can be felt when facing the pandemic, taking part in different activities.

## Compassion and solidarity

Unlike the individual actions that we can all do (going shopping for a neighbour who



can't go out, sharing information on social networks, etc.), this activism, by developing and putting into practice community proposals, has disruptive potential because it reveals the failure of a system founded on individualism and competence, generating a response based on compassion and solidarity.

This process is extremely important for mobilising people, as it makes it possible to transform fear and pain into anger, feeds discontent and encourages the identification of those responsible. Similarly, a new narrative can also be observed that is spreading in several countries, including Mexico, which reveals how the “true” virus is capitalism. These arguments are strengthened by reports from environmental organisations, such as the WWF, which show the links between COVID-19, the destruction of ecosystems and industrial meat production.

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Returning to direct action by grassroots movements, we can also say that, as well as mitigating social problems created by the system, it makes it possible to tie certain practices and values to specific collective emotions. Mutual support and self-managed solidarity make it possible to feed hopes that we humans are able to get past this crisis, and similarly past other crises like the one that will follow, including climate collapse. This is relevant in particular for young people who feel powerless with regard to what is happening (pandemics, climate collapse, more precarious lifestyles, etc.) and lack hope about the future.

An emotional impact by grassroots activism can be observed on the most vulnerable people, such as older people and undocumented migrants, so that these individuals feel less alone and vulnerable and acquire a feeling of security with regard to the community where they live.

Furthermore, these experiences are able to channel moral emotions such as indignation and outrage about being considered 'disposable' or 'expendable' citizens, anger and mistrust towards the authorities that cynically show the number of deaths (a small number, in their view) as an achievement of their administration, respect towards those who are suffering, admiration towards those who keep working in order to maintain the basic services during the pandemic (from doctors and nurses, to street cleaners, garbage collectors and those who provide us with food) making it possible to break away from a state of narcissism.

## **Emergence of a counter-hegemonic emotional culture**

Our reading of these grassroots activism experiences is that, as well as helping people, they feed a counter-hegemonic emotional culture, which will be needed not only to overcome this pandemic but also the other crises that we will have to face, such as the climate crisis. Normality... has brought us to where we are... we still have time to create another reality.

To be able to overcome the neoliberal system that has been built and strengthened thanks to the spread of an individualistic culture based on suspicion and fear of people who are different from us, in which blame is always directed at other individuals, where human and non-human lives are devalued and happiness is measured by consumer goods and social visibility, etc., we must build a new world with love, compassion, solidarity and respect towards all human and non-human living things, and where blame, anger, indignation is expressed towards those who prioritise wealth and economic growth over life.

we are still only at the beginning of a much wider and more painful crisis than we are seeing now, and we don't yet know the consequences, although we can already see them because the system that believes that those most vulnerable to the virus are expendable will also inflict damage on the recovery of economic losses. Despite this, all is not lost, because thousands of people are mobilising together around the world to open up cracks and weaken a system whose intentions are clearer than ever.

We don't yet know if these experiences will be able to strengthen counter-hegemonic feeling rules to weaken the cultural component of the system, and even less if they will be able to slow down the economic and political crises that are on their way. But we definitely know that everything that is being done will be needed to build other worlds and this will be everyone's responsibility. It is very likely that there will be no normality to which to return, because the crisis will leave very deep social wounds and fractures, but we also know that normality is what has brought us to where we are and we still have time to create another reality.

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