

Book Review

Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*, London; New York: Verso, 2020, pp. 128, \$14.95 (paperback)

Reviewed by Scott L. Cummings

Dean Spade's provocative new book, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*, proves the adage that big things come in small packages. As the title suggests, the book advances a grassroots theory of transformative social change, rooted in the concept of "mutual aid," that is at once theoretically rich and deeply practical. Its pages crackle with the urgency of the moment. The book is a vibrant call for systems change—overthrowing deeply ingrained structures of oppression and demoralization—while also speaking directly to individual barriers to solidarity-building and how to overcome them. In this way, Spade succeeds in issuing a searing critique of the causes and consequences of decades of disinvestment and discrimination, while offering hope that things can and will get better. This is no small feat, captured in the book's powerful coda demanding a more just society: "That is the world we are fighting for. That is the world we can win" (148).

Although Spade is a successful legal scholar, *Mutual Aid* is not a book of traditional legal scholarship. To the contrary, it is a political broadside, how-to guide, and self-help handbook rolled into one; something that can nearly fit into your back pocket, to be pulled out for inspiration in dark moments or for instruction in spaces of activism. Calling this work nontraditional is not a criticism. To the contrary, it is one of the fundamental challenges that the book lays out: What does it mean to do scholarship that matters during this period of unprecedented upheaval, pain, mobilization, and backlash? As COVID-19 has exposed so many deep-seated inequalities, it has also reminded us of the ephemeral nature of our time in this world and has caused us to more deeply consider how best to spend it. In this way, the form of the book is as important as its content.

Spade seeks to speak beyond the legal professoriate, beyond academics altogether, to engage a wider audience of activists and community members

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who are doing the hard daily work of deepening democracy, but perhaps lack the critical framework, tools, and language to frame and motivate their efforts. Spade is masterful at using multiple platforms of communication—print, video, online—and this is another important intervention in that regard. At a basic level, Spade’s conscious decision about format calls into question the appropriateness of reviewing this book in a journal targeting the U.S. law professor class. Clearly, we are not the book’s intended audience. However, as I will suggest in this review, *Mutual Aid* does, in fact, have much to teach us—often in unexpected ways—about the collective work we do as teachers grappling with how to convey what it means to build just law in this moment and beyond.

There is scholarship that adds empirical facts to the world and scholarship that serves as a polemic to galvanize change. *Mutual Aid* is squarely in the latter category: a tightly argued tract that aspires to revolutionize the way we think about how progressive social change happens. Revolutionary thinking, to be effective, must engage in a very specific sort of intellectual work: It must sharply define a vision of the good, assert why that vision is “new,” set that vision against forces bent on its destruction, and lay out a concrete path to realizing the vision that inspires hope and feels achievable in practical terms. Spade’s book successfully follows this formula.

The first part of the book is devoted to laying out the vision of mutual aid, which Spade defines as “collective coordination to meet each other’s needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them” (7). Spade’s basic claim is: “In this context of social isolation and forced dependency on hostile systems, mutual aid—where we choose to help each other out, share things, and put time and resources into caring for the most vulnerable—is a radical act” (8). In Spade’s conceptualization, mutual aid projects advance three principles: They “meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need” (7); they “mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements” (12); and they “are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors” (16). Spade offers many examples of this type of mutual aid work, such as:

- “Black Panther Party’s survival programs, which ran throughout the 1960s and 1970s, including a free breakfast program, free medical clinics, a service offering rides to elderly people doing errands, and a school aimed at providing a rigorous liberation curriculum to children” (9).
- “The Young Lords brought people into the movement by starting with the everyday needs of Puerto Ricans in impoverished communities: they protested the lack of garbage pickups in Puerto Rican neighborhoods, hijacked a city mobile x-ray truck to bring greater tuberculosis testing to Puerto Rican communities, took over part of a hospital to provide health care, and provided food and youth programs for Puerto Rican communities” (10–11).

- Efforts to pool resources in Black communities to provide insurance, care for the sick, and pay for burials, which “have addressed Black exclusion from white infrastructures by creating Black alternatives” (12).
- Spade’s own work as a lawyer with the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), a law collective providing free legal help to trans and gender-nonconforming people, in which “[p]eople seeking legal services for these problems would be invited to participate in organizing and become part of SRLP, working on changing the conditions that had brought them to the group” (13).

Spade’s definitional project runs into an immediate challenge. Given the nature of the examples offered, how is “mutual aid” different, if at all, from charitable work that goes on every day and has long been a central part of U.S. civil society but is not “radical” in the way that Spade advocates? To answer this question, Spade pivots from definition into critique. As he puts it: “We should be very clear: mutual aid is not charity. Charity, aid, relief, and social services are terms that usually refer to rich people or the government making decisions about the provision of some kind of support to poor people—that is, rich people or the government deciding who gets the help, what the limits are to that help, and what strings are attached It is designed to improve the image of the elites who are funding it and put a tiny, inadequate Band-Aid on the massive social wound that their greed creates” (21). Spade’s attempt to distinguish mutual aid from charity is compelling as a rhetorical strategy. Spade is brilliant at framing big concepts in powerful and accessible terms. Who isn’t against rich people deciding what is best for the poor?

As the central focus of this critique, Spade homes in on the “massive non-profit sector, which benefits rich people more than poor people,” since “elite donors get to run the show” (23) and “the nonprofit system creates a tax shelter for rich people” (25). To illustrate, Spade asserts that “poverty-focused and homelessness-focused nonprofits are essentially encouraged to *manage* poor people: provide limited and conditional access to prison-like shelters and make people take budgeting classes or improve their sobriety. They do not do the more confrontational and effective work that grassroots mutual aid groups do for housing justice, like defending encampments against raids, providing immediate no-strings health care and food to poor and unhoused people, fighting real estate developers, slumlords, and gentrification, or fighting for and providing access to actual long-term housing” (24). Spade makes many excellent and legitimate points about the massive constraints on the American “nonprofit industrial complex” (as others have called it), including (perhaps especially) pointing out the limits imposed by powerful donors. In Spade’s terms, “[n]onprofitization was designed to demobilize us, legitimizing unjust systems and hiding the reality that real change comes from movements made of millions of ordinary people, not small groups of paid professionals” (25–26). Instead, he promotes “volunteer-based” mutual aid projects that “avoid the careerism, business approach, and charity model of nonprofits” (59), while cautioning against fundraising “to pay staff, [since] there is a greater danger of

institutionalization and pandering to funders, because someone's livelihood will be impacted if they lose the funder's favor" (105).

I appreciated the radical vision that Spade presents of communities coming together and using pooled resources untainted by Big Philanthropy to challenge entrenched systems of power. In one particularly eloquent passage, Spade puts it this way: "As we deliver groceries, participate in meetings, sew masks, write letters to prisoners, apply bandages, facilitate relationship skills classes, learn how to protect our work from surveillance, plant gardens, and change diapers, we are strengthening our ability to outnumber the police and military, protect our communities, and build systems that make sure everyone can have food, housing, medicine, dignity, connection, belonging, and creativity in their lives" (148). Because they are so compelling, these examples left me wanting to know more specific mechanics: about how groups work in the messy world of American politics to connect individual acts to system transformation; how community self-help projects around food provision, health care, and legal services scale up to challenge structural oppression; and how mutual aid groups amass resources to perform systems change (or do without them) in ways that do not also impose significant limits on action.

Radical activism, in Spade's view, can be scaled up in decentralized fashion by "building more and more mutual aid groups," such as "working to create local energy grids using solar power" (40-41). How to connect decentralized activism to broader networks to build power, without undermining their autonomy, is one of the most vexing questions for those who study and participate in social movements. A fundamental lesson of social movement theory is that mobilization requires resources, and resources come with strings attached. There is a robust debate over whether movements are demobilized by fundraising and organizational maintenance, or whether the pursuit of resources and organizational stability is necessary to pursue long-term social change objectives, particularly through periods of limited political opportunity. *Mutual Aid* poses this question as an existential challenge to twenty-first-century progressivism.

While Spade's book correctly forces us to think deeply about the costs of "nonprofitization," I wondered whether the abolitionist critique sometimes swept too broadly. In chart form, Spade frames the battle of mutual aid versus charity (read as traditional nonprofit work) as a battle between deprofessionalism, consensus decision-making, and radical politics versus grant-funded, elitist, hierarchical, nonconsensus-based, depoliticized work (Chart 1). However, there are many nonprofit leaders and activists who are committed people who give up money, security, and fame to work on the front lines of community-building and social change. These people often bring important experiences and expertise that they apply back to advancing community interests and seek to be integrated into the movement-building work that Spade promotes—even though they are from well-off backgrounds, are well-educated, white, or otherwise privileged. It is important to fight against hierarchy, saviorism, and domineering decision-making enabled by privilege and systems of power, as Spade points out, but many people working in these spaces come to community discussions

with humility and respect, and want to learn more about how to do solidarity-building work better. Spade's critique made me think of how mutual aid might build partnerships with allies in the nonprofit sector, ultimately encompassing and redirecting nonprofit work toward more effective social change.

Spade is advocating abolition and not reform. As he puts it: "Elite solutions to poverty are always about managing poor people and never about redistributing wealth Despite the fact that they pitch themselves as the solution for fixing the problems of the current system, nonprofits mostly replicate, legitimize, and stabilize that system" (26). Yet I was surprised by the choice to make nonprofits the central target of the book's critique—instead of the frighteningly destructive radical right. Though it was written during the reign of one of the most racist and rapacious presidents in American history, barely is a word spoken about the forces of right-wing extremism arrayed against democratic institutions and values, no matter how imperfect and unrealized. To the contrary, Spade trains most of his harshest criticism on nonprofit professionals pursuing careerist objectives on the backs of the people they purport to help. For a book predicated on building solidarity, I found this discordant—reinforcing a type of intra-left division that disserves the very solidarity-building project Spade seeks to advance.

I also found some of Spade's examples of positive mutual aid work to be in tension with his critique. Indeed, many of the groups uplifted as exemplars of mutual aid throughout are, in fact, nonprofit organizations, which made me think that the real challenge is to better understand how nonprofit status—as opposed to particular organizational and individual choices about social change philosophies, strategies, and tactics—causes demobilization. Also, the link between small-scale self-help and large-scale system reform is often underdeveloped. One of the recurrent examples of good mutual aid is Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR), which is itself a nonprofit organization that operates across a number of states. A key illustration of mutual aid involves a group of MADR organizers after Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico who "found out about a government warehouse that was neglecting to distribute huge stockpiles of supplies. They showed their MADR badges to the guards and said, 'We are here for the 8am pickup.' . . . They were eventually allowed in, told to take whatever they needed" (18). In this way, Spade argues, MADR activists helped throw off the yoke of "undemocratic infrastructure" (20).

Similarly, Spade recounts the work of Oakland Power Projects (OPP), which emerged in response to the fact that when members of Black communities call 911, police come and hurt or kill those they are supposed to help. In response, "the OPP works to train people in communities impacted by police violence to provide emergency medical care for gunshot wounds, chronic health problems like diabetes, and mental health crises. If people can take care of each other, they can avoid calling 911 and avoid a confrontation with the police. This strategy is part of broader work to dismantle policing and discrimination . . ." (54). There are other examples: groups like Creative Intervention, which is spotlighted for producing a guide on community support and problem solving to address sexual violence; or the OUTside the System Collective, another nonprofit that

persuaded business owners to provide a place for queer and trans people to run into when threatened with violence in the street. The problem is not with the examples or the work—all of which is critical—but that the examples seem out of synch with the scale of oppression and are used to denigrate other good projects that seem not much different.

In this regard, I caught myself asking throughout the book: What does the pathway to systems change through mutual aid look like? Spade helpfully shows us the sort of activism that does *not* lead to systems change: professionalized nonprofits that “are urged to be single-issue oriented, framing their message around ‘deserving’ people within the population they serve, and using tactics palatable to elites This pattern of anti-solidarity incentives and practices has been devastating for movements as nonprofitization has taken hold . . .” (14–15). Yet, aside from noting that mutual aid provides the best “onramps” (96) for people to participate in radical movements by letting them work on issues that directly affect them, the book generally avoids thorny problems of mobilization and reform. There are some examples of how mutual aid generates the solidarity that “builds and connects large-scale movements” (14), but while long on rhetoric, they tend to be short on details of how this actually occurs.

At bottom, Spade makes a powerful argument against the “false separation of politics and injustice from ordinary life,” advocating instead for a “robust” view of social movements that “create vibrant social networks in which we not only do work in a group, but also have friendships, make art, have sex, mentor and parent kids, feed ourselves and each other, build radical land and housing experiments, and inspire each other about how we can cultivate liberation in all aspects of our lives” (27). This is a compelling vision with which many would agree; but to succeed in toppling injustice, it requires more allies, strategies, and resources. It is true that connection with mainstream actors always presents the potential for marginalization, cooptation, and failure—but what transformative movement has not confronted and had to overcome those very problems? Spade does not engage the question of what constitutes social movements, their internal contradictions and deficiencies, or how mutual aid may feed into their generation and longevity. One of its main conclusions of social movement research is that movements are complicated and always operate along multiple tracks, with grassroots protest strategies interacting with and informing law reform and legislative campaigning. There are risks and pitfalls throughout; but without those multiple strategies and tactics moving forward in concert, grassroots energy fizzles. Mutual aid is an essential component of these strategies, not an alternative.

Ultimately, *Mutual Aid* raises the important question of what genuine change looks like and who gets to lead it. Is change about making American democracy better—resisting capitalism, racism, sexism, and other scourges within the existing framework—or is it about scrapping our system and creating something else through genuine revolution? It is reasonable to believe that American democracy is irremediably flawed and should be jettisoned for something better. But until the revolution comes, the best strategy is to gain more power in governance.

In Spade's account, when government is mentioned, it is as the counterpart to nonprofitization: a force that abuses, ignores, criminalizes, and coopts. As an illustration, Spade points to USDA's free breakfast program in schools, which was undertaken as a response to the Black Panther breakfast program as a way to coopt and demobilize the Panthers. In Spade's view, government programs are "necessarily limited," and though potentially reaching more people than mutual aid, they are not as good because "they usually exclude particularly vulnerable people" (36).

It is essential to learn more about how mutual aid might positively interact with and reshape government institutions; how it might play an affirmative role in supporting movements that create programs of government policymaking and reform, which seems essential in a time of coordinated and powerful assaults by right-wing extremists on government institutions. While it may be true that "capitalist, imperialist" systems are "designed to transfer far more wealth toward the populations those systems were designed to support: white people, rich people, straight people, and men" (37), the solution cannot be to opt out and give up on the ideal of an accountable and responsive democracy. In this regard, Spade rightly emphasizes that, to achieve "a society organized by collective self-determination, where people get a say in all parts of their lives rather than just facing the coercive non-choice between sinking and swimming" (40), movements must avoid the "dangers and pitfalls" of elite professional control, which can absolutely advance disempowering visions of "saviorism and paternalism" (49). A central lesson of *Mutual Aid* is teaching all progressives how to widen the circle of solidarity to "work hard to remain oppositional to the status quo and cultivate resistance" (51) that is essential to building a better future.

The last chapter of the book, "No Masters, No Flakes," was a revelation—a wellness guide wrapped in a series of training modules. This is where Spade rolls up his sleeves and talks about the nuts and bolts of creating "participatory, transparent" group decision-making structures (65). You can almost see Spade in the community facilitating a mutual aid discussion, with detailed advice on good meeting facilitation ("start and end on time," "write out an agenda") (92). In this chapter, Spade makes a compelling case that our organizations must enact the principles we want to see advanced in the broader world. We cannot promote egalitarian social change through groups that do not practice those same values: "[W]e must build strong structures for our projects if we want this work to be effective at saving lives and mobilizing people" (66). Chart 2, offering a helpful framework for organizing mutual aid groups, contrasts the "dangers of [the] default approach" to "alternatives" that emphasize "horizontal decision-making," "[c]ultivating a culture of group participation, feminism, anti-racism" (49). Spade then presents the risks to group work: "secrecy, hierarchy, and lack of clarity," "over-promising and underdelivering, nonresponsiveness and elitism," and "scarcity, urgency, competition" (68–69). He lays out principles for "what we want instead": "leaderless and leaderful" groups, with "accountability to community being served, especially its most vulnerable members,"

with “cooperation” and “generosity” that promote “staying it in for the long haul” (70, Chart 3).

I deeply appreciated the care with which Spade synthesizes and presents these principles, which he spends the second half of the book helpfully unpacking. A key focus is on the benefits of and “basic steps to consensus decision-making” and flat organizational structures (79). While long on mechanical details (e.g., how to organize a meeting along consensus decision-making principles), it is short on discussion of real examples where this works. Spade argues that such decision-making creates better decisions, more buy-in, and lower potential for cooptation. But if all that is true, why isn’t it used more widely? What happens when groups grow big and delegation and specialization are more important? Spade does address the tension between consensus and scale when he talks about the need to create “fast-paced” decisions: “A quick-response group that has two or three people who are well-versed in the group’s principles can tell if something is easy to respond to quickly, or if it is more complex and needs to go to a larger group for decision. The quick-response group is also responsible for letting the whole group know immediately what quick decision was made so that others in the group are not surprised to find out . . .” (88).

One of the most arresting part of Spade’s book is his discussion of leadership. Not only does it speak to the challenges of building power, it resonates more broadly with our experiences balancing our quest for meaningful collective work and community with the pursuit of individual achievement and recognition. As mentioned, Spade is no fan of “domineering leadership” characterized by a “my way or the highway” approach that is self-promoting, arrogant, superior, and outcome-oriented; which values people who are good at talking and commanding, concerned about reputation only, suspicious, and impulsive; and cares most about elites, maintaining control, and micromanaging (99–101, Chart 8).

To counteract disempowering leadership, Spade presents “a cautionary note on fame”: “When we get our sense of self from fame, status or approval from a bunch of strangers, we’re in trouble” (102–103). Instead, he asserts that true leadership “means cultivating a desire to be beautifully, exquisitely ordinary just like everyone else. It means practicing to be nobody special.” I was quite moved by this idea of self-effacement as a model of leadership. This struck me as so important, yet so contrary to the prevailing cultural ethos of one-click recognition, and certainly contrary to the way we operate as law faculty and, consequently, the lessons we impart to our students. What I took away from Spade’s analysis was a fresh understanding of the barriers to productive and meaningful work—not just as activists—but as teachers and lawyers, which should cause us all to pause and reflect upon our environments and to think hard about what we might do to change them to avoid the pettiness and stress that accompany narrowly individualistic professional projects. In this regard, I suspect that many of us might find it all too familiar to read Spade’s description of the signs of burnout: “feelings of resentment,” “feelings of competition with other groups,” the “desire to endlessly be given credit for our work,” “feeling overwhelmed,” “hoarding information or important contacts,” “paranoia and

distrust about others in the group,” and “having no boundaries with work” (110). Rather than directing negativism at one’s surroundings or colleagues for engendering these feelings, Spade suggests that through mutual aid principles “the compulsive worker, over-worker, or control freak might come to understand their needs in the following ways: ‘If I hate everyone I’m working with or feel like I am going to die or like I have to stay up all night working, this is probably about something older or deeper in my life, not about the current work/workplace/group/coworker’” (117).

In the end, Spade’s vision of mutual aid suggests that structural change happens not only through group work, but through individual self-reflection and care. He urges readers to think more deeply about the psychological factors that impede solidarity, insightfully noting: “We have the strongest feelings about people who are closest to us” (120). He asks us to “[g]et curious about our raw spots” and “to realize that our raw spots belong to us, rather than being hostage to them” (122). When in conflict with a colleague, he suggests we should “use direct communication before using gossip and social media” (124) and ask ourselves: “Am I building my obsession with someone’s faults?” (125). He reminds us that before we shut people out or condemning their character, “Every one of us is more complex and beautiful than our worst actions and harshest judgments” (126). And he strikes a chord when he advocates working “joyfully” and describes what a joyful worker has: boundaries, reasonable goals, room for the unexpected, realistic time allotment, ability to prioritize, flexibility, calm, pleasure in working, openness to the moment, a recognition of when to rest, and the ability to stay in the now (128–29, Chart 9). Key to joyfulness is avoiding perfectionism with feelings such as: “If I don’t strive, I am a lazy and useless person . . . I should already know everything about this topic. Any mistake will expose me as a fraud” (49). To counteract these feelings, Spade helpfully proposes we use a “mad map”: “A guide we can make for ourselves that we can turn to when things go sideways or we find ourselves slipping into more difficult stages. A mad map can be like a gift to your future self, to help navigate the potentially dangerous waters of stress or conflict (133).

I began this review by saying that law professors are not Spade’s target audience. Yet as I read these passages, I became convinced that we would all should be. If it is true, as Spade argues, that we need to practice the world we want to create, then law professors would do well to heed Spade’s pages of advice. We cannot create healthy, compassionate, empathetic, service-oriented, and justice-seeking lawyers if we are insular, status-seeking, and self-regarding. His principles of leadership and joyful work have a lot to teach faculty who struggle to sustain our own communities and teach meaningful work to the next generation. Amid the constant pressure to pursue likes, hits, downloads, high h-indexes, cites, T14 status, and the other algorithmic metrics of immediate notice that count as success in our complicated world, Spade’s ultimate message—that meaning derives from sustained collective engagement in respectful communities oriented toward goals that transcend self-interest—is a powerful message that we all would do well to remember.