Raging Against the “Neoliberal Hellscape”: Anger, Pride, and Ambivalence in Civil Society Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the USA

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Abstract: Do volunteers and civil society groups entrench or subvert neoliberalisation? We contribute to this debate by utilising data from 662 self-administered questionnaires and 78 semi-structured interviews with adults who made and distributed personal protective equipment (PPE) in response to a failed federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA. The state’s failure to protect Americans angered PPE makers, even as they worked to address PPE shortages. Many purposefully assisted populations marginalised by neoliberal policies, taking pride in their ability to help. Although makers generally did not seek to reform the institutions that had failed them, our results indicate that civil society groups may challenge neoliberalisation by rallying communities to mitigate its worst impacts. Instead of being a passive conduit for neoliberalisation, PPE makers’ efforts in the USA were more accurately characterised by ambivalent engagements with neoliberalisation that sometimes bolstered collective efforts to challenge neoliberal governance and its associated inequities.

Keywords: COVID-19, civil society, neoliberalism, disasters, pandemic

Introduction
Politicians, development officials, and academics granted increasing attention to individuals and organisations in civil society as neoliberal governance strategies “outsourced” the responsibility to address social problems to these groups (Leap...
et al. 2022; Rosol 2012). Beyond whether individual volunteers and organisations can fulfil their newfound obligations, a key question concerns whether they can effectively rework and challenge ongoing neoliberalisation (DeVerteuil et al. 2020; Dolhinow 2010; Kimura 2016). Defined as the always incomplete, uneven processes of deploying governance strategies informed by the ideological tenets of neoliberalism, neoliberalisation continually modifies governance strategies to interface with the shifting socio-historical particularities of places (Darby 2016; Peck et al. 2010; Springer 2010). Some contend that state institutions subvert grassroots resistance to neoliberalisation by relying on volunteers to alleviate the worst social consequences of welfare cuts, privatisation, and market deregulation (Jessop 2002). Others illustrate that outsourcing can prompt reforms and challenges to ongoing neoliberalisation (Argent 2005; Darby 2016; Leap et al. 2022). Whether and how volunteers and civil society groups buttress and/or challenge the inequities associated with neoliberal-inflected governance remains an open question whose messy answers are especially important given the critical roles these groups play in neoliberalising places (DeVerteuil et al. 2020).

We address this topic via 662 self-administered questionnaires and 78 semi-structured interviews generated between July 2020 and January 2021 with volunteer personal protective equipment (PPE) makers who fabricated and distributed PPE in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA. We use the term “makers” because respondents often referred to themselves as such. Study participants also regularly utilised machine sewing and 3D printing equipment, and libraries, entrepreneurial centres, and universities often include these technologies in “maker spaces” (Stalp 2020; Stalp et al. 2018).

Personal protective equipment makers often linked their efforts to neoliberal understandings of citizenship that frame individuals and civil society groups as being responsible for ensuring the well-being of their communities (Kimura 2016; Rose 1996). However, our results do not support the argument that civil society groups working to address social problems associated with neoliberalisation necessarily entrench neoliberal governance. Individuals creatively navigate the constraints and opportunities presented by neoliberalisation as they work to address its shortcomings (Cahuas 2019; Larner and Craig 2005; Leap et al. 2022; Molinari and Pratt 2021; Neely and Lopez 2020; Park and Richards 2007). We argue makers’ efforts were messy, ambivalent engagements with neoliberalisation that had the potential to bolster collective efforts to reorganise neoliberal institutions in more just and equitable manners.

Through their grassroots efforts, makers alleviated PPE shortages and social inequalities intensified by ongoing state withdrawal and neoliberal production strategies in the USA. Makers regularly excoriated federal responses to the pandemic as grossly inadequate, and some described their efforts as a pointed form of resistance to racial and class inequities associated with social welfare cuts, privatisation, and global manufacturing strategies. As makers organised PPE production and distribution efforts, they also fortified existing relationships with others and/or created new communities. Because strong social networks are vital to collective efforts to reform state institutions and upend systemic inequalities (Bell 2016; Gamson 1991; Snow et al. 1980), the challenges these communities
could present to neoliberalisation should not be overlooked. Although our data generation timeframe precludes us from addressing how PPE makers have continued responding to the ongoing pandemic and neoliberalisation, by the start of 2021 some maker groups transitioned into efforts to address social inequities associated with neoliberalisation beyond PPE access as shortages were increasingly alleviated.

These results document initial civil society responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA. “Moments of crisis always reveal a great deal about the nature of neoliberalisation as an adaptive regime of socioeconomic governance” (Peck et al. 2010:95), and the reciprocal exchanges of caring in civil society that emerged in response to COVID seemed to present opportunities to fundamentally rethink the emphasis on individualism and competition at the heart of neoliberalism (Springer 2020). However, we show that volunteers and groups in civil society simultaneously challenged and reproduced neoliberalisation as they worked to alleviate some of the worst social problems associated with the pandemic in the USA. Echoing recent analyses that implore scholars to consider how the mundane work of volunteers in civil society consistently creates opportunities to subvert neoliberalisation (Cahuas 2019; Darby 2016; Williams et al. 2012, 2016), we show that as makers created PPE they regularly challenged neoliberal conceptualisations of citizenship while also producing communities that could contest ongoing neoliberalisation.

We first introduce literature linking communities, civil society, and neoliberalisation. After detailing our data and methods, we analyse how makers produced both PPE and communities capable of challenging neoliberalisation. We conclude by detailing the significance of these results.

**Sustaining Communities Amidst Neoliberalisation**

An ascendant governance strategy in countries such as the USA and UK since the 1980s, neoliberalisation selectively withdraws and expands state responsibilities in uneven, place-specific manners (Peck and Tickell 2002) to facilitate the continued accumulation of wealth by private interests (Harvey 2007; Somers 2008). Deregulating financial markets, globalising production strategies, and repeatedly cutting welfare programs, taxes, and labour protections in pursuit of neoliberalisation presented communities with new challenges and proposed solutions (Millbank and Pabst 2015). The continued expansion of the penal system in the USA, for example, has become an economic development strategy (Eason 2017) that disciplines those marginalised by neoliberalisation (Freshour and Williams 2020; Wacquant 2010). In contrast, “commoning” (community production and distribution) responds to such cuts with democratic, community-controlled networks that produce and distribute needed goods (DeAngelis and Harvie 2013), such as masks.

Neoliberalisation is associated with efforts to privatise social programs and services, but it has also regularly involved “outsourcing” the welfare of individuals and communities to volunteers and civil society groups (Eliasoph 2012; Fyfe and Milligan 2003a; Rosol 2012), especially in places that pursued austerity politics following the 2008 global financial crisis (DeVerteuil et al. 2020; Featherstone...
et al. 2012; Hall 2019). Defined as the portions of a society that are neither part of state institutions nor for-profit entities, civil society includes individuals who volunteer in their communities and sprawling organisations such as churches and non-profits (Fyfe 2005; Somers 2008). By shifting greater responsibility to civil society, neoliberal advocates contend state institutions can cut wasteful spending while empowering individuals and groups to utilise their specialised skills to creatively address problems in their communities (Larner and Craig 2005).

Instead of providing services, state institutions have become responsible for “activating” civil society to address social problems (Rosol 2012). (In)formal neoliberal governance strategies work to produce citizens more amenable to voluntarily shouldering responsibilities previously provided by the state (Argent 2005; Fyfe 2005; Larner 2000; Morison 2000; Rose 1996; Rosol 2012). Volunteers and civil society groups are portrayed as “magic bullets” or “panacea” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Fyfe 2005) that can efficiently address complex social issues such as unemployment (Williams et al. 2012), food insecurity (Williams et al. 2016), and socioecological disasters (McQuarrie 2012; Peck 2006).

Advocates insist civil society groups providing services to their communities can help build new social ties, strengthen existing networks, and produce engaged citizens (Fyfe and Milligan 2003a; Turner 2001). Despite the individualism and competition that are central to neoliberal ideologies (Springer 2010), it should still be possible to build communities of active citizens linked by feelings of solidarity in neoliberalising settings (Fyfe 2005; Leap et al. 2022; Molinari and Pratt 2021; Neely and Lopez 2020). Contemporary research on community production and distribution, referred to as commoning, is illustrative. Commoning refers to the process of a community independently self-managing its own resources on behalf of the community at large, and/or to use community-owned resources (also referred to as the commons) to produce and distribute needed resources (DeAngelis and Harvie 2013; Federici 2011; Huron 2015). For example, during the early months of the pandemic, volunteer PPE makers pooled resources such as material, elastic, and printer filament and skills including sewing and 3D printing to meet the need for PPE. Social networks served to identify needs and deliver PPE to individuals, hospitals, businesses, and schools. In some cases, makers utilised publicly held resources such as 3D printers in community maker spaces to make this PPE.

Although commoning efforts can be short-lived and fail to fully meet collective goals, participating in commoning can prompt individuals to reconceptualise their relationship to civil society, state institutions, and private interests so that they become more likely to engage in ongoing efforts to reorganise their communities in more just and equitable manners (Federici 2011). Even urban commons composed largely of strangers can function effectively to meet material needs by building networks of participants who continue to actively engage with each other (Huron 2015). This is especially significant because, as those studying disasters (Erikson 1976) and social movements (Bell 2016; Gamson 1991; Snow et al. 1980) stress, social networks are central to individuals’ well-being and successful efforts to address social problems.
The Messy Politics of Civil Society Amid Neoliberalisation

Abstract notions of a self-balancing market seamlessly meeting the needs of a society fail to reflect how private markets are (de)regulated and the consequences therein (Molinari and Pratt 2021; Polanyi 1944). Neoliberalisation is transformed by and exacerbates place-specific economic, racial, and gender inequalities (Abramovitz 2006; Cahuas 2019; Roberts and Mahtani 2010; Somers 2008). The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act illustrates how processes of neoliberalisation rely on fusing neoliberal strategies with the variegated inequalities that permeate particular places (Springer 2010). Touting stereotypes of Black “welfare queens” popularised in the USA, proponents argued that forcing low-income mothers and their children off welfare rolls would solve a host of social problems (Jimenez 1999; Kelly and Grant 2007). Alternatively, conservatives claimed, such women could embrace “family values”, marry, and become economically dependent on husbands and/or civil society aid services. The results for these women and their families were dismal, but this was deemed acceptable by the state (Abramovitz 2006).

Under what conditions civil society groups contest social inequalities is an open question (DeVerteuil et al. 2020; Dolhinow 2010; Kimura 2016). Voluntarism should not be romanticised as a purely altruistic social activity involving individuals working harmoniously to reorganise their communities in more just and equitable manners (Cahuas 2019; Cheung Judge 2020; Eliasoph 2012; McQuarrie 2012; Lawson and Elwood 2014). Even when civil society groups are created with the explicit goal of “empowering communities” (Lederman 2019; Thomas 2018), state institutions can “parasitise” these groups (DeVerteuil et al. 2020) and subvert collective resistance to neoliberalism by using them to alleviate some of the harshest social problems of neoliberalisation (Jessop 2002).

The organisational arrangements of civil society groups and their formal relationships with state institutions are especially important to whether these groups entrench and/or challenge neoliberalisation (Fyfe and Milligan 2003a; McQuarrie 2012; Spade 2020). The “Imagine Flint” development plan for Flint, Michigan, is notable. Before civil society groups were invited to participate in the planning process, state officials determined that maximising real estate values was the primary goal of the plan. Consequently, the same neoliberal governance strategies that facilitated Flint’s water crisis in 2014 continue to structure land uses and service deliveries (Lederman 2019). Though it is important not to oversimplify this dichotomy (Williams et al. 2012, 2016), grassroots groups that avoid official partnerships with state institutions and corporatised non-governmental organisations seem more apt to purposefully challenge neoliberalisation in the immediate and long terms (Fyfe 2005; Fyfe and Milligan 2003b; Spade 2020; Thomas 2018; Wolch 1999).

Civil society groups have sometimes been conceptualised as passive “conduits” or “puppets” that are strategically exploited to promote neoliberalisation (DeVerteuil et al. 2020; Williams et al. 2012), but evidence suggests that volunteers and civil society groups working to address social problems can cultivate resistance to neoliberalisation (Darby 2016; Leap et al. 2022; Spade 2020). The mundane civil
society work of addressing problems amidst neoliberalisation consistently presents opportunities to modify and subvert this governance strategy (Cahuas 2019; Williams et al. 2012). Through increased civic engagement, individuals can increase their awareness of social issues facing their communities, acquire new skill sets, and build the senses of solidarity upon which collective resistance to neoliberalisation depends (Argent 2005; Cahuas 2019; Park and Richards 2007; Spade 2020). This includes building solidarities across social differences and inequalities that are salient within particular settings (Lawson and Elwood 2014), which is integral to mobilising the sustained collective efforts required to continually challenge the shifting features of ongoing neoliberalisation (Spade 2020). Though civil society work is often aimed at addressing problems within local communities, it can “feed into broader social and political movements” (Featherstone et al. 2012:180).

Civil society is often valorised as a neutral playing field where individuals can harmoniously work together (Zerilli 2014), but the same inequalities that structure state institutions, private companies, and communities also inform both participation in civil society and the outcomes of such participation (Cahuas 2019; Cheung Judge 2020; Eliasoph 2012; Featherstone et al. 2012; Pabst 2018; Spade 2020; Zerilli 2014). The increasing reliance on women to sustain communities through civil society engagement in many neoliberalising settings is notable (Larner and Craig 2005; Roelvink and Craig 2005). When combined with long-standing expectations that women are best-suited for duties associated with the domestic sphere of caretaking, the neoliberal emphasis of self-help can require and simultaneously depoliticise women’s civil society involvement (Dolhinow 2010; Kimura 2016). Celebrating white, middle-class women who are supposedly content to happily toil away at home making PPE, for example, erases the political potentialities created by participating in crafting practices associated with presumably apolitical, domesticated femininity (Hall and Jayne 2016) while simultaneously distracting from the racialised and classed inequities that require marginalised women of colour to produce PPE in factory settings for paltry wages (Hong et al. 2021; Pham 2020).

**Data and Methods**

This analysis employs 662 self-administered online questionnaires and 78 semi-structured phone interviews generated with US adults between July 2020 and January 2021. Both data generation techniques were approved by the authors’ institutional review boards. Inviting PPE makers to complete either a questionnaire or a telephone interview accommodated their time constraints and comfort with different communications technologies. On average, respondents completed questionnaires in 33 minutes or interviews in 53 minutes. Responses to both data generation techniques were similar in content, but interviews generally produced more detailed answers through probing. Utilising an iterative, open-ended approach to data analysis meant to avoid imposing findings onto respondents (Charmaz 2003), we read and re-read responses to open-ended questions on questionnaires and interviews to identify key themes such as the perceived duty to help others and anger at the federal government.
We used professional, personal, and virtual networks to distribute flyers and invitations to participate in the study. Similar to previous research on disaster responses (Penta et al. 2020), social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit were especially useful for identifying and contacting potential participants because makers often used social media to mobilise PPE production efforts. Because individuals who acquired raw materials and organised distribution networks were just as important as makers in getting PPE into the hands of users, they were included in the study.

As Table 1 illustrates, women, whites, and relatively well-educated individuals are overrepresented in the sample as compared to the population of the USA. Other analyses of responses to the pandemic in Western countries that distributed calls to participate through online platforms reported similarly skewed results (Craig and Churchill 2021; Friedman et al. 2021). The dynamics of making and volunteering in the USA could also help explain the sample demographics. Sewing and 3D printing requires specialised equipment that presents classed barriers to participation (Stalp 2020), and the gendered and racialised dynamics of volunteerism in the USA have often encouraged white women to engage in volunteer efforts at higher rates than other groups (Pham 2020). Although we purposefully contacted maker groups comprised primarily of people of colour to try to further diversify our sample, it is also possible that non-response bias skewed the sample.

We cannot generalise our findings beyond our sample, but our dataset does have some notable strengths. The regional composition of questionnaire respondents is within ±5% of population estimates of the four Census Bureau regions of the USA (US Census Bureau 2019). We also rely on 740 different individuals’ first-hand assessments of an ongoing global disaster as it unfolded. Consequently, makers often provided meticulously detailed descriptions of their efforts to survive a worsening disaster that threatened their lives, families, and communities. By focusing on respondents’ accounts of their experiences participating in PPE production in this analysis, we analyse the mundane experiences and practices that make civil society work capable of both furthering and undermining neoliberalisation (Cahuas 2019; Darby 2016; Williams et al. 2016). All interview respondents are referred to by pseudonyms in the following analysis, while questionnaire respondents are referred to more generally, using age, race, gender, and regional demographic information.

The Cascading Failures of Neoliberalisation in the USA During a Global Pandemic

Neoliberalisation is an ongoing process of “compromise, calculation, and contradiction” that melds neoliberal governance with the socio-historical particularities of the places in which it is implemented (Springer 2010:1029). State responses to COVID-19 in the USA were no different (Saad-Filho 2020). State-mandated business closures disrupted the continued concentration of wealth, while expanded unemployment benefits contradicted the continued rollback of state supported social welfare programs. Nevertheless, long-standing and contemporary neoliberal
governance strategies were centrally important to federal and state level responses to the pandemic.

Disasters are shaped by state policies that precede and follow the onset of the disaster (Freudenburg et al. 2009). From local to federal levels, decades of cuts to public health infrastructure in the USA undermined state institutions’ abilities to mount an effective response to the virus (Interlandi 2020; Maani and Galea 2020). Ill-prepared to implement an effective monitoring regime, the national strategic stockpile of PPE was rapidly depleted after not being replenished following previous uses such as during the 2009 swine flu pandemic (Brown 2020).

Contemporary state responses were also informed by neoliberalisation. Some politicians contested business closures, or refused to implement them altogether, on the grounds that economic production should be granted priority over all other considerations—even life itself. Dan Patrick, Lieutenant Governor of Texas, argued that senior citizens were willing to die in order to avoid economic disruptions (Knodel 2020). Some officials’ refusal to mandate face masks also followed...
the neoliberal contention that individuals, and not state institutions, should be responsible for managing health risks (Kimura 2016). Even if they acknowledged the health threats posed by COVID-19, many Republican governors regularly invoked “personal responsibility” to justify avoiding mandatory mask orders (Washington Post 2020).

Global manufacturing chains were disrupted by the pandemic exactly when demand for PPE skyrocketed (Bradsher and Alderman 2020). Instead of implementing a coordinated national strategy for manufacturing, purchasing, and distributing PPE, the US federal government diverted procurement responsibilities to states, private businesses, and individual consumers. An intense competition for PPE ensued. Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson proclaimed, “It literally is a global jungle that we’re competing in now” (McCaskill and Ollstein 2020). When asked during an unofficial COVID-19 taskforce meeting whether the federal government would intervene, President Trump’s son-in-law and advisor, Jared Kushner, reportedly exclaimed, “Free markets will solve this. That is not the role of government” (Eban 2020).

Once apparent that neither state initiatives nor private businesses could meet PPE demands, individuals and civil society groups were asked to produce and distribute massive amounts of PPE (Leswing 2020; Pham 2020). Hospitals, nursing homes, schools, and prisons began soliciting PPE donations from the general public through television and social media platforms (Leswing 2020; Ma 2020), and makers began receiving requests from family, friends, and co-workers. Makers were “activated” (Rosol 2012) into the commons by these requests. Like the parents who began voluntarily monitoring radiation after the Fukushima nuclear power plant meltdown (Kimura 2016), individuals and groups in civil society began working on a largely voluntary basis to address the shortcomings of neoliberalisation during an evolving disaster, a process akin to commoning as communities took responsibility for independently meeting their needs for PPE.

Effectively responding to the rolling socioecological crises typifying the Anthropocene requires making skills to be (re)deployed (Carr and Gibson 2016). Working alone or as part of groups, makers first figured out how to creatively leverage their skill sets, tools, and materials to fabricate PPE. Next, they worked out how they could reliably source more materials and skills to produce and distribute PPE on larger scales, often for communities that had long been systematically marginalised by neoliberalisation. This regularly involved mobilising existing groups such as quilt guilds and/or forming new networks. Aside from those fabricating masks, face shields, and ear guards, there were often “point people” who managed supplies and demand with extensive spreadsheets and a robust social media presence. Once the “how” was formalised in makers’ groups, they worked to continually identify those who needed PPE. In this study, makers’ production ranged from two units to over 250,000 units.

Disasters “offer windows of opportunities to challenge unequal power relations” (Moreno and Shaw 2018:220), but this potential has repeatedly been undermined by “disaster capitalists” (Spade 2020) who leverage crises to promote privatisation and the continued outsourcing of state responsibilities to civil society (Gotham and Greenberg 2008; Katz 2008; Woods 2009). Although they
voluntarily worked to alleviate the cascading failures of neoliberalisation in the USA, makers’ efforts to sustain themselves and their communities through voluntary civic engagement did not simply perpetuate neoliberalisation. Makers regularly levelled especially pointed criticisms against neoliberal governance strategies while also building communities capable of supporting direct challenges to institutions implementing such strategies.

Good Citizens Taking Pride in Making PPE and Building Community

Repeatedly, when asked why they began producing PPE, makers responded that they had the skills and materials required to help family, friends, and/or community members in need. In response to the questionnaire item that asked why she began making PPE, a Southern white woman in her 30s who was involved with multiple grassroots networks across her region explained:

It felt like the right thing to do, as I had the resources to do so. I also run a non-profit that has a portion that teaches the community about how to use 3D printing to better a person’s life. It felt like it was our calling to help those in need.

Similarly, a white woman in her 50s living on the West Coast explained, “I was connected with local groups trying to make and distribute masks to essential workers as soon as it was clear they were needed”. Likewise, a multiracial man in his 30s who was living in the South and 3D printing tools for other makers, described his motivations as a “mixture of supporting my community and supporting my wife and friends who were making cloth masks and needed tools to help the process”.

Although makers regularly justified their efforts through reference to individual “can-do-ism” in pursuit of community assistance (Rose 1996; Rosol 2012), they also maintained that their efforts strengthened social ties with others. Confirming predictions that dense social networks can be established and bolstered as individuals work to address the social fallout of neoliberalisation (Federici 2011; Fyfe 2005; Hall and Jayne 2016; Thomas 2018; Turner 2001), makers indicated that one of the key benefits of producing PPE was that they felt closer to family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, and other makers. When asked in the questionnaire how much they agreed with the statement that “My efforts to make [PPE] have helped me strengthen relationships with individuals that I knew before the pandemic began”, of the 617 respondents in our sample who answered the question, 61.59% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Just 10.21% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, while 28.2% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Beyond strengthening existing social ties, makers noted that participating in PPE production efforts enabled them to establish new social networks. Of the 620 respondents in our sample who responded to the questionnaire item that “My efforts to make [PPE] have helped me establish new relationships with individuals that I did not know before the pandemic began”, 43.39% indicated they either agreed or strongly agreed, 27.58% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, and 29.03% neither agreed nor disagreed.
Makers repeatedly stressed the significance of these social ties in their responses to open-ended questions. In response to the questionnaire item that asked about the best parts of making PPE, a multiracial woman in her 50s living on the East Coast who helped organise a network of 400 makers that produced and distributed over 40,000 masks across the region wrote:

The social part has been incredible. I have met so many people and have been deeply moved by the volunteerism in my community. People came out of nowhere and stepped up to help. They gave us money, time, materials, and incredible support. I made many new friends and felt useful every single minute of every day. I didn’t sleep a lot and I didn’t exercise as much as I normally do but it made this horrific experience rich, rewarding and filled with learning.

Responding to the same question, an Asian woman in her 40s living on the West Coast who belonged to the Auntie Sewing Squad, a national maker network created in response to the pandemic, echoed these sentiments when she noted:

In [the Auntie Sewing Squad], the members care about and for each other. “Auntie Care” of cookies, hand salve, swag, home-grown produce, Zoom yoga sessions, etc. means each of us feels supported and appreciated for the work we do.

When asked during her interview how she anticipated talking about the pandemic in five or ten years, Dawn, a Black woman in her 40s living on the East Coast who sewed masks for her family so that she could avoid competing with hospitals for masks, explained:

I would say if I’m lucky enough to survive it (which I’m not counting on), but if I should be that lucky I think I’ll say there was a time when the government tried to kill us. Our president tried to kill us. And we as a nation, as a country, had to try and fight back against that. It’s obviously unseen right now whether or not we’ll be successful. But there has been a mobilisation effort, like I’ve not seen before in some ways, surrounding COVID. That kind of cross cuts race and class and gender and sexuality and these other categories of difference in some ways, right? So, in that way it’s sort of been like we’re all in this together. But I also get very triggered because I’m just like, “No, we’re not”. Right? No, we’re not. We’re not all in this together. We’re all in this very differently. In fact, you know, your COVID experience is really different from mine.

Dawn stressed that social inequalities had produced very different pandemic experiences. Nevertheless, highlighting the potential of civil society work to cultivate solidarity across social differences (Cheung Judge 2020; Huron 2015; Lawson and Elwood 2014; Spade 2020), Dawn also emphasised group efforts to address the pandemic helped build social ties that bridged significant social cleavages in the USA.

These social ties often enabled makers to produce and distribute higher quality PPE at a more rapid pace as they consolidated their efforts within the commons. Makers routinely leveraged interpersonal ties to identify who needed PPE, source materials amidst shortages, access specialised tools and skill sets, and learn new techniques to produce better PPE. A group formed in the Pacific Northwest provides an especially illustrative example. Boasting roughly 1,000 volunteers, this group produced and distributed tens of thousands of PPE units nationally by
leveraging the unique skills and resources possessed by the various members of
the group. Jacob, a white man in his 30s, explained how he had assisted the
group primarily as a volunteer coordinator:

I’m one of those guys that just likes to jump in and help when they can. And so that
was the position they needed, and so I said, “Alright, let’s do it”. Being in Boy Scouts
and having done that since I was age 11. Doing Eagle Scout projects. I used to help
coordinate events. I’ve done the volunteer side of things, and I know how hard that
can be. Just to have someone handle it until the process is more fleshed out. So that’s
why I jumped in. They needed somebody. I was like, “Hey, I’ve done this before. I
can jump in and help where I can”.

By linking individuals who had access to different technologies and unique skill sets
that included hand and machine sewing, 3D printing, fundraising, volunteer coor-
dinating, and online platform design, this group practised commoning (DeAngelis
and Harvie 2013) to come together and perform the labour necessary to manage
and produce large quantities of PPE (Martindale et al. 2021; Schnittka 2021).

They were not alone. From coast to coast, social connections were employed
to fabricate and disseminate PPE broadly and efficiently. A separate group of mak-
ers in Oregon 3D printed sewing tools for a California quilt guild. A Southern vol-
unteer fire department captain used her laser cutter to produce face shield
components, while department members assembled them. A Midwest maker
space used their laser to cut fabric and assemble mask kits that were then dis-
tributed to sewists for construction.

**Raging Against the “Neoliberal Hellscape”**

Makers indicated their efforts stemmed from a personal responsibility to help
others in need, but a vast majority did not provide full-throated embraces of neoliberalism. Civil society volunteers often associate ambivalent meanings and
emotions with voluntarism in neoliberalising contexts (Cahuas 2019; DeVerteuil
et al. 2020; Rosol 2012; Williams et al. 2016), and makers routinely expressed
intense displeasure with some of the central ideological tenets of neoliberalism.
Negative sentiments regarding price gouging were indicative of makers’ common
refusal to accept the neoliberal doctrine that profits must be prioritised over people.
Makers also levelled especially pointed criticism against state institutions for relying
on volunteers and not being more proactive in responding to the pandemic.

Makers’ distaste for prioritising profits was especially clear when they criticised
those perceived to be price-gouging individuals trying to acquire PPE. Although
some criticised anyone who was making and selling PPE instead of only donating
it, perhaps revealing a classist assumption that no one needed to sell PPE to get
by economically, the strongest condemnations were levelled against those per-
ceived as taking advantage of makers’ kindness in order to pursue profits. A white
woman in her 50s in the Mountain West, who was working with over 200 mem-
bers of her local quilt guild to produce thousands of masks, provided an especially
memorable example when explaining why she made PPE. Stressing her objection
to the co-optation of community labour by private interests, she wrote:
I worked in a quilt store until mid-March 2020 when I was laid off. About three weeks after I was laid off, I found out that my previous employer was asking people [from my guild] to volunteer masks and then they were SELLING THE MASKS (and charging prices way beyond just the cost of materials)! Given the incredible need for masks especially early in the pandemic, I thought that they had a lot of gall to sell masks at a profit especially when volunteer labour was being used, so I decided I would make AND DONATE masks so that people wouldn’t have to buy them from this shady outfit.

Although a handful of makers indicated governmental responses to the pandemic had been heavy handed, most emphasised considerable resistance to the neoliberal tenet that state institutions should not play a leading role during a national emergency. Responding to the questionnaire item regarding why she began making PPE, a white woman in her 40s on the West Coast wrote, “Because this country is a shit show and relies on volunteers to respond to a crisis”. Regarding whether she believed any individuals, groups, and/or organisations should be doing more in response to the pandemic, an Asian woman in her 30s on the East Coast echoed these sentiments in the questionnaire:

The government needs to do more to supply PPE and offer free/quick testing. It’s ridiculous that an individual (me) is slaving away to fulfil a need to hospitals that will bankrupt you if you’re sick. I’m donating masks to help the nurses and doctors as individuals, but it doesn’t sit right with me that hospitals and healthcare [are] privatised.

Similarly, at the end of the questionnaire when respondents were given the opportunity to contribute anything that they thought was important for us to know, an Asian woman in her 40s living on the West Coast who had sewn hundreds of masks and helped to distribute materials to a grassroots network of over 700 makers scattered across the USA replied:

I should not have to be doing this. I should not have to learn to sew, deplete my savings, and injure my body to provide basic protective equipment to others in my community. This is a failure of our government. I am furious. This is unacceptable. We can shoot a Tesla into outer space, but we can’t make sure that everyone in our society gets a simple fabric mask and has access to culturally competent health education?

Benjamin, a white Midwestern man in his 40s who was coordinating PPE acquisition for hundreds of students in a university marching band, provided an especially memorable statement during his interview that indicated makers’ efforts to respond to the deprivations of privatisation could prompt reformulations in how they conceptualised the relationship between citizens and the state (Federici 2011). When asked for his opinions on governmental responses to the pandemic, he proclaimed, “I think the pandemic has illuminated for people who may not have noticed before the sort of neoliberal hellscape that contemporary American life can be”. Although Benjamin was unique because he explicitly named neoliberalism, as the preceding statements illustrate, he was just one of many makers who angrily panned the claim that individuals and civil society groups should always stand at the ready to voluntarily sustain communities when state institutions failed to do so.
The initial contours of the pandemic, including PPE shortages, were also shaped by the globalised, on-time production strategies pursued by corporations as part of neoliberalisation during the preceding decades (Hong et al. 2021; Pham 2020; Springer 2020). Nevertheless, although makers occasionally lamented relying on Amazon to source supplies, their strongest criticisms were overwhelmingly reserved for federal responses to the pandemic instead of market-based entities. Some indicated that federal initiatives were either “excellent” or the best that could be hoped for given the circumstances, but makers generally expressed considerable frustration that federal institutions were not responding to the pandemic more proactively. Words such as “pathetic”, “atrocious”, “appalling”, “embarrassing”, “criminal”, “incompetent”, “terrible”, “disaster”, “disgusting”, and “shameful” routinely peppered answers when makers were asked about their opinions on national political leaders’ responses to the pandemic. President Trump and partisan rancour in the Senate were regular targets of such statements. Aside from Dr Anthony Fauci, who was often singled out as an exception worthy of praise for his work as the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, federal efforts to strengthen the economy, coordinate health interventions, and distribute PPE were repeatedly slammed as grossly insufficient. Interestingly, and in contrast to some other studies that find the state comes into direct conflict with those who resist its abuses via harassment or outright blocking community efforts (e.g. Spade 2020), makers in our study did not experience any state resistance or hostile actions, instead identifying the problem as state inaction in the face of a crisis (Hong et al. 2021; Martindale et al. 2021; Schnittka 2021; Stalp 2020).

When asked for her thoughts on political leaders’ responses to the pandemic at the national level, a white Appalachian woman in her 50s who was working with a national service organisation to produce and distribute masks shared this in the questionnaire:

They could not have done a more deplorable, unchristian, uncaring, irresponsible job than they did. Absolutely NO leadership. No course to follow. No sympathy for those who were dying. No factual truths were relayed to the people. It was all lies, denials, mishandling of scientific guidelines. I would be amazed to find one single positive thing the federal government did. The stimulus money was a joke (support an American for six cents a day). The unemployment benefits ran out before it was safe to go back to work. The loans to “small businesses” were handed out under the table to corporations and friends. It was a total disaster and continues to be so.

When asked in the questionnaire whether any individuals, groups, and/or organisations should be doing more in response to the pandemic, a white woman in her 50s on the West Coast who was working with local volunteer organisations to fabricate and distribute masks shared this in the questionnaire:

The government response has been pathetic at the federal level. While it was fantastic that the community response was so good, it should not have been necessary. PPE should have been available from federal stockpiles.
Here, the respondent juxtaposes the failures of privatisation with the effectiveness of commoning efforts (Federici 2011) yet, like many respondents, does not accept that the commons should hold responsibility for meeting such needs.

Dawn also focused direct attention on PPE during her interview when she was asked for her thoughts on governmental responses to the pandemic. After noting that she was pleased with the officials in her state, Dawn linked PPE shortages and the total number of COVID-19 deaths in the USA at the time of her interview to federal pandemic initiatives:

It’s the federal level, for me. I think that’s part of the hard part too is you’re sitting and you’re making masks and you’re thinking, “My government has failed me so poorly that I have to do this”. That, “I have no other choice but to do this to save our lives”. And that was the feeling in the beginning. Then it became, “My government is trying to kill me”. Actively trying to kill its citizens by not providing any PPE. By hijacking shipments and all the other, you know, shenanigans that have gone on. And so it’s also, there’s a lot of sadness in the process because you’re having to do this based on the fact that somebody really wants you dead. And that feels hyperbolic to say. And it feels ridiculous, but there’s no other way to describe it once you have like 150,000 people dead and it was completely avoidable.

**Pivoting from PPE to Confront Neoliberalisation: Assisting Communities Marginalised by Neoliberal Governance**

Paralleling civil society efforts in other neoliberalising settings (DeVerteuil et al. 2020; Williams et al. 2012, 2016), and feminist commoning efforts to communally meet the needs of those most marginalised by privatisation (Federici 2011; Thomas 2018), makers regularly sought to assist groups who were marginalised by state and market institutions. Prisoners, Indigenous groups, workers in minimum wage jobs, and unhoused populations were the most common groups facing barriers to acquiring PPE that were referenced by makers. In response to the questionnaire item regarding why they began making PPE, a white nonbinary individual in their 30s in the Southwest who was working with a national network of makers that was created to distribute PPE wrote, “Masks were not widely available when I started. I started making them for others when I learned about the Covid related death rate at Navajo Nations. It felt important to be a part of something life-affirming”. Similarly, a white woman in her 30s who was working with local volunteer networks in the Southwest noted, “To help protect people. I sold masks and caps and used the money to buy materials to make masks for mutual aid efforts locally (pueblos and reservations, unhoused people, community organisations, or anyone else who requested!)”. An American Indian woman in her 40s on the West Coast who had made over 300 masks for a volunteer organisation responded, “To keep vulnerable communities alive”.

Some individuals and groups also expanded their efforts to assist marginalised communities beyond providing PPE once shortages began to be alleviated approximately mid-year. The Auntie Sewing Squad, a community of makers living...
across the USA that produced and donated over 250,000 masks after forming in response to COVID-19, began supporting winter clothing and medical supply drives intended to benefit resource-poor Lakota and Navajo communities (Hong et al. 2021). These efforts conformed with the neoliberal understanding that civil society groups are well-suited for helping those who are marginalised by state institutions and/or unable to access goods through markets (Fyfe 2005; Williams et al. 2012, 2016), but interpreting such efforts as simply perpetuating neoliberalisation or accepting its failures (Federici 2011) would be an oversimplification.

Given the significance of social ties for generating and sustaining social movements capable of addressing institutionalised inequalities (Bell 2016; Gamson 1991; Snow et al. 1980), the communities makers constructed and fortified are especially noteworthy. We cannot assess whether and how these communities might mobilise to challenge neoliberalisation in the future. However, some could undergo “care-justice” transitions (Williams et al. 2016:2308) to purposefully leverage their collective skill sets and solidarities to confront neoliberalisation and its associated inequities (Federici 2011).

Austin, a white man in his 20s who helped organise a sizeable community of makers that produced and distributed tens of thousands of pieces of PPE through the coordinated efforts of hundreds of volunteers, provides a telling example. As PPE orders began to slow during the summer of 2020, protests related to the murder of George Floyd emerged across the USA. The city where Austin’s group was based was no exception. During his interview, Austin casually mentioned that the group had started producing and distributing devices that allowed protestors to use water bottles to rinse tear gas from their eyes. After being asked to elaborate on how the group started supporting the protestors, he explained:

A lot of our volunteers have been participating in the protests. I think two or three of them are acting as street medics. They’ve been helping people, and they’re the ones that have actually requested these washers. So, I spent a couple days doing a design, and then we got something set up to go on a standard water bottle for your eyes basically. It’s more of we’re trying to help where we can, and if we have the capacity and we have the ability, why not?

Austin’s community of makers was created to produce PPE, but the social ties, technical know-how, and tools present within their newly formed community could be “resourcefully repurposed” (Darby 2016) and “extended as part of alternative political projects” (Featherstone et al. 2012:180).

This enabled them to support those who were being gassed nightly by law enforcement officials as they protested state institutions whose neoliberal contours have been centrally important to expanding police presence in communities of colour (Freshour and Williams 2020; Wacquant 2010). Communities created through civil society efforts to alleviate PPE shortages can also support collective efforts to challenge and reform state institutions exacerbating inequalities through neoliberalisation (Federici 2011). Makers were not necessarily entrenching neoliberalisation in the immediate or long terms by alleviating social problems exacerbated by neoliberal governance strategies.
Discussion and Conclusion: Ambivalently Subverting and Perpetuating Neoliberalisation

Makers in the USA voluntarily produced and distributed PPE to address shortages intensified by decades of neoliberalisation. An overwhelming share of makers drew on neoliberal conceptualisations of citizenship when they indicated that self-sufficient individuals should help others in their communities whenever they can (Rose 1996). Echoing volunteers in other neoliberalising settings (DeVerteuil et al. 2020; Rosol 2012; Williams et al. 2012, 2016), this was a limited, messy embrace of neoliberalism. Many makers indicated that prioritising profits over the well-being of people was immoral, and they were generally adamant that federal responses to the pandemic were grossly inadequate. Some even explicitly noted their intense displeasure with civil society being activated to voluntarily produce and distribute PPE.

There was mixed evidence regarding whether individual volunteers and groups in civil society perpetuate neoliberal-inflected governance strategies and/or whether they can present sustained challenges to neoliberalisation via commoning. Civil society groups that eschew partnerships with state institutions and larger, corporatised civil society groups are expected to be more apt to confront neoliberalisation (Carr and Gibson 2016; Fyfe 2005; Fyfe and Milligan 2003a, 2003b; Spade 2020; Wolch 1999). Our results do not necessarily contradict this expectation, but makers generally did not indicate that they were explicitly seeking to challenge neoliberalisation even while producing PPE through grassroots groups. They were much more likely to describe their efforts as helping to alleviate social problems through individual or small group efforts as opposed to addressing the structural factors that produced the problems.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude civil society groups working to alleviate social problems associated with neoliberalisation during the pandemic will necessarily entrench neoliberal governance. It is possible that the urgency of makers’ work precluded a broader, immediate effort to purposefully challenge and reform state institutions. Paralleling civil society efforts to address social problems in other neoliberalising settings (Fyfe 2005; Huron 2015; Lawson and Elwood 2014; Morison 2000), makers built and bolstered communities permeated with solidarity as they worked to address PPE shortages. These communities had generally not pivoted into commoning efforts to purposefully transform neoliberalisation by the time that makers completed questionnaires and interviews, but this does not preclude future such efforts emerging from these communities.

As volunteers and civil society groups work to alleviate problems in their communities, they can also create and strengthen groups with greater potential to collectively challenge neoliberalisation (Darby 2016; Federici 2011; Leap et al. 2022) on scales of space and time that extend beyond the immediate futures of particular communities (Cahuas 2019; Featherstone et al. 2012; Spade 2020; Williams et al. 2016). Providing clear evidence of this potential were the groups that had pivoted into collective efforts beyond PPE. Some had transitioned into providing more general support to populations marginalised by decades of neoliberalisation, while another group fabricated and distributed PPE to protestors attempting to reform the US criminal justice system. By leveraging the social ties, technical
know-how, and resources available in their newly built communities, these groups supported collective efforts to address the shortcomings of neoliberalisation beyond PPE shortages in their local communities.

Scholars have started exploring the evolving interrelations between social inequalities and COVID-19, with particular attention to inequitable labour arrangements (Craig and Churchill 2021; Friedman et al. 2021; Hong et al. 2021; Martindale et al. 2021; Pham 2020; Schnittka 2021). Given the significant responsibilities granted to civil society in neoliberalising contexts, it will be important to fully consider how civil society work reproduces and/or subverts inequalities associated with race, gender, class, and other significant dimensions of inequality. Paralleling civil society responses to other social problems (Lawson and Elwood 2014; Spade 2020), solidarities across significant social cleavages can be built through civil society responses to COVID-19. However, this does not necessarily indicate shifts toward greater equality among the participants and beneficiaries of civil society because solidarities across social cleavages erase neither the histories nor future trajectories of those inequities (Cheung Judge 2020; Spade 2020; Zerilli 2014). As Dawn explained, though individuals may cooperatively work to respond to the ongoing pandemic, “we’re all in this very differently” because social inequalities shield some while exposing others to greater harms associated with COVID-19.

As individual volunteers and civil society groups continue responding to social problems associated with the pandemic, whether the communities that are bolstered through these efforts challenge and/or further neoliberalisation will be especially important to consider. Based on our results, we should not expect dichotomous instances of volunteers and civil society groups either entrenching or subverting neoliberalisation as they work to respond to a pandemic that seemed to present an opportunity to fundamentally upend neoliberalisation (Saad-Filho 2020; Springer 2020). Like previous civil society efforts to address problems associated with neoliberalisation (Williams et al. 2012, 2016), volunteers and civil society groups responding to the pandemic seem likely to produce ambivalent subversions and perpetuations of neoliberalisation and its associated inequities.

Neoliberal-inflccted governance strategies that have intricately shaped the meanings of citizenship and the relationships between state institutions, markets, and civil society will be centrally important to emerging civil society responses to the pandemic in places that have pursued neoliberalisation to varying degrees over the preceding decades. Even when volunteers and civil society groups vehemently disagree with some of the tenets of neoliberalism, their efforts, like the problems they are responding to, will bear the unmistakable imprints of decades of neoliberalisation. Nevertheless, and paradoxically, the neoliberal reliance on civil society to address social problems associated with the pandemic can generate collective efforts to challenge neoliberalisation and its associated inequities.

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Research data are not shared.
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