

THE ELEMENTS OF MUTUAL AID

DOCUMENTARY
DISCUSSION GUIDE

CH. 4



◆ EXPERIMENTS TOWARD LIBERATION ◆ TOWARD THE ABOLITION OF THE STATE ◆

The spirit of Air teaches us to speak, listen, strategize, and change with the seasons. This chapter explores decision-making, managing resources without hoarding them, weighing the pros and cons of formality and scale, and making our projects accessible.



CH. 4

AIR

RUNTIME—66 mins

Before 2020, mutual aid lived in the margins of organizing spaces, rooted in radical traditions of community autonomy and antifascism. When the pandemic hit, the term exploded. But with that popularity, its political edge was blunted by a misconception that mutual aid boils down to just distributing goods.

That misunderstanding has led to burnout and apathy. But liberatory mutual aid transforms our relationships, sustains us as we fight the State, and prepares communities to defend their autonomy. It's time to resharpen mutual aid's edge together.

How do we move out of reacting to crisis and into responding with strategy and vision? How do we prepare ourselves and our communities to live freely beyond the State?

This series is a tool to help communities reflect on their efforts, build strategy together, and sow real relationships and infrastructure that will sustain us as the systems around us crumble.

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STEP 1 HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE



FACILITATION TIP: *Feel free to read the sections of this guide aloud together as a group!*

The Elements of Mutual Aid is a four-part series made to spark conversations. Today's episode is *Chapter 4, Air* and this discussion guide offers a few **QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES** to help dig into some deep conversation afterward.

Ideally everyone has a copy of this guide so everybody can help move the conversation along together.

Use the **NOTES** section at the end to jot down thoughts, the **GLOSSARY** section for helpful terms, and the **RESOURCES** section to find other powerful media.

The entire series is freely available on YouTube and PeerTube with English and Spanish subtitles. For support with organizing more screenings and discussions, visit: theelementsofmutualaid.com/screen-the-series

STEP 2 ABOUT THIS CHAPTER



Before pressing play, let's check out a few of the main ideas in this chapter. *Air* is all about the logistics of mutual aid-based organizing. We'll discuss horizontality, collective decisions, managing resources, and what it looks like to make our projects accessible.

LEARNING GOALS

- *Understand why hierarchical structures and mutual aid are incompatible*
- *Understand why building up agency in ourselves and each other is crucial to mutual aid work*
- *Think about how building accessible spaces makes our work more powerful*

Does everyone have what they need before starting the film?

STEP 3 AFTER WATCHING



3.1 THOUGHTS OR QUESTIONS?

Does anyone have any immediate reflections they want to share? Did anyone hear any terms they weren't familiar with? (*Check out the **GLOSSARY** if helpful*).

Optional: Take a quick 5-10 min break for people to use the bathroom before discussion.

3.2 SET AGREEMENTS

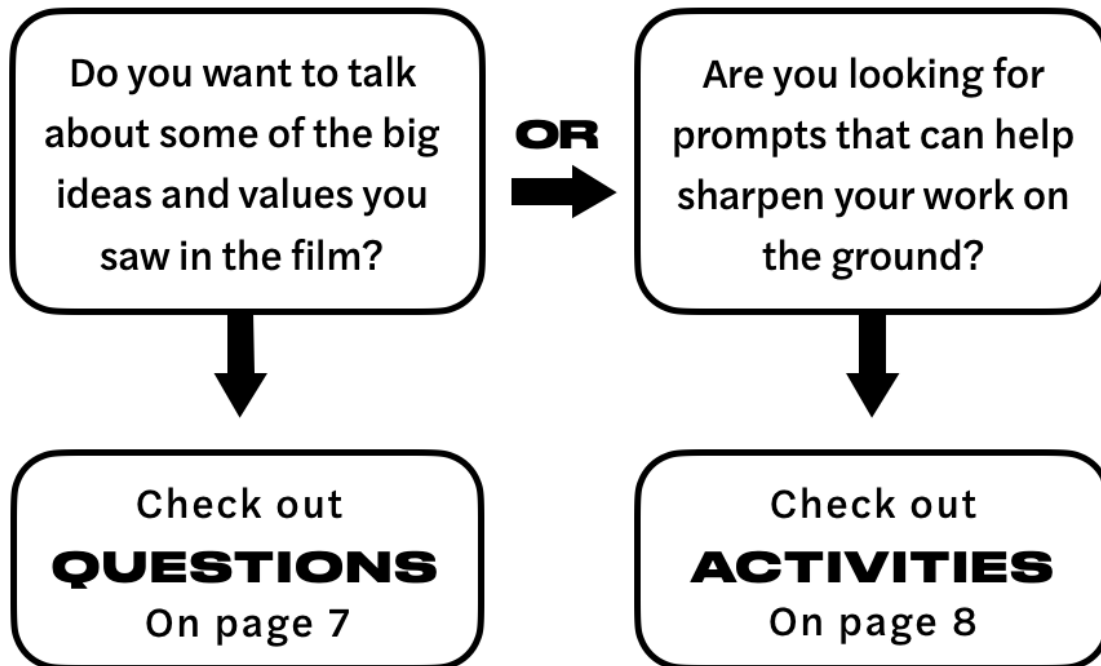
Before getting into discussion, it can be helpful to set a couple agreements to call back on. Here are some basics:

- *make space for quieter voices*
- *help keep the conversation focused*
- *be mindful of time*

Does anybody have others they want to add?

FACILITATION TIP: *If the conversation meanders, you can say something like: "That's a really great point but could we refocus on the question?" If a few people are talking a lot while others are quiet you can say: "Can we make some space to hear from voices we haven't heard from yet?"*

STEP 4 PICK A TOPIC & DISCUSS



Take a few minutes to look over the **QUESTIONS** or **ACTIVITIES** as a group and pick one to focus on. Throughout the discussion, refer back to this list if you need more inspiration.

FACILITATION TIP: *Do you have a larger crowd? Divide up into smaller breakout groups and set an amount of time for discussion. At the end of the time, have all the groups come back together and share their main takeaways.*

QUESTIONS



1. Why are hierarchical decision-making structures incompatible with liberatory mutual aid?
2. What are some values that horizontality is in tension with (*e.g., respecting people's expertise, being time efficient, organizing with a lot of people*) and how can talking about those tensions help us navigate those complexities in our work?
3. What are some different types of scarcity mentalities that show up in our organizing?
4. Have you seen examples of groups that have taken time to reflect on their work and make adjustments? How has that process made them more effective?

ACTIVITIES



1. Take some time to outline how decisions get made in your group: are there any unspoken hierarchies? Is your decision-making process accessible to the people who are most impacted? Then take some time to discuss how to address any limitations you've noticed.
2. List a few responsibilities in organizing that require a sense of agency to do (e.g., *speak up at a meeting, facilitate a conversation, initiate a project, call for accountability, etc.*). Then list reasons why people might be feel reluctant to take on these tasks (e.g., *they don't feel skilled, they aren't offered the opportunity to try something new, etc.*). Finally, list specific ways that your group could support more people feeling confident in taking action or using their voice.
3. Spend some time talking about ways you'd like your project to be more accessible (e.g., to people who speak different languages, to people with kids, to disabled people, to service industry workers, etc.). Then zero in on one of these points and come up with three next steps for starting to move toward it.

STEP 5 NEXT STEPS



It's hard to take time away from the work of caring for our communities to have these conversations. But they're so important to our ability to doing this work well and to moving intentionally toward liberation instead of just reacting to crises. We encourage communities to continue prioritizing conversations like this. Here's a couple ways to keep using this series as a tool in your community:

- *Apply key takeaways from this discussion into your organizing.*
- *Plan a screening of another chapter with this group.*
- *Plan a screening with the wider community and offer the lessons you learned here.*
- *Dive into some of the resources and form study groups to digest them.*

GLOSSARY



- **Accessibility:** A practice of making our physical infrastructure, technology, ways of participating, and cultures easier to access by people who have disabilities, who know different languages, who have kids, or who have other barriers to participating in an event or project.
- **Agency:** When we feel empowered to take action, use our voice, and put our values in to practice.
- **Consensus:** A decision-making process where each member of a group works to reach agreement on a decision. Consensus requires us to build trust, communicate, and compromise.
- **Consensus Minus One:** A modification to consensus that allows for a decision to move forward even if one person disagrees with it. However, if two or more people disagree, the group has to go back to the table and address the concerns.
- **Hierarchical Structures:** A limited number of people in a group make decisions and everyone else is tasked with carrying them out.
- **Horizontal Structures:** A group holding power collectively so that more voices contribute to decisions and more people share access to resources and information. The people most affected by decisions should be the ones making them.

- **Hub House:** A term used by West Street Recovery and Northeast Action Collective in Houston for the community-managed disaster response hubs they've built throughout their neighborhoods.
- **Iteration:** The practice of making changes to how something functions, reflecting on how it's going after a period of time, and making more changes from there. Iteration helps prevent us from getting paralyzed and allows us to try things that might not work with confidence that we can adjust them later.
- **Nonprofit Industrial Complex (NPIC):** The industry of charity organizations and philanthropists that gives out enough resources to ease poor people's suffering so they don't rise up but not enough to actually change what causes poverty.



RESOURCES



Organization, Continuity, Community

by Peter Gelderloos (Book)



5 Defensive Strategies Against Fragmentation by the
Anti-Oppression Resource & Training Alliance (Zine)



Democratic Decision Making by the Anti-Oppression
Resource and Training Alliance (Zine)



Mutual Aid Legal Toolkit by the
Sustainable Economies Law Center (PDF)



***A Space for Us: A Guide for Leading Black,
Indigenous, & People of Color Affinity Groups***
by Michelle Cassandra Johnson (Book)



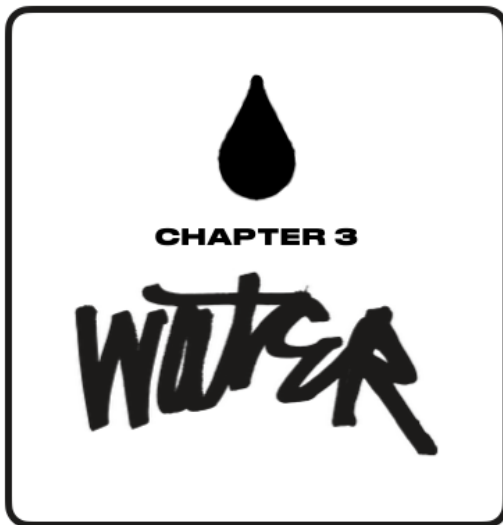
***Anarchic Agreements: A Field Guide to Collective
Organizing*** by Ruth Kinna, Alex Prichard,
Thomas Swann, and Seeds for Change (Book)



Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire (Book)



***From The Bottom Up: Strategies & Practices
for Membership-Based Organizations***
by the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (Zine)



Watch the full series for free on
YouTube & PeerTube!

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