

Community Self-Help

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To my wonderful partner Laura and to our children, Caitlin, Nico and Aaron without whom this work would have no meaning.

Danny Burns

To Toby for bringing such joy to our lives.

Colin Williams and Jan Windebank

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In the past a great deal of reliance has been placed on altruism as the sentiment which could underpin left-wing collectivist political philosophy. Our central argument in this book is that the notion of reciprocity provides a more powerful underpinning. But in letting go of pure altruism as the basis for social organisation, we want to hold onto the fact that it will always have a powerful place within society. The day before sending the first draft of this book to the publishers Danny was taking his nine-year-old son Nico on a train. During the journey, Nico was violently sick. The sick went everywhere.

Some people looked on with disdain – wrinkling their noses. Most looked on disinterested. Some were loosely helpful – offering newspaper and tissues. But as Danny struggled to ensure that his son was OK, a young woman got down on her hands and knees and helped him clear up the sick. Her hands, like his, were quickly covered in it. We recount this story in graphic detail because it shows so clearly how her instinct to help was immediate and unequivocal, and this natural willingness to help lends powerful support to our arguments for cooperation, even if it cannot be relied on as the basis for organising a whole society. If she ever happens to read this book we would like to thank her for illustrating to us all the continuing power of altruism.

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Most of those mentioned here will doubtless take issue with at least some of the ideas between the covers of this volume. Nevertheless, their interventions and inputs have played a large part in helping us to develop our ideas. As always, therefore, the normal disclaimers apply.