

The struggle to belong
Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

Amsterdam, 7-9 July 2011

Political Moments with Long-term Consequences

Debbie Becher

Department of Sociology
Barnard College, Columbia University
3009 Broadway
New York, NY 10026
USA
dbecher@barnard.edu

Paper presented at the International RC21 conference 2011

Session 13.2 Strategies in Context

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By Debbie Becher

Department of Sociology, Barnard College, Columbia University

Abstract

This paper is about one way that poor, urban residents claim their rights to cities. I call this specific type of organizing “political moments” to refer to intentionally temporary, grassroots organizing around small-scale, specific claims. The very characteristics that distinguish political moments as organizing – that they are small-scale and temporary – suggest that their impacts will be the same: limited and short-term. I argue that, on the contrary, through political moments, poor urban residents create enduring control over their parts of the city in ways that other forms of politics may not allow. The kind of organizing I call political moments is especially likely to mobilize people accustomed to being disengaged from politics. In this paper, I first detail the conditions that create opportunities for political moments and then the kind of organizing that comprises them. I explain how these kinds of opportunities and organizing combine powerfully to mobilize poor communities and secure short- and long-term gains. I then illustrate these arguments through the specific conflict that made me recognize them: a redevelopment plan for a poor Philadelphia neighborhood at the turn of the millennium. I conclude that the organizing experience of political moments develops the actors’ personal commitments and skills to access political power. It also alters established local institutions, which sometimes unwittingly open their doors to long-term local resident involvement through a temporary issue. In these ways, through political moments, poor, urban residents establish control over city resources.

This paper is about one way that poor, urban residents claim their rights to cities. I call this specific type of organizing “political moments.” The word “moment” indicates impermanence. Political signals something more. Residents create political moments by mobilizing around very specific issues affecting them. Political moments contrast with other kinds of organizing often privileged in studies of social movements. Political moments are intentionally short-lived and small scale. Resident leaders do not seek to create lasting organizations. They expect any organizations they form to dissolve once the immediate issue is addressed. Residents rarely refer to rights or other abstract ideals when they frame their claims. Their work is somewhat isolated from other struggles for rights or justice. They demand resolutions to specific problems affecting them. I thus use the term political moments to refer to intentionally temporary, grassroots organizing around small-scale, specific claims. In this paper, I elaborate on what distinguishes this kind of collective action and why it deserves special attention. I demonstrate how city residents secure change -- indeed how they secure rights to cities -- through political moments.

One of the reasons that political moments deserve notice is that they promise long-term impacts. The very characteristics that distinguish political moments as organizing – that they are small-scale and temporary – suggest that their impacts will be the same: limited and short-term. I argue that, on the contrary, political moments can secure durable changes that give a wide range of poor people access to city resources. Political moments are fleeting and narrowly focused, and even somewhat isolated, yet through them, poor urban residents create enduring control over their parts of the city in ways that other forms of politics may not make possible. The kind of organizing I call political moments is especially likely to mobilize people accustomed to being disengaged from politics. The experience can change both the individuals and the institutions that become involved. The organizing experience develops the actors’ personal commitments and skills to access political power. It also alters established local institutions, which sometimes unwittingly open their doors to long-term local resident involvement through a temporary issue. In these ways, through political moments, poor, urban residents establish control over city resources.

In what follows, I elaborate each of the issues just mentioned above, first theoretically and second through a case study. I divide the first half of the paper into four subsections to make my primary analytical points. I first detail the conditions that create opportunities for political moments and then the kind of organizing that comprises them. I then explain how these kinds of opportunities and organizing combine powerfully to mobilize poor communities and secure short- and long-term gains. I then illustrate these arguments through the specific conflict that made me recognize them: a redevelopment plan for a poor Philadelphia neighborhood at the turn of the millennium. I present the case in the same order as the analytical points presented in the first half of

the paper, beginning with the conditions that became opportunities for organizing, followed by the details of the organizing and mobilization around these opportunities (which constituted what I call a political moment), and ending with the short- and long-term consequences of the moment.

I. THEORIZING POLITICAL MOMENTS

Opportunities in Problems

Conditions that might foreshadow doom can become opportunities. A serious threat that might strip community power can help do the opposite. Often, massive changes to neighborhoods become imminent, and residents fear they have little voice in that change. Ideas to develop a big-box store or a casino, to reroute a highway or public transportation, or to assemble large plots of land for housing redevelopment can be kicked around for years by developers and politicians with residents paying little attention. Once those ideas look like real plans, the potential for quick and dramatic change catches people's attention. Even people who would otherwise ignore development planning, for instance, will focus on significant plans for change.

Individuals and organizations become politically active when they stand to win or lose a great deal. The specter of an unusually serious change to land development concentrates interests in space and time. *Specific* plans to significantly reroute traffic, build sidewalks, or construct a large residential or commercial development (as the case explored later in this paper) are all likely to draw the undivided attention of the particular people they will impact most seriously. Plans focus interests when they make clear exactly which people and which addresses will be significantly affected and when.

Individuals and organizations marshal their resources around an issue when their interests are large, immediate, and apparent. Countless ideas and plans for urban change are usually being tossed around at kitchen tables, on street corners, and in executive offices. The expectation that one of those issues is going to be realized soon motivates action.ⁱⁱ The anticipation of a massive change, concentrated in space and time, can draw the attention of those who would otherwise ignore political struggles. Put simply, even if we are accustomed to being quiet or losing fights with power, we will stand up and pay attention when issues seem big, to affect us, and to be happening now. We already know this much, but scholars have not considered how shriveling neighborhood organizations can combine with these conditions to create an even greater opening for change.

Established organizations provide crucial resources to any collective action. Even a highly motivated and skilled group of individuals will struggle without them. Novice or one-time political activists need meeting space, publicity channels, political experience,

and personal connections. People with little financial wealth and formal education might have trouble accessing these resources quickly to respond to a threat or opportunity. A range of local organizations exist in most neighborhoods. Churches, social clubs, schools, day-care centers, settlement houses, corner stores, barbershops, and other community institutions hold physical, human, political, and organizational resources crucial to the success of collective action.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet these organizations can sometimes be more of a barrier than an opportunity. As neighborhoods have changed over time, many older organizations have lost their original connections to the neighborhood residents.

A neighborhood-organization disconnect is especially likely when neighborhood wealth has declined and racial makeup has shifted. Many churches and settlement houses in the older neighborhoods of postindustrial cities, for example, continue to say they are committed to a neighborhood, but their actions betray a shallow connection. Churches often continue to serve the same congregants even after they have moved out of the neighborhood. Church leadership may resist welcoming newer residents who usually differ from the old ones by race, class, nationality, language, and more (McRoberts 2003). Settlement houses, once established to assist immigrant incorporation into particular neighborhoods lose direction once migration patterns change. Organizations persist, but with different activities at their core. Many have changed themselves into providers of social services, with fewer grassroots connections than they once had (Lasch-Quinn 1993).

Often, these community organizations struggle to survive in changing neighborhoods. Organizations may endure for a time with their original members, even after those members move away. Over time, however, as these members die or otherwise leave, the organizations suffer. Churches with disappearing congregations find themselves responsible for maintaining ambitious programming and large buildings designed for more people than currently attend. Their responsibilities to their buildings overwhelm their declining membership. Organizations' failure to incorporate new neighbors can thus become a problem for their very survival.

Older organizations struggling to retain members may therefore be particularly poised to benefit from involvement in political moments. Publicity about their involvement in political moments promises to increase hopes for their own, somewhat endangered survival. Established local organizations that have become sick and distant from the people who surround them, therefore, can have their own reasons to want to get involved in eye-catching neighborhood issues. Becoming committed to organizing around an important neighborhood issue can help older, established organizations create new, necessary community ties.

A Particular Kind of Organizing

The opportunities or conditions I described give birth to what I call political moments when a particular kind of organizing emerges. For reasons I will suggest, this kind of organizing might be motivated by the conditions just mentioned in relatively disenfranchised neighborhoods. But the conditions just mentioned by no means guarantee that a political moment will emerge. At the most basic level, to turn a moment political, in the sense I mean it, a contentious politics must develop. That is, people must take action collectively, in opposition to a defined target. But the collective action that comprises political moments, as I define them, has a particular character.

Political moments involve intentionally temporary, grassroots organizing around explicitly specific issues. Neighborhood efforts to stop or relocate specific development projects typify these small-scale, specific, short-term organizing efforts. First, people most directly affected by the issue at hand significantly direct the mobilization. Second, the claims around which people organize and the way they frame their issues are particular in focus. That is, people make claims about very specific issues, people, places, and events. They rarely explicitly connect their local claims to other struggles or even to claims about rights or justice for larger groups than themselves. They seldom invoke abstract or general claims. During political moments, people might draw attention to the concerns identified by scholars and activists as comprising a right to the city, but they almost never use the words “right to the city” or connect to collective action reaching beyond their neighborhoods’ boundaries.

Third, political moments are intentionally and explicitly temporary. People are not, at least intentionally, joining ongoing campaigns. The specific issues around which claims are made are expected to end in the foreseeable future. It is even likely that people expect even the organizations they form to dissolve once the issue is addressed. This is something different from joining issue-based campaigns led by established organizations. In this case, leaders expect that the organizing will be temporary, that its structures will disband, and that people will terminate their political activity and return home when the issue dies.

We should already expect episodes of small-scale, specific, and short-term organizing to be not only prevalent but fundamental to large-scale social movements. Social-movement scholars recognize the importance of episodic collective action. Such activity can create and cement social networks and community organizations that become resources in future bouts of activity (Tarrow 1998). Recent studies highlighting the particular importance of churches and social networks in the building of the American Civil Rights Movement suggest that large-scale social movements are built on these small-scale events (Morris 1986; McAdam 1988). Scholarship on community organizing has consistently paid attention to these seemingly smaller forms of action

(Alinsky 1971; Kretzmann and McKnight 1997; Warren 2001), and some scholars of social movements also understand specific and temporary organizing to be a type of social-movement activity (Snow, Soule et al. 2004; Flacks 2005; Staggenborg 2011). In fact, Snow and Soule (2004) claim that this kind of organizing may be more common and engage more people than the more formal, large-scale, long-term networks and organizations typically queried by social-movement researchers.

Even though particular scholars have queried or acknowledged this kind of organizing, scholarship on social movements has generally downplayed its significance, in comparison to more explicitly permanent and ideological forms of organizing. Long-term, rights-oriented organizing is usually more visible to researchers of urban-based and other social movements. Writers about urban movements, for example, tend to privilege lasting, citywide, national, and global organizing with abstract claims and goals, such as the right to housing, living wages, and environmental justice (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Marcuse 2009). To deserve consideration as urban social movements, Manuel Castells (1983: xvi) insists, organizing should consciously articulate a program for change. Mayer Zald (2000) similarly requires that collective action be “ideologically structured” to count for researchers of social movements in or out of the city.

The social-movement scholars who recognize importance of short-term specific organizing also realize that this activity has taken the backseat in research. The very things that characterize what I call political moments can lead scholars of cities and social movements to overlook them and characterize them as forms of rebellion or contentious politics with short-term impacts at best. There is, perhaps, even a bit of disdain among progressives for organizing that is local and short-lived, as the example Snow and Soule (2004) use suggests – that of NIMBY organizing. Sidney Tarrow (1998) distinguishes social movements as those collective actions that last over time and extend across space. Still, his theories of social change appreciate the importance of enduring ties among actors that can be accessed at crucial moments. He also lauds flexible rather than rigid structures for the development of social movements. By characterizing social movements by their extension over space and time, Tarrow rightly calls attention to a distinct form of social action. The problem, however, with this focus is that it can lead scholars to privilege these distinct forms of collective action and to miss other important forms.

The reasons for the oversight may be largely methodological: researchers can more easily locate large-scale, rights-based organizing. If not methodological, the reasons may be more theoretical. Perhaps political moments seem too little, fleeting, specific, and disconnected. Perhaps they appear important only to the few people directly involved or to studies of community organizations but not to larger movements for social change. Whatever the reason, the result is that organizing of the type I call

political moments too rarely informs theory of how rights demanded in social movements are won and institutionalized.^{iv} Scholars of social movements and rights to the city have not discovered the benefits of *not* making abstract claims and of *not* intending organizations to last.

The Long Arm of Mobilization

Political moments' specific and fleeting nature can make it possible to mobilize individuals and organizations that might be hesitant to engage in politics. Claims about an issue related to a specific place, rather than a more general political struggle, can actually broaden the potential for mobilizing people and organizations near that space. An expectation that the collective action will be temporary can further extend the likelihood that a broader spectrum of people will become involved. The specific framing and short-term time frame, therefore, have actual, often positive, consequences for who is mobilized.

Residents of poor, American neighborhoods are particularly *unlikely* to think of themselves as involved in "politics." Poor urban residents in the United States often turn away from issues because they are defined as political. By contrast, issues that seem relevant to their "community" engage them. They organize collectively around concrete issues related to their own neighborhoods. Issues that promise to build or threaten to distress their local community, for example, inspire them to join forces (Naples 1998; Warren 2001). Residents of poor, urban neighborhoods will become involved in what they consider community rather than political issues.

Place creates connections among people and organizations and makes allies of directly affected residents. Because of a shared place, nearby individuals and organizations may feel a responsibility and affinity for them. Physical proximity not only makes neighbors likely to help; it can make those primarily affected more likely to ask them for help. And asking is often an important precursor to participation. Framing an issue around a place increases the likelihood that nearby organizations will consider themselves uniquely available, capable, and responsible for helping. The professed commitment to place of older organizations that have lost their local ties makes involvement logical, if not recently typical. When an issue is focused on a specific change to a place, reticent people and organizations may speak out.

Ironically, residents may avoid some organizations explicitly dedicated to their neighborhood or community. The community organizations that regularly engage in politics, specifically in development issues, may seem particularly *ill* served to assist with grassroots mobilization. Neighborhood associations, community development corporations, and housing and social service providers directly engage in local politics and often represent community residents (Marwell 2007; McQuarrie 2010; McQuarrie

and Marwell 2009). But because these organizations have primary interests in their own survival and development projects, residents faced with a particular challenge may avoid alliances with them.

The expectation of *temporary* involvement in politics can and does help motivate other, less overtly political organizations and individuals to step up. The temporary nature of the organizing breaks down barriers to mobilization for individuals and for institutions like churches and cultural centers. Someone can engage in a short-lived and unique issue with little threat to an identity that usually keeps them on the sidelines. Residents and organizations who typically eschew politics will be more likely to see their role in a political moment rather than a movement. In addition, political moments can create a way for established organizations that have become estranged from their communities to test new modes of engagement. They can become involved in the neighborhood on a singular issue, without making long-term commitments. Though an issue's overt connection to government might cause some apolitical community organizations and individuals pause, its temporary nature may reduce that barrier.

Beyond Mobilization: Short- and Long-term Gains

Specifically framed and short-term organizing may be crucially important to securing residents' wins. The strategies of political moments, in and of themselves, may help residents win concessions from government and other large, powerful organizations. Temporary organizing around issues that are framed as unique encourages concessions. Politicians and bureaucrats worry about setting examples that will cost them. If they give in this time, the next group of residents will hear about it and understand the concession as their right. Therefore, they are more likely to give in to claims framed as distinct, that is not as examples of anything that will occur again.

A win on the particular issue can be an extremely significant accomplishment, but, critics may think, the effects of political moments seem to stop soon after the moment subsides. Those who overlook political moments might worry that individuals' and organizations' participation in emergent associations may last only as long as a particular issue. Perhaps, they would say, these political moments remain important as isolated and promising instances of issue-based organizing, but no more. Perhaps no other lasting or general impacts, such as increased political consciousness, political participation, or organizational capacity, result. Perhaps political moments do not deserve to be considered a part or a type of social-movement building or institutionalization of rights because they do not promise the same results (Giugni 1998). Through political moments, participants do not (by definition) develop ties to established, political organizations that might mobilize them around later campaigns. Individuals probably remain involved in politics only until the particular event is over. Their organizations only exist as long as the situation requires. Therefore, one reason

right-to-the-city and social movement scholars may have neglected political moments is that they do not seem to win particularly sizeable gains beyond the local issues at hand.

On the contrary, changes beyond the immediate issue can and do result. Focused, short-lived collective action creates broad and long-lasting changes. Participants in political moments institutionalize gains that they do not demand or anticipate, and may not even notice.

Organizing around a particular situation potentially builds local capacity by increasing a sense of power and ties among people and organizations. Involvement in political moments, like any participation in contentious politics, promises to build individual consciousness and interpersonal relationships, especially when groups are victorious. These changes are particularly notable for people who usually eschew political action. Thus, through political moments, urban residents can transform local political culture (feelings of efficacy) and networks (interpersonal ties), important impacts and building blocks of social movements (Staggenborg 2011).

These moments promise long-term impacts even beyond personal beliefs and interpersonal ties. They transform the established organizations that become involved. Political moments can recharge the dedication of organizations like churches to their immediate neighborhoods. Through political moments, established local institutions can become more available and responsive to their surrounding neighborhoods. Such adjustments might serve not only the neighborhoods' residents but also the organizations' survival. Temporary practices can spill over into how organizations approach more permanent issues like membership, leadership, and programming. Through the temporary activities of political moments, leaders might redirect the attention of established organizations to the neighborhoods surrounding them for the years to come. By helping local residents during especially visible and trying times, established organizations can build positive local reputations. Thus, the temporary and specifically focused organizing can transform organizational infrastructures, another important impact by which any a social movement might be deemed a success (Andrews 2004).

II. A POLITICAL MOMENT: A CASE STUDY

The conflict over Jefferson Square in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania from 1998 to 2000 exemplified a political moment that established rights to a city. First District City Councilperson Frank DiCicco's ideas for the redevelopment of a portion of a south Philadelphia neighborhood in the late 1990s incensed the area's residents. The white City Councilperson, a hospital owner, and other non-residents had dreamed up a plan for the city to acquire ownership of about five blocks of privately owned land, including where over 30 families lived, to be razed and redeveloped into a new parking lot for the

hospital and new, market-rate housing, complete with fences, driveways, and garages, to appeal to middle-class buyers.

Mostly African-American residents in the immediate path of the plan were angry, but they were not organized. They were in a city with highly racialized politics and in a neighborhood historically populated by white ethnic residents (though less so recently). Italian Americans and African Americans had moved into the area throughout the early decades of the century when jobs were plentiful. After the jobs and many residents had left, more African-American families moved in. But local power did not shift as quickly as jobs and populations did. One particularly important site of local power was the district City Council position, to which men who ethnically identified as Italian regularly won elections. In the late 1990s, the City Councilman's plans to redevelop what is now called Jefferson Square seemed to foretell a familiar picture. Residents knew that they would resist, but they expected a repetition of the familiar American story in which poor, African-American residents are displaced by someone with more power who wants their land.

Residents organized themselves into a focused group that spoke a collective voice and won concrete victories. Residents living in the center of the targeted area – people who usually avoided official politics -- allied themselves with neighbors, relatives, a church, and a settlement house to form a temporary organization. Through this organization, they lobbied politicians, engaged the mass media, mobilized allies, and negotiated with city officials about the plans for neighborhood change. As a result, the city adopted a revitalization plan they approved of, a plan that looked much different from the one Councilman DiCicco originally proposed. Residents won major concessions on the issue at hand. They also secured long-lasting interpersonal ties and established institutions' commitments to the neighborhood.

Opportunities in Problems

By at least the early 1990s, many of the people living in the bulls-eye of the City Councilman's "Jefferson Square Revitalization Plan" believed they had a right to their small place in the city. The area that Councilman DiCicco dubbed Jefferson Square was becoming increasingly poor after decades of decline. Poverty rates, rents, and the proportion of renters to homeowners rose. Median household incomes and home prices, adjusted for inflation, continued to drop, and many buildings were simply abandoned. A once thriving hospital where many neighbors were born and had worked bought up some of the leftover buildings, demolished them with plans to eventually rebuild. But the hospital slowly sickened and filed for bankruptcy itself, leaving the scattered lots it had purchased and its own campus vacant.

In spite of, and sometimes taking advantage of, this devastation, some families established their homes here. Residents came and stayed. One family had a particularly significant claim. The Stones^v owned several of the houses in redevelopment's way. The African-American family had moved into the neighborhood as others abandoned it. They had patiently acquired property over the years; the parents bought individual houses from their neighbors who left, and their adult children and other relatives moved in. Just before the family patriarch died years earlier, he reminded his wife and children to think about the land they owned and occupied as a pot of gold. He reminded them that those houses were *theirs*. The Stones and other mostly African-American neighbors talked about how they had come and stayed during the hard times, when jobs and families left but drugs arrived (Becher 2009).

The Stones and some of their neighbors believed that, in the time and effort they had given, they had established a right to the space beyond their privately owned plots. They established claims to the area surrounding and connecting their houses. For example, residents held regular block parties in the middle of the street and in the empty lots. Neighbors knew to go to the 1400 block of South Leithgow Street for good times every July Fourth and every time Mrs. Stone's birthday rolled around. Locals informally referred to that section of Leithgow as Stone Street. The Stones and many of their neighbors understood their right to use the neighborhood's land extending beyond what they privately owned to the larger area. Their history there and their commitment to the place, they thought, had earned them a right to control their houses and their neighborhood. Problems and all, the neighborhood was theirs.

City government's attention to redevelopment of the area scared many of these residents. It threatened their control over that space and thus hit a collective nerve. Once they heard that the city was moving on something, neighbors started talking. They were angry and fearful, and they knew that if they had a chance of winning any fight against being pushed around they needed to channel that anger into collective action. They believed government should and could respect their rights, but they knew they did not know how to make that happen. They knew they had claims that would draw public sympathy, but they realized that they lacked the political experience or the organizational resources to capitalize on their assets.

Longstanding residents of this particular area were not typically engaged in neighborhood politics and saw this redevelopment planning as one more policy arena where they lacked power. But they saw this plan as so drastically disruptive and unfair that they would not take it lying down. At first, between 1993 and 1998, when residents received flyers about planning meetings, they did not react. Throughout the 1990s, managers of the local hospital, nearby neighborhood leaders, and the City Council office had been discussing revitalization plans for the residential area north of the hospital. Some of the neighbors in the targeted area attended early meetings, voiced

their opinions, and went home to continue on with their lives. Even an immense threat of dislocation and the loss of property would mean little if it stayed in the meeting rooms but got no further.

Mobilization around the Jefferson Square plan began only after people saw evidence that government was really going to do something. The Jefferson Square Revitalization Plan sparked community organizing when it became specific and immediate, that is, when residents learned which properties were in the footprint for redevelopment and when they came to believe that city government was seriously pursuing this plan. In 1998, the plan suddenly seemed imminent. Official, bright orange signs from the City's Department of Licenses and Inspections appeared on the front doors of a small group of properties the city thought were vacant. The signs stated that the properties were dangerous and thus condemned. Because these signs were posted throughout an area only a few city blocks long and wide, residents decided that somebody was actually moving on a plan for their neighborhood. They soon learned that the City Councilperson's official plan for Jefferson Square's redevelopment threatened to forcibly take thirty owner-occupied homes, displace renters, and confiscate the property from landlords and absentee owners. The city's plan was dramatic and concentrated on a small area of about five city blocks that had one to two hundred privately owned properties. About 30 of the properties were occupied by homeowners and a few by business owners. Most of the owners were non-resident owners of vacant and occupied properties. If owners would not sell, the city would use eminent domain, the power to take property for urban redevelopment in return for just compensation. Residents became convinced that the city was actually doing something. Specific people were targeted, and the proposed change was drastic.

Mostly African-American residents heard white Councilman DiCicco saying in public meetings that the plan's main purpose was to bring the middle class back to live in an area he wanted to dub "Jefferson Square." Residents watched their City Council person, the owners of the neighborhood hospital, and even heads of nearby neighborhood organizations strategize about what they called "revitalization." When they got wind of this plan, residents were mad, but they did not know if they could fight the city and win. Though residents were enraged and believed they had a right to control the neighborhood's change, they also believed they did not have the skills to claim their rights. They knew they did not know how to win a fight with the city. They knew they would be on shaky ground even if they could take their stories public. Their houses were in bad shape. Some of them had not paid property taxes. Some were probably running drugs and guns.

At first, there was no organized voice, no particular leader or group of leaders to represent the affected individuals. The question of who spoke for "the community" frustrated early advocacy on this issue. Who should or could the Councilman listen to?

Whose wishes would and should matter as the final plan was drawn up? Homeowners who wanted to stay had different interests from those who wanted to leave; tenants felt differently from homeowners and landlords. Absentee investors had their own approaches.

Constituting a Political Moment: Organizing and Mobilization

Homeowners, neighbors, relatives, a local church, and a neighborhood settlement house banded together to create a temporary organization to fight and then negotiate with the city over the redevelopment plan. The St. John's Leadership Team represented residents who wanted to stay. Stated goals involved this redevelopment plan, nothing more. The group never organized around this event as an example for or to connect with others. They did not frame their fight around an ideological issue or connect themselves to other issue-based organizations. Residents could have allied themselves, for example, with local and national anti-*eminent domain* activism growing at the time. Or they could have accessed other longstanding social-movement organizations dedicated to the poor, to cities, to race, or other issues. They probably would have gotten resources, but for the most part they did not do this.^{vi} Most of the work of the St. John's Leadership Team was focused on gathering specific information, convincing specific people to support them, and, eventually, finding specific plans for redevelopment they could agree to. Eventually, members of the group unanimously signed a dramatically revised Jefferson Square Revitalization Plan, and the group dissolved once the plan was implemented.

That residents in the footprint of the redevelopment plan devoted themselves to the issue over a long two years was crucial to their success, but they are quick to attribute their eventual wins to the support of other individuals and groups. Looking at how the residents organized others' support can teach us about a political moment's potential for mobilization beyond immediately affected individuals. In Jefferson Square, the core people affected pulled others (who could have remained nothing more than bystanders) into the struggle.

Neighbors joined a struggle they perceived as different from the usual politics, over a decidedly local and immense issue. Residents requested help from individuals and organizations located within a few blocks of the plan's footprint. One nearby resident named Ellen, who took on a leadership role usually turned away from political meetings in South Philadelphia because she had seen that they were full of screaming and got nowhere. She saw that this time it was different. The people yelling at each other were not the usual characters, and what the city was planning to do was just too horrendous for her to ignore. In addition, the meetings seemed to her like they might actually get somewhere. People were not just blowing off steam and arguing to argue; they were trying to solve a real problem. Tammy did not live in the immediate footprint

of the plan either, but she also committed herself to helping with the organizing. As a new member of the St. John's congregation, she heard about the neighborhood development conflict and kept attending meetings, taking notes, and helping out however she could. An issue singularly affecting their little place in the city drew neighbors in to help with the fight, even when they had little particular interest in the event and no prior personal relationship with the people involved. For guidance about what to do, residents first looked to neighbors who seemed to have learned to work the system for help. At first, they followed the advice of a pair of men who had grown up in but later had left the neighborhood. One had his own construction business; the other had worked with the city on official community recreational activities. But residents still needed resources like physical meeting space that these individuals could not provide.

At first, it seemed like neighborhood organizations and associations might offer little help to the residents resisting the Councilman's plan. They turned to the preacher of the closest church with an African-American congregation. Eventually, the most active resident-organizers abandoned this preacher because they thought he was acting more in his own interests than in theirs. The area had no formal neighborhood association or community development corporation, unlike most other Philadelphia neighborhoods. Some churches and other associations sat in the neighborhood physically and were originally sustained by mostly local members. Over time, their members had moved away. Many of the older members returned for services and meetings, keeping the organizations afloat. The organizations' programs became increasingly detached from local concerns. Most visibly, predominantly white ethnic organizations formed early in the century had retained this ethno-racial identity and membership as the surrounding neighborhood had greatly increased its African-American population. Residents eventually asked some of these predominantly white churches if they could hold their meetings there. They also asked for and received help from Marcella, the community organizer for a nearby settlement house, whom they had met months earlier when she was knocking on neighborhood doors to find out what concerns people might have. The support of one of these churches and the settlement house became crucial to the successful campaign to make the revitalization plan serve the existing residents.

The decision to get involved with the conflict over Jefferson Square was hard for both the church and settlement house. At first, leaders of both resisted. It was unclear to them how relevant the issue of local development was to their organizations. They also worried about antagonizing their City Councilperson and State Senator. Like the individual neighbors mentioned above, these neighborhood organizations would have probably declined involvement in an issue framed around abstract political principles or enduring issues. Members of both boards recommended against getting involved in this issue precisely because it was so political, but they were in the minority. It scared the

leaders of the church and settlement house that the development plan directly engaged a city councilperson. If the residents had framed this issue as more abstract or permanent, the organization leaders who wanted to steer clear of politics might have won the argument.

In addition, disengagement from the neighborhood, especially at the church, was partially intentional. Internal conflicts over the organizations' responsibilities to nearby residents had been brewing for years. These issues were rarely debated explicitly. Some leaders and members fought programmatic changes that would shift the mix of members from white to black. Others wanted to increase membership from their immediate neighborhood. Without a particular issue to force their hand, members and leaders would continue disagreeing and make only slow, if any, changes. By making explicit decisions about whether and how to support neighborhood organizers, the church would have to deal with longstanding but often unacknowledged questions about how the church's mission and congregation should respond to neighborhood changes.

The two individuals who pushed for involvement understood that this struggle could help their organizations survive. Marcella, the community organizer working with a settlement house, and Pastor Rick of the nearby St. John Evangelist Church, realized that the redevelopment plan was unusual precisely because it had caught residents' attention as no other common issues had. Most neighbors had paid little attention to St. John Evangelist Church or the settlement house. St. John's had recently hired Pastor Rick to help the organization survive dwindling numbers of congregants and rising operational costs. He saw the Jefferson Square redevelopment issue as a way to help the church turn toward its local community, and in turn enlarge its congregation. Similarly, Marcella saw this conflict as an opportunity for the nearby settlement house where she was working as a community organizer. Her agency - formed almost a hundred years earlier to help European immigrants adapt - had been struggling to keep up interest, support, and provide needed services as the neighborhood changed. The organizations could earn recognition, respect, and members by helping with the issue that had motivated even the most private neighbors to become involved in community affairs.

Short- and Long-term Gains

As a result of their own tenacity, their mobilization of individual and organizational support, and many other factors, residents who organized around the Jefferson Square Revitalization Plan won a great deal. After two years of struggle, the redevelopment plans became much more amenable to resident wishes than in their first instantiations. Instead of a new parking lot for the imaginary new owner of the bankrupt hospital, a full street of new houses replaced the blocks where older homes were scattered. Instead of having to move to other neighborhoods and possibly worse living conditions,

homeowners could move into new houses within the footprint of the project, at no extra cost to them. Instead of being relocated twice – once so that the redevelopment could happen and a second time to move back – construction was staged so that people could move directly from old houses to new ones. They had not been worried about moving twice; they worried that the first move would happen but the second one would not. By staging the construction they were guaranteed not to give up their old homes until they had new keys in hand. Most dramatically, therefore, instead of being pushed out of the neighborhood, homeowners could get keys to new homes a few blocks from their original ones, at no extra cost. Other low-income families who wanted to move into the neighborhood would also receive subsidies to buy new houses. In addition, many of the surrounding row-homes were renovated for existing and new owners.

Circumstances related and unrelated to their efforts helped residents broker such a significantly improved deal. Residents engaged other council members who forced DiCicco to negotiate, and once DiCicco started talking to residents he seemed to develop a personal commitment. The Councilman and his aide seemed to want to find a better solution once they got to know the Stones and others as invested residents, rather than as slumlords. Private interest in the original plan of rehabilitating or expanding the hospital fell through. The hospital went bankrupt and closed in 1997, and the next private developer who showed interest withdrew, perhaps because of a visit from protesting residents. DiCicco subsequently accessed government funding for the senior and low income housing through his powerful ally in the state senate.

In addition to all of these reasons, residents helped themselves secure this agreement by pursuing an issue specific to their neighborhood, without tying it to larger political concerns or to similar struggles in other places. Concern that a large concession with them would force government to pay more for future relocations endangered the agreement with the councilman. Indeed, insiders are quite sure that the Philadelphia Mayor held this project up for over a year out of concern that the generous relocation arrangement would create a costly precedent. This suggests Jefferson Square's residents might have sacrificed the concessions they did win if they had joined forces with other neighborhoods or more permanent organizing drives. Though the lack of apparent growth of a larger movement may be disappointing to justice-minded outside observers, poor urban residents might gain power over particular issues by avoiding such connections.

At first glance, it seems this isolated win is the only reason for celebration of the mobilization around Jefferson Square. A more durable shift in political participation or organizational resources was not readily apparent. The direct participation and formal organization dedicated to the issue dissolved with the resolution of the specific problem. Even during the struggle, direct resident participation fizzled. Some people stopped coming to meetings once they worked out solutions that suited them individually, even if

others were still fighting. Many professionals, neighbors, family, and friends who took part in this struggle confessed hopes that the residents who persevered and won the battle for the group would stay involved in the war, for their neighborhood and for the poor. They hoped the residents, at the very least, would form new neighborhood associations and organize themselves around new issues. Much to their chagrin, even the most involved residents went home after the battle was won. We should expect that by definition when people engage in what I am calling a political moment, they organize around temporary, discrete issues. The St. John's Leadership Team disbanded, and its core group of residents went and stayed home once the general issue was resolved. By 2009, the residents who had been in the eye of the storm had not taken on any new political issues or campaigns. Thus, longer lasting transformations of political voice seemed to remain out of reach. It seemed like the private and isolated win would have little if any long-lasting effect beyond individual homeowners who avoided displacement.

Once we look a bit more closely, however, we find more long-lasting effects of the organizing. First of all, through this political moment, residents created their own newly powerful orientation to city politics. The people who dedicated so much of their time and energy to the struggle felt vindicated, dignified, and empowered. They began the struggle with a sense of entitlement to their little piece of the city but had little faith that they could actually affect city government plans. The people involved with St. John's Leadership Team testify that they now expect greater attention to their voices in future issues. The experience taught them that they could fight the city and win.

More than one of the Stones said the fight made their family proud. Considering how the struggle strained their time and energy, I assumed that residents would have preferred to have avoided it. I thought they would have liked to turn the clock back, if they could, and have the city begin by offering them the solution eventually reached after over two years of conflict. To my surprise, the woman who took the most intense leadership role and talked about how exhausting it was told me she is glad they had to struggle for what they won. It was worth it to her to have learned that they could and did succeed in budging seemingly unmovable powers. Residents who struggled over Jefferson Square expect to fight again if necessary and say they would tell others in similar situations to stick up for what they believe and that they can win too.

Second, the people who mobilized in Jefferson Square developed new interpersonal ties. For many, the new relationships they built, not just the political victories, made the energy they put into organizing worthwhile. Core members of the St. John's Leadership Team talk about how they formed new friendships through the organizing. They attribute their own staying power in the struggle and to their continued feelings of community to those new friendships. One of the women who took a leadership role as a neighbor stopped me in the middle of an interview to make sure I understood what she sensed I was not getting (and was right): that to her, the

relationships built from the organizing were as important as the more obviously political gains. Even if we do only care about political outcomes, the new friendships she told me about may serve these residents well the next time they want to claim access to power. In addition, people developed familiarity not just with individuals but with local organizations. They can now access these new relationships if they, or anyone they know, are threatened or see an opportunity they want to pursue.

Third, two established neighborhood institutions became more locally available and responsive. Through their involvement in the Jefferson Square conflict, the church and the settlement house shifted their agendas, their leadership, and their membership to be more of the neighborhood, rather than just in the neighborhood. As a result of the decision to support the residents through the redevelopment struggle, the church and settlement house lost members and leaders who had resisted more neighborhood-oriented policies. A few long-time board members left the church, and a key staff member left the settlement house. The organizations gained new devotees and a reputation for engagement with their neighborhood. In the years following the Jefferson Square redevelopment, even after Rick and Marcella had moved on to jobs elsewhere, the church developed and maintained new, neighborhood-oriented programs. Both organizations made temporary public decisions about their relationships to the neighborhood, and those decisions had long-term impacts.

Having to make a solid decision on a dramatic local issue forced these organizations to choose how they would adapt to neighborhood change. The decisions at the St. John Evangelist Church and the settlement house could have gone the other way; in fact, at least one other established church passed up the opportunity to support the organizing. Still, the request to get involved in this issue created an opportunity for these organizations to turn towards the neighborhood. Many of the organizations in changing neighborhoods struggle over who their constituency is and plod along without making any major adjustments. When a dramatic political situation comes to their front door, they might be forced to choose sides. A temporary alliance with the neighbors can pull the established organizations more permanently in their direction. Publicly visible and specific issues may offer established organizations' progressive tendencies an opening to grow and earn a positive reputation with neighbors.

Conclusion

In this paper I have articulated and illustrated a particular form of organizing that I call political moments. Political moments are comprised of intentionally short-term collective action directed toward very specific goals. These moments of organizing emerge, in large part, from the conditions that residents of poor, urban neighborhoods face periodically, not from the initiative of widespread or long-term political campaigns. Conditions typically experienced as problems become opportunities for organizing. A

drastic plan that threatens local control over development, local residents who prefer participation in community to politics, and organizations dedicated to dwindling members from outside the neighborhood can become a volatile concoction. When this combination births a political action that is specifically focused and temporary, it promises to mobilize unlikely suspects. Furthermore, the political action promises to win short- and long-term control over resources.

Undoubtedly there are limits to where political moments can mobilize and secure short- and long-term change, and we need more research to know what those limits are. I hope that by proposing the concept of political moments in this essay I will encourage others to develop it further. We need to know more about how temporary organizing around specific events emerges and what the tradeoffs are. More research comparing political moments to other kinds of organizing can answer additional questions. Whose support is gained and lost by specific framing? Who might be motivated or excluded if large-scale organizations take leadership? Would more explicitly political or large-scale organizations push harder for bigger wins? Would established, local organizations encourage earlier compromises with power? With this research, we can better imagine how political moments should inform theory about how rights to the city and other political claims are won.

Political moments suggest how residents can, somewhat surreptitiously, engage local organizations in a way that secures their commitments to neighborhoods in the long term. This opportunity for organizational involvement and change is especially likely to prevail itself in older neighborhoods with significant histories of demographic change. Through participation in political moments, older local organizations such as churches that have strayed from having neighborhood members can reinvigorate their neighborhood connections and commitment. Political moments may secure established organizations' survival by forcing needed adaptations to changing neighborhoods, and in turn secure the organization's attention to the neighborhood. Residents can thus win greater power over organizations in their midst. The organizations' participation can reignite a dedication to the neighborhood, and even help the organizations survive and grow.

Experienced organizers are very likely to be crucial to the formation and success of political moments. Professional organizers take on a particular role. They do not expect to recruit members for the organizations that employ them directly from participants. They prioritize service in the moment. Though they certainly may seek long-term gains for their organizations from an enhanced reputation, they do not expect individuals who are mobilized to become long-term participants. In the Jefferson Square conflict, several outsiders took on this role. Most significant were Marcella, the professional community organizer connected to the settlement house, and Pastor Rick, the preacher of St. John Evangelist Church. An experienced neighbor and an attorney

from Community Legal Services of Philadelphia also provided considerable support. Resident leaders attest that these individuals were vital to the campaign's success.

As they mount successful challenges to power in political moments, people need and transform established organizations. But these organizations look different from those dedicated to political change or social movements. Organizations which typically turn away from political issues may be the most useful to local residents, in the short and long term. Organizations like churches or cultural centers typically identify as apolitical, except perhaps, for the occasions when an issue about place lands on their lap. The long-term changes that can arise from temporary partnerships may mean different things to local residents than the growth of an organization dedicated to political or development issues. During political moments, these organizations offer some of the same resources, such as space, equipment, and connections, that others dedicated to social movements can. Because these partnerships occur with any number of kinds of organizations, they can secure resources for many different areas of life. Thus the results of political moments may be, in some ways, more widespread than those of the more traditionally studied social movements.

Under this model of organizing, what can we say is institutionalized? Sociologists know that institutionalization can refer to a wide range of structures, from concepts or norms to laws or organizations. Still, we may tend to think of institutionalization of rights to the city in organizations as the establishment of social-movement organizations explicitly dedicated to those rights (or components of them), not to local churches and settlement houses. Yet the very organizations that can seem peripheral to right-to-the-city movements may be central. Their involvement in politics may be sporadic, but their ability to make resources available to poor neighborhoods in the long term may be much more significant than that of movement organizations. These organizational changes may build networks and resources to be accessed by larger-scale movements, but they may also comprise rights to the city in and of themselves.

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ⁱ I would like to thank the many people who opened their hearts, minds, and offices to my research. In the scholarly world, I owe a great debt for this paper to Michael Peter Smith and Michael McQuarrie for their careful and astute editing. I also thank Emily Zackin and Caryn Carpenter and for their extremely helpful comments. The research for this paper was completed with support from the National Science Foundation (NSF), Dissertation Improvement Grant, Law and Social Sciences and from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Office of University Partnerships, Grant Number H-21536SG, the Horowitz Foundation for Social Policy, and Princeton University. Points of views or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of any of these supporting organizations.

ⁱⁱ Government bureaucrats and politicians, non-profit organizations, for-profit companies, and individuals standing around street corners or sitting at kitchen tables are constantly dreaming up ideas about how to change a little piece of a neighborhood. Many of those plans even make it on to paper, but they usually go no further. At some point, however, concrete actions on behalf of the plan can make it seem like someone's idea might actually materialize. The initiator might start buying up property or put up

a significant amount of money, for instance. Actions like this can make a concentrated threat or opportunity seem pressing.

ⁱⁱⁱ Many local organizations, such as barbershops and hair salons, day-care centers, and recreation centers play a more central role in residents' daily life but have not been as closely analyzed for their political impact (Sanchez-Janowski 2008; Small 2009).

^{iv} This kind of activity is more likely to be covered in research on organizing or activism in contrast to social movements, see for example Hart (2001) and Warren (2001). Nor are political moments adequately captured by scholarship on what is called everyday resistance, which connotes even more short-term and hidden forms of action (Scott 1985); what I call political moments involve open and public resistance.

^v Names of individuals are fictitious, but names of organizations and places are real.

^{vi} This is a matter of emphasis; the resources they did access were, of course, not developed or maintained in isolation. An attorney from Community Legal Services of Philadelphia assisted. The organizer at the settlement house was supported by a program that placed such professionals throughout the city. St. John Evangelist Church was connected to larger organizations and more.