Disrupting the order of things: Public housing tenant organizing for material, political and epistemological justice

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ABSTRACT

Since the advent of public housing in the U.S., tenants have played an integral role in both fostering environments where they can flourish, and, when needed, organizing to hold public housing authorities and government officials accountable for providing the material resources necessary to maintain and enhance residents' quality of life. In the current era of public housing demolition and redevelopment as mixed-income communities, these organizing efforts have not only centered on minimizing forced displacement, but also for the right to participate as meaningful stakeholders in governing the transformation of the places they call home. While these material and political dimensions of tenant organizing have been the focus of many studies, relatively little research has focused on the epistemological work that organizing performs in challenging and disrupting abstract representations commonly deployed in spatial policy discourse that marginalizes public housing residents as being both victims and causal agents of concentrated and intergenerational poverty. We examine these themes through an analysis of tenant organizing in Nashville, Tennessee's largest public housing development that is slated for demolition and redevelopment. Our study finds that the material and political achievements of tenant organizing were predicated on the epistemological work that residents engaged.

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1. Introduction

Since the advent of widespread public housing during the 1930s, tenant groups have been both active participants in working with housing authorities to create spaces where residents could flourish, and, when needed, engaged in organizing to make demands of the same agencies to improve the physical and social conditions of their communities. Not surprisingly, accounts of tenant organizing underscore the difficulties with attaining everything residents hope to achieve, but they also demonstrate that the act of being political itself can be transformative for individuals, families and the neighborhoods in which they live (Bloom, Umbach, & Vale, 2015). That is, in order to make material claims, residents must gain access to the political processes where decisions about their homes and neighborhoods are made. Furthermore, to be considered legitimate stakeholders in the governance of public housing developments and redevelopment, residents invariably engage in a type of epistemological work that has been given little emphasis in the literature on tenant organizing in public housing. In short, we contend that effectual tenant organizing hinges not only on the delineating clear demands and gaining access to political decision-making circles, but as importantly, in the capacity of these groups to challenge the

territorial stigmatization of living in public housing (see, Wacquant, 2008). In this paper we address all three of these (material, political, representational/epistemological) domains with focus on how they impact each other. Our main arguments are that: 1) tenant organizing may produce impactful results in each domain, and that solely focusing on the material outcomes as a barometer of success neglects the myriad of residents' experiences of empowerment; and, 2) the epistemological work that tenant organizing engages – challenging and disrupting the given order of things that partitions public housing residents as the other of normal society – is properly political in a qualitatively different way than simply petitioning the state for resources.

To explore the ways that tenant organizing can be materially, politically and epistemically generative, we offer a case study of Cayce United, a community organizing effort in response to the planned demolition and redevelopment of the largest public housing project in Nashville, Tennessee. Drawing on geographic thought that explicitly connects race and space, and the notion of epistemic resistance, we focus our attention on the efforts of public housing residents to gain authorship of the redevelopment process by strategically moving toward a narrative of *a present that could be otherwise*, which is imagined to include housing and meaningful employment for the residents of Cayce Homes and public housing tenants across the city. We begin by providing a brief review of tenant organizing, and then situate the need for broadening the analytic lens applied to these efforts.

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2. Space, race and tenant organizing

From the onset of public housing, tenant organizations participated in the everyday governance of community relations. Williams (2005) notes, "as early as 1933, across the nation, black and white tenants who lived in subsidized housing took advantage of participatory spaces opened by the government" (p. 46). In particular, African-American groups organized for public housing as a means to alleviate displacement due to urban renewal efforts, "emphasizing the centrality of the home for family, citizenship, and democracy" (Argersinger, 2010, p. 801). During the 1960s, federal funding allocated for public housing failed to rise with the need for maintenance (Schwartz, 2013), and tenant groups around the country organized for capital improvements to dilapidated buildings by petitioning the state for remedy (Baranski, 2007; Feldman & Stall, 2004; Karp, 2014; Matsumaru, 2011; Wolfinger, 2009). While these struggles were often protracted, requiring vigilance on the part of public housing tenants (Maslow-Armand, 1986) in many cases, tenant organizing efforts effectively garnered concessions at the local level and also resulted in federal policy changes (for an excellent review, see Williams, 2005). However, by the mid-1980s, the Reagan administration again cut federal spending for assisted housing programs, this time by over 70%, resulting in dire consequences (Hall & Hula, 1997). During that time and up through today, federal legislation has not only permitted, but encouraged, local housing authorities to raze public housing developments and replace them with subsidized units in newly built mixed-income communities (Goetz, 2012).

While housing demolition has been opposed by tenant organizations in many cities, organizing against it has proved to be a complex and largely unsuccessful undertaking in the context of neoliberal urbanism (Arena, 2012; Bennett, Smith, & Wright, 2006; Howard, 2014). The dismantling of public housing has been constitutive of a broad trend to commoditize urban space by allowing state-owned assets to be leveraged for private sector investment. As neighborhoods surrounding these sites are targeted for revitalization, real estate interests, including city officials, see public housing as an obstacle to real estate-based economic development.

Neoliberal policies relying on a strong interventionist state that supports market mechanisms to dismantle public housing, such as HOPE VI and the Rental Demonstration Program (RAD), need to be understood not only for their political economic underpinnings, but also for the ways in which they reinforce epistemologies of black poverty that perpetuate raced and classed hierarchies. Representations of largely black public housing developments as socially unhealthy, unruly, chaotic, and obsolete are often deployed using the seemingly benign language of 'concentrated poverty.' This argument suggests that these sites are detrimental to the residents who reside in them, yet, subtly implies that residents are to blame for the challenges in their communities. This ideological construct has been transformed into scientific fact by sociologists who measure the more benign poverty rate and correlate it with a host of indicators that invariably measure the existence of social problems. Indeed, a veritable cottage industry has formed for the purpose of using some quite sophisticated modeling generating results that are reported as 'threshold effects', or in layperson's terms, the point at which people in poverty living in the same place leads to bad stuff. Politicians, armed with this corpus of scientific knowledge, can then make a case that public housing developments, which by design have high rates of poverty, need to be transformed into mixed-income neighborhoods (DeFilippis & Fraser, 2010; Goetz, 2013).

It is not the intent of this paper to cover the scholarly literature on the merits of razing public housing developments and the creation of mixed-income neighborhoods in their place, as there are already analyses of the elusive benefits of mixed-income housing for those socioeconomically disadvantaged (Fraser, Chaskin, & Bazuin, 2013; Levy, McDade, & Bertumen, 2011; Popkin, 2010). Rather, we suggest that the concentrated poverty thesis is ideological. It is rarely applied to groups other than very low-income, black populations residing in urban neighborhoods and public housing developments, and is commonly deployed by academics and politicians alike to give explanation for black 'intergenerational poverty.' Together these terms imply a softer, gentler more covert form of the 'culture of poverty' argument suggesting that there is something dysfunctional or lacking in, for example, public housing residents. In this way, the spatial policy discourse used to justify interventions like public housing demolition pivots on the subjectification of tenants as being outside the bounds of normal society whether they are cast, first and foremost, as victims or perpetrators of concentrated poverty.

Concentrated and intergenerational poverty, when forwarded as abstract representations of life in public housing, render the everyday lives of tenants in an overdetermined manner: residents are seen in terms of totalizing discourses while their actual lived experience remains concealed. Such representations constitute epistemic injustices. As Fricker writes, "the negative prejudices about a particular group circulating in a culture can denigrate the epistemic character of a group, affecting how they are perceived …" (Fricker, 2007, p. 58). Public portrayals of public housing position residents as the *other* of society through a series of images and tropes that center on themes of deviance and aberrant behavior (Henderson, 1995) create a *credibility deficit* (Fricker, 2007) wherein public housing residents' testimony about their experiences and aspirations is discounted, ignored, or suppressed.

Tenant activism aims to open political discourse to reveal the social relations of power that shape their everyday lives, including the relations that produce pejorative representations of public housing. In this sense, tenant organizing is an active form of resistance to the epistemic injustices that too often render public housing residents unknowing and unknowable.

Through practices of organizing, public housing residents enact a democratic politics of the part-taking of those with no part (drawing on, Rancière, Bowlby, & Panagia, 2001), claiming dignity and equality even when society tries to silence histories of racial dispossession caused by federal public housing policies and their local implementation. Disrupting a social order wherein residents of public housing are partitioned as a constitutive *other* of the community of equals is certainly no easy task, but it is vital to recognize and experience the embryonic moments when tenant organizing gestures toward this political project. Certainly, "powerful forces limit or suppress what seems possible, constituting it in terms of current conditions and presenting what is beyond them as unrealistic and utopian in the derogatory sense" (drawing from Lefebvre, Pinder, 2013, p. 34). Yet some conceptions of utopianism, whereby people's desires for making a better world are fastened to hope connected to finding the agency capable of transforming the current situation, provides a motivation for imagining how current conditions could be otherwise (Levitas, 2010). This interplay of the imaginative and real-life actualization requires a focus on the everyday utopias that constitute the desires and actions of individuals whose visions emerge *through the experience of organizing*.

In this neoliberal era of public housing demolition and welfare retrenchment, protesting, petitioning, and appealing to the state with demands for fairness and justice in shelter, healthy environmental conditions, and sustenance are critical. Yet when tenant organizing is reduced to making demands of the state for securing better housing, for example, then we misrecognize the moments wherein their strategies are also staking epistemic claims: the rights to speak, to be seen as knowers, to imagine, and thus, to be seen as fully human (Fricker, 2007). We are not supplanting concern for one type of justice for another. Given Medina's contention that social injustices and epistemic injustices "are two kinds of the same coin, always going together, being mutually supportive and reinforcing each other" (Medina, 2012, p. 27), we suggest that the measure of tenant organizing must jointly attend to the material *and* epistemic dimensions of oppression. Likewise, analyses must also speak to the ways in which these facets of tenant organizing matter.