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Organizing is Not a Silver Bullet: Locating Community Organizing as Part of an Ecology of People Power Strategies that Change Our Cities

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Abstract

In proclaiming the strengths of organizing as a way of making change, community organizing practitioners and scholars can sometimes slip into the habit of seeing organizing as superior to other forms of change. This is particularly true of the Alinsky tradition. As long-time organizers and supportive scholars ourselves, it is something that we are not only aware of but guilty of. This article describes this as 'silver bullet' thinking, and we explore its lineages and limits in Alinsky-style organizing. We argue that seeing organizing at the top of a hierarchy of strategies can get in the way of organizers finding common cause with people who use different approaches to making change. As a way forward we place community organizing amongst a broader ecology of urban change practices. The paper introduces the concept of people power strategies, drawn from a seven-year study of urban social change across the globe, and documents five dominant people power strategies in the city – playing by the rules, mobilizing, organizing, prefiguring and running for office. We argue that each of these strategies has distinct strengths and limits and has an important place in urban change-making, and that within this ecology organizing has distinct advantages in developing leaders and building relationships across difference. We end by arguing that an ecosystem approach has the potential to help disorganize and reorganize how organizers relate to and build power with others in the city.

Keywords: Community organizing, people power, Alinsky, Barcelona, Cape Town, Sydney, Austin, mobilizing, prefigurative, parties

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Introduction[1]

How does community organizing relate to other strategies for social change, like mobilizing or advocacy? In the cut-and-thrust of city politics, practitioners of any given strategy seeking to enlist people and resources tend to elevate their own approach, and to emphasise their differences and incompatibilities with other 'competing' social change strategies. Community organizing is no exception – indeed, as community organizing has been institutionalised in a range of national and international networks which have developed formal approaches to induction and training, it is not surprising that its practitioners have tended to focus on organizing's uniqueness and its strengths in comparison to other strategies. Both of us have spent plenty of time in this mode through our involvement with community organizing in Sydney – proselytising with people within and beyond our own organizations about why they should commit people and resources to broad-based community organizing. Like many community organizing practitioners, our motivation to do this came from our frustrations with the limits of other strategies for making change, and from our excitement about the potential 'fixes' that organizing could offer.

But perhaps because this is the journey for so many community organizers, the community organizing tradition can sometimes find itself in a self-assured swagger - so confident of its method that it holds itself superior to other forms of social change. It is a gait that sometimes rests on the worthiness of organizing's purpose, to build leadership in others and revive the very practice of democracy while achieving change. This self-assurance can at times produce unconscious aloofness, where the strain of day-to-day organizing cuts organizers off from other social change practices. Calling out organizing's occasional disconnect is not intended to detract from the strengths of the community organizing tradition. We continue to believe that organizing's pedagogical focus on relationships, leadership development and its commitment to diverse broad-based relationships makes a unique and powerful contribution to social change strategy. Given these strengths, organizing practice and scholarship have developed the habit of focusing internally, assuming that organizing can achieve greater power and impact by just doing more and better organizing. We believe that in addition to this, organizing needs to partner intentionally and consistently with other forms of social change work. What we think is missing is a language that allows organizers to more soberly appreciate the limits of organizing alongside its strengths, and in turn see how other strategies beyond the organizing tradition may have strengths to share.

Rather than seeing organizing atop of a hierarchy of change making or as a self-contained approach to social change, we position community organizing as one of five key people power strategies used to make change in cities. Our intention is to make more visible some of the conscious and unconscious tropes used by organizers that can at times restrict organizing's ability to play well with groups that do not organize – whether they be advocacy groups, social movements, community experiments or political parties. We argue that seeing organizing as one of several important social change strategies offers a useful agitation to organizing, suggesting ways in which organizing may be disorganized and reorganized so it can better align with the broader ecology of people power in the city.

Our argument builds over four sections. We begin by setting out our approach to organizing and people power. Second, we explore the idea of silver bullet thinking, and how the origins of

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organizing as well as some of demands of organizing in practice help explain why organizers sometimes find themselves in a swagger. To illustrate these challenges, we share a couple of stories based on our own experience of these dilemmas. Third, we outline the five people power strategies and offer short examples of their practice. Finally, in the conclusion we ask how this approach might helpfully agitate community organizing and offer new opportunities for more productive and potentially powerful alignments with other change makers in the city.

Organizing and People Power

For us, 'community organizing' speaks to a broad body of approaches to making change that share in common a focus on the leadership development of people and institutions, and the cultivation of diverse relationships. Organizing tends to be rooted in local communities. It is frequently associated with extensive training programs often underpinned by pedagogy that seeks to teach community leaders about power in public life. Organizing tends to build power and partnership through institutions (although not exclusively). We have worked with and documented global organizing practice across a wide spectrum, and have seen many of the cultural practices that we discuss in this article across a range of different organizing initiatives (for more see Tattersall and Iveson, 2023).

However, this article has a particular focus on a narrower network of community organizing practice born of the work of Saul Alinsky in the United States. We see this tradition broadly, including groups such as Faith in Action, Gamaliel National Network, DART (Direct Action and Research Training), and the Industrial Areas Foundation which was set up by Alinsky in 1940. These US traditions have long been global, with groups such as Citizens UK and Organize Germany having been around for 30 years, and a strong Alinsky tradition operating in Asia since his visit in 1971 (Alinsky, 1972). This is the organizing tradition with which we are most familiar.

Alinsky-style community organising makes an argument that public life can be best understood through a series of core principles and practices including power, relationships, leadership, organisation, action and reflection. Combined these principles are used to identify a series of dynamics found in the world as it (often called 'universal's' of organising) that are used to then advance change for the common good. These democratic practices tend to be taken up at a local scale, in neighbourhoods and local institutions, which are then combined into broad-based coalitions that seek to stand for the whole of a city or region (Harmon, 1990).

Tattersall established Alinsky-style community organizing in Oceania founding the Sydney Alliance in 2007, and since 2016 she has researched people power strategies and pioneered the use of organizing as a research method (Tattersall and Iveson, forthcoming, Tattersall and Stears, forthcoming, Tattersall and Iveson, 2021, Tattersall and Iveson, 2024). Iveson is an urban geographer and has been an active Sydney Alliance union leader since 2011. We are passionate and yet at times frustrated organizers, and this drove us to reflect on organizing more broadly, a project made possible because of our location in academia. Research funding and a culture of critical reflection gave us time outside the pressures of campaigning to think, to reflect on the wisdom of others and to undertake extensive research with people making change in cities.

For the past seven years we have analysed people power strategies across the world's cities, canvasing organizing as one of many strategies for urban social change. We focused on the cities of the world, not only because they are where more than half the world lives but because of their political qualities. Cities are a site for public action, and the urban process is also an increasingly

important force in shaping our political and social life – daily life in cities can spark shared experiences, beliefs and potential common cause (Beveridge and Koch, 2023, Iveson and Tattersall, 2023, Tajbakhsh, 2001). While the existence of social contestation in cities is well documented, we wanted to make sense of the variation in change making strategies in and between cities. This led us firstly to a mapping exercise documenting urban contest and organization across the world, identifying over 1500 examples of what we came to call urban people power (Tattersall and Iveson, 2023). Alongside this we documented five longitudinal case studies of urban people power, from which we draw on to provide brief descriptions below. These case studies were selected because they reflected the breadth of people power strategies we found in our mapping, and they helped illustrate particular forms of people power (Tattersall and Iveson, 2021, Tattersall and Iveson, forthcoming).

The term *people power* comes up frequently in social change copywriting, but it is not well-defined. People power is associated with a variety of grassroots movements, everything from US Black Power's 'power to the people,' to nonviolent insurrectionary Global South democracy movements, the most famous of which was the anti-Marcos 'people power movement' in the Philippines (Mercado and Tatad, 1986, Shames and Seale, 2016, Schock, 2005). We think *people power* is a useful term, but one that is worth clarifying. We define urban *people power strategies* as the different approaches used by urban movements, alliances and organizations to understand, build and enact people's collective capacity to make their city more just and equal. We identify five dominant people power strategies in the city – playing by the rules, mobilizing, organizing, prefiguring and running for office. The 'people' in people power refers to the kinds of constituencies and the qualities of leadership they use to take action, and 'power' makes reference to the choices, dilemmas and approaches that the people use to act. We see power dialectically, embodying both the ability to make things happen (*potenta*) and the ability to assert control over things (*potestas*) (Nunes, 2021). As Mary Follett put it long ago, this tension between 'power with' and 'power over' helpfully describes the interminable wrestle of public power (Follett, 2003).

Examining people power from the vantage point of the city allowed us to see people power strategies with fresh eyes. Earlier as practicing organizers, our reflections on organizing were often unconsciously undertaken at a different scale, with our gaze narrowed to the internal systems that define the scale of organizing as a strategy. When we stepped back to the scale of the city, we could still make out individual people power strategies, but we could also see how they were nested in a broader ecology (see also Nunes, 2021). Seeing an ecology of people power helped shift our thinking away from seeing any one strategy as a silver bullet for people power.

Where Does Silver Bullet Thinking Come From?

Perhaps it is unsurprising that community organizing has come to a place of steely self-belief given its ancestry. While Saul Alinsky, the so-called godfather of community organizing, didn't necessarily set out convinced that his emerging Back of the Yards pedagogy was superior to other forms of change, his final book *Rules for Radicals* became a best-seller in part because of his flair for ridiculing other strategies as inferior. In *Rules* there was not a lot of bridge-building amongst the barbed one-liners criticising other approaches, like "I have nothing to say or give but pity – and in some cases contempt"(Alinsky, 1971, xvii). Some of Alinsky's strident language can be linked to his context, both his desire to distinguish himself from the communist tradition as well as to agitate the

New Left. Still, when it came to assessing other ways of working, Alinsky polarised and was polarizing (Boyte, 2004, 41).

In the 50 years since Alinsky's death, organizing has bloomed, evident in part in the network of US Alinsky-style organizations (like IAF, Gamaliel, DART and Faith in Action) as well as in the spread of Alinsky-style organizing across the globe, with the IAF alone operating in in 99 cities in four contents. These organizing practices have also spread to other sectors like the union movement (McAlevey, 2016, McAlevey and Lawlor, 2024).

Even though the fault lines that categorised Alinsky's political context have changed, some of organizing's distance to other forms of people power have not. Today organizers, particularly those in the Alinsky tradition, have a tendency to see their approach as the 'correct' or 'better' way to make change. The IAF have often been criticised for their self-confidence, for instance years ago they felt the need to invent the phrase 'broad-based organizing' to distinguish themselves from others using the community organizing label. While the need for clarity is understandable, when this was explained to Tattersall as a new IAF organizer she was told the name separated the IAF from the organizing 'swill.' But the IAF are not alone. Even those who have criticised the IAF, like union organizer and researcher Jane McAlevey, have adopted the IAF's self-regard for organizing. McAlevey is scornful of 'mobilizing,' presenting structure tests, high-participation negotiations and intensive preparation as a 'better' strategy to win by (McAlevey, 2016). Hahrie Han's analysis of organizational leadership development also outlines a hierarchy of practices, beginning with lone wolf social change and ending with organizing as the most effective strategy (Han, 2014).

Beyond conscious silver bullet thinking, several assumptions baked into the practice of organizing can be identified as possible causes of organizing's disconnect from the broader people power ecosystem. First, there are cultural practices in organizing that can isolate it from movement mobilizing or advocacy that plays by the rules. We interviewed organizers and non-organizing groups in five cities across the world, as well as a broader selection of community organizers in more than 34 cities. Most of these organizers came from the IAF tradition but not all, and most of the non-organizing groups came from an advocacy, service or mobilizing tradition. When non-organizers were asked about their relationship with organizers, a consistent theme we were told was that organizers were seen to be so overwhelmed by their own processes that they did not have time to engage with others. When Tattersall put this criticism to organizers in interviews, they frequently identified that the internal work of holding together broad-based organizations, cultivating and supporting new leaders, combined with an internally focused organizing lifecycle made it difficult to create points of connection and collaboration with others outside their broad-based network – especially when those requests for connection were in response to urgent political crises. Given the relative slowness of organizing's 'relationships precede action' method, and that a predictable cycle of organizing was so important for alliance partners, a kind of zero-sum effect developed where external focus was often seen to come at the expense of a busy internal program.

Second, organizers in the Alinsky tradition often shun ideology as a collective frame inside broad-based organizations, arguing that the absence of a predetermined set of ideas about how public life works gives space for a variety of belief systems to thrive between the groups. Organizing's tendency to underemphasise the public and ideological forces in its analysis of power may make it more likely to separate rather than connect with others. Some organizing scholars have argued that the absence of a broader 'worldview' about the causes of urban problems, say around race, can

disincentivise strategic partnerships beyond the broad-based organization with different people power strategies (Healey and Hinson, 2020, Healey and Hinson, 2005).

Alinsky organizing has been criticised for a mechanical and pluralist approach to power (Fisher and Kling, 1990, Delgado, 1997). Organizing's somewhat simple adage that power is 'organized people and organized money' has been criticized for leaving out the cultural dimensions of power (Boyte, 2004). While a typical organizer's power analysis drawn as an X-Y axis can helpfully identify active decision makers in relation to a specific issue, it can leave off the grid the more diffuse structural powers and narrative forces that shape an agenda. Leaving out these larger forces, what Lukes (2005) would describe as power's ideological or narrative dimensions, can simplify the dimensions of the power contest. For instance, McAlevey and Sen criticise Alinsky organizing for at times seeking more policing as a solution to neighbourhood crime, in a way that overlooks the racial dimensions of that solution (McAlevey, 2016, 45, Sen, 2003).

Equally, some argue that so-called organising universal 'no permanent friends, no permanent enemies' encourages a short-term, tactical approach to change while discouraging long-term, strategic coalitions and partnerships with other organizing groups, unions, movements, and parties. On the other hand, in our observations, the place of ideology or worldview without dialectical thinking presents the risk of limiting collaboration and outreach by pre-emptively ruling out relationships with groups that do not subscribe to the pre-existing world view. While seeing the source of public causes can incentivise collaboration and encourage organizers to work across different strategies, we are not convinced that the answer to improving organizing's ability to collaborate across the urban ecology lies in organizing adopting stronger ideologies.

While some Alinsky organizers have emphasised the politicising role of action and elevated intrinsic rather than extrinsic knowledge in interpreting community problems (Fisher and Kling, 1990), this instinct to contrast between community knowledge and ideological critiques of public systems is not the case everywhere. Some, for instance in Australia and the UK, have used the organizing dialectic of public and private to draw attention to the broader public causes of pressure in our private lives, including around difference and identity, but have done so in a dialectical rather than a typical ideological way (Tattersall, 2024). While important it also has its challenges in a context where participants in broad-based alliances bring a range of ideological perspectives to the table.

Despite these issues, community organizers have built connections with other forms of people power. In the US, the Civil Rights movement cultivated a powerful ecology between organizers and mobilizers, with organizer Ella Baker skillfully working inside movements to identify, train and mentor leaders in the skills of organizing to serve a sustainable movement (Payne, 1995). Organizers have also worked with political parties, with US organizers in the ACORN tradition running for office through the Working Families Party, and organizers in the IAF tradition experimenting with deep electoral canvassing and working with political parties (Graf, 2020, Tattersall, 2020). Organizing practices have also been translated to other forms of people power, such as the use of distributed participatory leadership structures and public narrative in President Barack Obama's election campaigns, and the merging of organizing and mobilizing strategies in Senator Bernie Sander's Primary Campaign (Bond and Exley, 2016). Beyond the US in 2015 Citizens UK worked with the digital mobilizing organization 38 Degrees to scale a humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis, where 38 Degrees' large email list was combined with Citizen UK's community leadership skills to generate public pressure and emergency relief that neither could have done alone.

While it was our scholarly research that helped us better understand silver bullet thinking, these questions had come to our attention earlier through our experience as organizers. We recognise that knowledge can be sourced through many forms and that reflecting on our experience is a powerful teacher. We share two stories to illustrate.

Tattersall's Reflections

Before I was a community organizer, I was a mobilizer having cut my teeth in the student movement and the union movement. In Sydney Australia in 2003 I was part of the social movement that tried to stop the war in Iraq. On 16 February 2003 we organized the largest protest in Australia's history – 250 000 people, which was part of a weekend of global coordinated protest involving more than 10 million people. Yet all those people did not stop the war, which commenced only a month later. The experience sobered my belief in mobilizing as a strategy. While mobilizing had been impressively quick in turning out large numbers its speed had created its own limitations, leaving little time for building trust between the coalition of very diverse organizations that organized the rally. Relationships slowly factionalised and our ability to creatively make plans together deteriorated. Only two months after the war began, our coalition fell apart. I was left wondering – if the largest mobilization in Australia's history could not work, then what could?

This question led me to a PhD on coalition building and to a period of research living in the United States. In early 2006 I cold-called the Industrial Areas Foundation to find out more about community organizing, having been introduced to it through books like *Reveille for Radicals* and its talk of People's Organizations. Meetings led to a five-day training and dialogical encounter with broad-based organizing's pedagogy– relationships, leadership, organization, action and evaluation. Some of the ideas answered my questions, a few affirmed some instincts, but I also found core practices like the relational meeting frustratingly hard. But I persisted. Perhaps these new ideas could work in ways that mobilizing had failed?

In 2007 I returned to Sydney and established the first Alinsky-style community organizing alliance in Oceania – the Sydney Alliance. It was challenging building an organization with a very distinctive culture and practice in a place where that methodology was not familiar. In staring down the sceptics, I became an evangelist for organizing which undoubtedly came across as swagger. While I had turned away from mobilizing, I had maintained a love of silver bullet strategies – simply replacing my faith in mobilizing with the promise of organizing. But years into the organizing journey, doubts began to creep in. Organizing had tremendous strengths in cultivating leaders and bringing together very different people, but we struggled to scale the issues that we were working on beyond localized site fights. Our Assemblies were dramatic and certainly engaged a wider range of people than a conventional protest, but they did not register public attention in the same way as a mass mobilization. My misgivings were hard to talk about because as the lead organizer I saw my role as being organizing's cheerleader. At first I wondered if I had failed, but over time I started to see limits in organizing itself.

As I began to question my assumption that organizing was a 'better' form of change, I started to see a deeper pattern of silver bullet thinking in my approach to making change more broadly. For decades, through social movements, research and organizing I had been on a quest to find the 'right' answer. But by 2016 I wondered if this was wishful thinking. As I teamed up with Iveson to begin our people power research we cracked open this idea, coming to see strategies more as

practical tools with strengths and limits instead of seeing strategies as single systems or rules that could offer all the answers.

Iveson's Reflections

In 2015, after several years working in Sydney Alliance research action teams I joined a delegation of three on a visit to Hong Kong to deliver a two-day training session in principles of community organizing to a number of civil society organizations involved in an emerging alliance called Hong Kong Citizens. Hong Kong Citizens had been established by social workers who had been exposed to community organizing principles and practices while spending time as interns with Citizens UK.

In Hong Kong at that time, a range of organizers and organizations were increasingly looking for new approaches to advancing change in their city. While mass protests and the issue-based 'letterhead coalitions' had been effective in blocking some 'bad' things, they were not necessarily effective in developing and progressing positive agendas. Beyond those reactive mobilizations, much civil society effort was directed towards conventional funded service delivery which lacked an orientation towards political transformation. The defeat of the Umbrella Movement in 2014 had also strained relations between different elements of civil society.

There were many elements of the community organizing toolkit that were of interest to the people we worked with in Hong Kong. But our formal sessions, and the informal conversations in between them, kept cycling back to one element of the training. A core tenet of community organizing is that we build power by generating unpredictable coalitions and unlikely partnerships through a process of power-mapping to identify disparate stakeholders who might have shared interests. Almost every Hong Konger attending our training sought to refute this point, arguing that in Hong Kong a focus on potential shared interests did not have the potential to break down existing hard-line ideological polarisations between the 'pro-democracy' and 'pro-Beijing' camps in the city. To borrow from what we set out above, they argued that a pluralist approach to power would not break down steep ideological divisions that had been baked into the broader public system. Again and again, we pushed back on this – surely, for instance, even a 'pro-Beijing' elected representative or administrator might be able to make common cause with a 'pro-democracy' organization if instead of focusing on their ideological differences, they focused instead on their shared interest in a neighbourhood issue like waste collection or transport? Our efforts were met mostly with shaking heads.

Now, as anyone who has delivered or participated in community organizing training will know, training is intended to 'agitate' – to unsettle taken-for-granted ways of doing things, to foster honest conversations about their effectiveness, to suggest new ways forward based on the accumulated learnings of the organizing tradition. But in the years after this experience, I've replayed these interactions in my head many times. I can't speak for my Sydney Alliance colleagues, but I think that while I imagined our suggestions about breaking down political polarities were a form of agitation to the people attending the training, I was not really allowing myself to be agitated by the forceful replies we received. There's that swagger. And of course, experience in Hong Kong in the years since we were there have only borne out the truth of what people were trying to tell us. The very ideas of citizen participation and democratic autonomy that are the foundations of any kind of community organizing – even self-described non-partisan organizing – are positioned as partisan and treacherous principles by a ruling authority that operates explicitly by drawing and enforcing 'red lines' of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and thought.

A Response to Silver Bullets: An Ecology of People Power

The consequence of silver bullet thinking is that it creates a strategic myopia. For organizers this blindless can mean that they fail to see the potential of other strategies and the limits of their own. Tattersall experienced this when she first raised concerns about the Sydney Alliance's organizing in workshops with other IAF organizers from around the world, being told that she needed to just organize 'harder' or 'more' as though the solutions to organizing's limits sat inside the existing tradition rather than potentially outside of it. Myopia can block our ability to see the inherent limits of organizing. While it is not radical to suggest that organizing has strengths and weaknesses, the consequences of this kind of thinking are radical. It means that organizing needs to be curious and in relationship with other people power strategies. This is radical because for the most part it is not the case in practice.

Instead of silver bullet thinking we can instead approach community organizing as but one part of a broader social change *ecosystem* which has diverse elements and explore how organizing can benefit from such diversity. Here, we agree with Brazilian philosopher Rodrigo Nunes, who argues that there is not one universally and eternally correct answer to the question of how we organize, and that *the very search for such an answer is itself misguided*. He comes to this position by starting with a broad definition of the problem of organization as a question of how we assemble, expand, coordinate and deploy people's collective capacity to act (Nunes, 2021: 11).[2] The reality on the ground is that wherever we are, there will always be groups of people working with different answers to this question – social change strategy exists in a state of 'ecological plurality' (2021: 28). Rather than thinking about this plurality as a problem to be overcome, Nunes suggests that plurality is actually a good thing – after all, monocultural ecosystems are prone to collapse! The implication is that we should not approach the question of organization as "the search for an ideal form that should be universally replicated or subsume all others" (2021: 62). Instead, we should approach this as a question of "what is the best thing to do *in this situation*?" (2021: 62, original emphasis).

Importantly, approaching social change strategy from this ecosystem perspective is not simply a matter of celebrating ecological plurality – to just let one hundred flowers bloom would avoid the hard strategic questions that confront us when we try to push for change. As Nunes (2021: 41) argues:

> *"It is of course true that different forms can do different things and lead to different results, and therefore the question of form is highly relevant."*

But here, he suggests we must develop the capacity to make choices based on a situational analysis which considers the usefulness of different forms in a specific context:

> *"It is exactly because different forms serve different purposes that a choice of form is inseparable from such questions as 'what for?', 'with what material?' and 'under what conditions?' It therefore makes more sense to assume a plurality of forms, rather than a universal one, and to distribute them across a diverse organizational ecology, rather than project all of our expectations on a single form or organization," (2021: 41).*

[2] Things can get a little confusing here because Nunes is using the term 'organizing' in a very broad sense, not in the very specific sense of the community organizing tradition. While Nunes' book is primarily written for an audience of people wedded to 'horizontalist' forms of politics, we think his approach applies to an audience of community organizers too.

Nunes' hope in developing this perspective is that:

> *"The question of organization … ceases to be an arena for the endless reiteration of fixed positions and becomes instead a shared worksite in which everyone has to deal with the same set of problems, even if coming at them from different angles," (2021: 5).*

We love this approach to the question of organization as a 'shared worksite'. Our response to silver bullet thinking has been to identify a range of people power strategies that co-exist with organizing in cities, and to identify the various strengths and weaknesses that each of these strategies have.

The phrase people power is useful for describing forms of collective action in cities. Elsewhere we discuss how different people power strategies are responses to the various dilemmas that people face in the city. These dilemmas include how people make decisions about who is involved, what are you fighting for, with what resources you are mounting your fight, where will you stage your contest, how will you time your response, what tactics you will use and how will you define success (Tattersall and Iveson, forthcoming). Our mapping process led us to identify five dominant people power strategies, and we have found each one to be partial in how it answers these challenges, bringing distinctive strengths and weaknesses. It leads us to explore the possibility of productive relationships between forms of people power as a way of mitigating strategic limits, while equally noting that these relationships can be challenging. Here we offer a shorter overview of five dominant people power strategies that we have drawn from our research, with the aim of exploring how this approach can help recast the place of organizing in the city.

1. Playing by the Rules

Playing by the rules refers to participation in formal (and citizen-initiated) mechanisms of consultation, representation, and/or litigation that are typically (but not exclusively) associated with the institutions of the state – such as planning authorities, government agencies and service providers, courts and tribunals. Examples might include participation in a consultation process for a policy, petitioning government, or the use of courts to enforce legal rights. It is a relatively safe and uncontroversial form of civic participation where citizens leverage influence through what Miraftab (2020) refers to as 'invited' spaces of political participation.

Playing by the rules is somewhat contingent on the form and power of the state, whose rules it uses to exercise influence. This includes anything from formal rules, like the rule of law, to more subtle assumptions about the forms of communication and argumentation that are invited in or excluded (Laskey and Nicholls, 2019, 350). These rules create moments of political opportunity, for instance elections and legislative timelines expose decision makers to popular influence, even so they are timetables set by the state (Tully, 1999). Accessing the rules requires resources, which can create financial and cultural barriers to their use. Moreover, the right to participate in a process or the appearance of an aesthetic of participation is not the same as being able to effect the outcome of a process (Arnstein, 1969, Mattern, 2020).

Many organizers would feel some tactical affinity with playing by the rules. Organizing frequently makes use of participatory and public processes as it generates public influence for specific policy solutions, with rules sometimes being used to create social acceptance for the use of more confrontational action. Indeed we found several examples of people playing by the rules with an 'organizing mindset' where the rules were used after 'building power' through diverse relationships, and were used fully aware of the limits of consultation.

Yet there is something distinctive about playing by the rules that distinguishes it as a form of people power. Playing by the rules places considerable emphasis on public processes and seeks to exercise power by leveraging the authority of institutional spaces like courts or consultation processes. Playing by the rules emphasises the role of expertise in these processes, such as the research expertise to produce evidence-based recommendations or legal expertise in court cases.

For decades in Austin in the US, new and old residents have primarily used the strategy of playing by the rules to debate how the city should grow. Since 2014, zoning and land code reforms have been contested through City of Austin-initiated consultation processes, citizen-initiated ballot propositions at elections, and through a series of legal cases. The result has been a stalemate, where waves of rule play have stalled what was seen as a negative City agenda while not providing the political space to produce substantive alternatives to those policies. What made playing by the rules distinct was its use and reliance on forms of expertise as power, where the capacity to run a self-funded legal case and play the technical rules of a court process were able to delay and then terminate wholistic land code reform. The 'rules' were used to limit the scope of the City of Austin's decision-making power. Yet, the multi-year battle also revealed the strategy's limits. Playing by the rules required significant resources; the group that was most able to use the rules was a middle-class predominantly white community. Moreover, playing by the rules was most useful when reacting to an agenda proposed by a decisionmaker, which meant that building an alternative agenda was less of a focus.

2. Mobilizing

Mobilizing builds power by moving people into visible, mass displays of protest, often at symbolic sites to attract media attention and create moral authority for change. Mobilizing focuses on the power of numbers – the number of participants, the amount of media coverage or the scale of disruption caused (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). Digital tools frequently play a key role (Dumitrica and Felt, 2019).

Mobilizing is best used as a strategy for calling those already committed to a cause into public action (Klandermans, 1988). At its most powerful it can scale a message and pressure for change. Its strength is that it is powerfully reactive, especially when resisting an egregious proposition, and equally it can enact power quickly, bringing people together at speed. Its limits are that it can be hard to sustain; the pattern of the mobilization tends to follow the wider trajectory of the issue at its core, rising as debate heats but dissipating as interest passes (Tarrow, 2011). Mobilizing can struggle to maintain people's participation, often directed by a central group of decision makers. That said adaptations like affinity groups, distributed networks or participatory digital spaces seek to provide places for sustaining some decentralised leader involvement (Mogus and Licas, 2018). Mobilization can also suffer from tactical fatigue if the forms of activity, such as mass public protest or the occupation of public squares, do not change over time. Finally, mobilizing is often ill equipped to find consensus and create popular engagement in specific policy solutions.

Mobilizing people power exploded across the city of Hong Kong in 2019 in a way that was unprecedented in history. A protest movement emerged in response to an Extradition Bill that threatened Hong Kong's political freedoms. At its peak in June, the Hong Kong protests attracted an estimated 2 million of Hong Kong's 7 million residents. Over the following six months, waves of protest action were driven by two co-existing constituencies that used distinct mobilizing strategies: the 'peacefuls' were committed to organizing mass protests and the 'braves' used protest to disrupt

the functioning of the Legislative Council and then later, the city. A game of protester 'cat and mouse' ensued, always maintaining high levels of public support, yet in early 2020 when COVID shut down the world it also ended the street battle. Not long after this in May 2020, the Chinese Government effectively ended Hong Kong's distinct political system with the introduction of a new National Security Law that severely curtailed civil rights.

The successes of Hong Kong's mobilizing reminds us that organizing is not always the most useful strategy. While a nascent community organizing group, Hong Kong Citizens, operated in Hong Kong, its tender but relatively small networks were not fit for generating the scale of people power required in 2019. When it came to mobilizing, it was the fruitful coexistence of the 'brave's' direct action that prevented the Legislative Council from meeting (and later the city from functioning), and the 'peacefuls' organization of mass protests that initially stopped the Bill and later promoted an agenda for universal suffrage (Tattersall, 2019). The evolution of a positive agenda around universal suffrage made Hong Kong unusual as an example of mobilizing. They used technology, in particular a local reddit style website (LIHKG) to debate tactics, and to create a culture of acceptance for different approaches to protest (Cheng et al., 2022). Yet mobilizing's gathering power, like all forms of people power, had its limits. It took a global pandemic to stop this protest, but this is also a feature of mass mobilization – the fight tends to erupt in victory, fade out or is put down. Mobilizing has a clock. While Hong Kong protests continue – particularly through a global diaspora as well as in more prefigurative community work in the city – the mobilizing strategy ended (Ling Lam, 2023).

3. Organizing

As already discussed, organizing is an approach to people power that attends to 'how' change is made, supporting the capacity of leaders to act and the development of broad-based relationships in the process of winning improvements to cities. Organizing's greatest strength is that it builds the capacity for democratic action in the process of making change, putting people at the centre of their own liberation. Equally, organizing's attention to building a broad solidarity across difference makes it well suited to creating connection rather than polarisation and fragmentation.

Aside from the swagger, organizing's challenges are partly a product of its attentive method, it is a slow practice with it often taking years to build alliances and leadership teams. The creation of political agendas can be challenging, and there is a risk of lowest common denominator issues. Equally, the localised focus of the work can sometimes mean that the issue agenda does not attend to the causes of problems, which may lie outside the scope of the city (Kleidman, 2004). Despite organizing professing an intention to build leader-led organizations, this can be short-cut, either with organizers doing 'for' leaders or small groups of leaders acting 'for' larger organizations (Osterman, 2002). Finally, the intensity of the process – the demands of the organizing cycle that privilege issues that come from the membership – can lead organizing to struggle to take up urgent opportunities that arise in the political context.

The Sydney Alliance's work on climate change and energy stress in Western Sydney shows how organizing helped create an unusually diverse climate just movement. The work emerged in response to the 2015 People's Climate March, when Sydney Alliance organized with Pacific Islander communities in its membership to lead the march. Buoyed by that success, a longer-term project called Voices for Power sought to engage a group of organizers to work with a number of migrant communities based in Sydney's expansive western suburbs, which are generally hotter, poorer and more diverse than the rest of the metropolitan area.

Using a process of listening, research, discernment action and evaluation, they focused on developing a positive agenda of improving access to affordable renewable energy through organizing a grassroots, non-partisan and diverse movement. Across several years, the project has involved strong participation from a range of migrant communities and has developed a range of potentially transformative demands that would make affordable and renewable energy more accessible to low-income migrant households that have been put to State and Federal Governments. After years of work, Voices for Power can certainly take some credit for shaping government announcements of over $200 million of new funding for energy efficiency upgrades to social housing and solar assistance for renters. At the same time, the project felt the limits of organizing, namely the difficulty of building power with communities that have limited financial resources, in the context of on-going whiteness of Australia's settler-colonial political institutions and cultures. To overcome this challenge they relied on 'soft money' from philanthropy to fund the effort. The subsequent need to develop 'deliverables' for the funding agency as well as organize communities put considerable pressure on those organizers, and has generated tensions at various stages concerning accountability, commitment, and 'ownership' of the project.

4. Prefiguring

Prefiguring people power is where people demonstrate, model or 'prefigure' the kind of changes they want in the city, where power is enacted through example. Forms of community experiment are used to embody the city 'as it should be.' The experiment can produce anything; from creating community run emergency housing, women's refugees, mutual aid, community batteries, to sustained experiments in participatory democracy. Borrowed originally from anarchist traditions, this form of constructionist change emphasises people's capacity to put their values and desires into practice in the here-and-now, rather than demanding change from someone else and/or deferring change to a future in which the position of the powerful has finally shifted (Wright, 2010). While anarchists often argued for prefiguration as an alternative to strategically challenging the state, prefiguration can also be used alongside other strategies to change decision making in cities (Tattersall and Iveson, 2024, Ribera-Almandoz et al., 2020). The strength of this approach is that it can develop a powerful narrative that change is possible by demonstrating it practically, including in difficult political environments like authoritarian spaces (Pérez 2022). However, a challenge for prefigurative power is that it requires high levels of commitment, so-called 'sweat equity,' that can be hard to sustain.

In Cape Town, the Black housing movement Reclaim the City (RTC) experimented with prefigurative people power after mobilizing and playing by the rules had failed to deliver state support for affordable housing.[3] Cape Town suffered from the spatial legacies of apartheid, with predominantly white inner-city housing and economic prosperity starkly separated from more informal and peripheral Black housing (Urson, 2022, Ngwenya and Cirolia, 2021). Even with the rise of democracy in 1994, local and provincial governments did not supported the creation of inner-city affordable housing. In 2016 in response to the sale of disused provincial property, the new RTC

[3] We use the term Black to politically refer to South African communities that identify as either African Black or coloured. This follows an approach in South Africa informed by Black Consciousness (BIKO, S. 2004. *I write what I like: A selection of writings,* Oxford, Heinemann.) where people have consciously chosen to not follow the racial classifications as prescribed by the apartheid regime and instead use an identity that is inclusive of all non-White people, including Coloured men and women, as a subset of a larger Black and African Identity (ARENDSE, D. E. 2023. Advancing Black solidarity in South Africa while Coloured and Black: reflections during COVID-19. *African Identities,* DOI: 10.1080/14725843.2023.2227351.).

movement used protest and litigation to press for a piece of land to become affordable housing. In 2017 as the provincial government was poised to approve the sale of land regardless, the movement decided to launch a shock occupation of two major health precincts in the inner-city. While the occupation was initially designed to symbolically demonstrate that inner-city housing was possible, the protesters were never evicted, which led them to change strategy and establish two permanent emergency housing spaces. These spaces have been maintained as prefigurative housing experiments till today, housing more than 1000 families who have used these places to weather threats of eviction and to incubate an affordable housing movement in the city.

RTC's prefigurative power illustrates how people power strategies can co-exist and can complement each other. Here the RTC showed the utility of a single movement shifting between strategies, and not treating strategies as mutually exclusive. Once the affordable housing experiment was established, RTC continued to run legal cases and to mobilize, and later they experimented with organizing strategies (which had been adapted from Barcelona's La PAH movement – see below Tattersall and Iveson, 2024). It was challenging to maintain many strategies at once, and it revealed cultural tensions between strategies, for instance the expertise of playing by the rules created tension with the leader-led approach of organizing. Prefiguration helped RTC make the 'impossible' possible by acting 'as if' the city was what the people wanted it to be. This narrative buttressed judicial intervention and dramatic shifts in housing policy that have fundamentally altered the housing debate in Cape Town (Thorpe, 2022, Broughton, 2023). That said, prefigurative people power's greatest challenge comes from its reliance on 'sweat equity,' and the personal costs and organizational demands that are faced by those involved.

5. Running for Office

Running for office is the strategy of forming political parties or city-based electoral platforms to contest elections, where power arises from the ability to take control of the levers of the state to make change directly, and from gaining access to the resources that come from electoral contest and representation. Labour and Green parties have long been used as a strategy for movements, but since the 2008 Financial Crisis there has been a rising wave of movement-based parties contesting power at the city scale (Poguntke, 1994, Thompson, 2021). Networks like Fearless Cities, initiated by movement-platform Barcelona en Comú, have helped spread the strategy of running for office at the municipal scale across Europe and South America (Barcelona en Comú et al., 2019). The strengths of running for office are that it projects a broad political agenda and provides proximity to formal and informal decision makers. Its challenges arise from the compromises required to advance a popular agenda, especially as most movement parties work in coalition with other organizations forcing compromises, coupled with the more generalised pressures that come from electoral culture, like professionalism and media scrutiny (Przeworski and Sprague, 1986, Mair, 2006).

In Barcelona, having exhausted the other people power strategies, a group of activists resolved to run for office, a decision that resulted in the formation of the movement-based electoral platform Barcelona en Comú. The 2008 Financial crisis sparked an eviction crisis in Spain, and in Barcelona in particular. Housing platform La PAH was a political response to the crisis that sought to put people affected by the threat of eviction at the centre of the fight. La PAH was radically successful, creating collective organizing strategies where evictees educated and supported each other (instead of turning to lawyers), used direct action to stop eviction, and built prefigurative emergency housing.

La PAH also found ways to dance with other people power strategies, using moments of mass mobilizations like the town square occupations following M15 Indignados protests in 2011 to talk with people to identify new leaders. La PAH also played by the rules using consultations, petitions and advocacy to improve the rights of homeowners. Yet by 2014 most of their attempts at change had been stimmed or stalled. In response a group of leaders discussed whether they should 'do the unthinkable' and run for office themselves.

Much to everyone's surprise – including their own – ex La PAH organizer and Barcelona en Comú candidate Ada Colau won the Mayoralty in the 2015 municipal elections. She was re-elected for a second four-year term in 2019. While it is impossible to summarise the lessons of this experience in a paragraph, key issues stand out. Certainly, and predictably, it quickly became clear that being 'in power' does not necessarily mean you actually have power. The capacity of Colau and her fellow Barcelona en Comú city councillors to enact their radical agenda was limited by a wide range of factors – not least the deep pockets of their opponents, the inertia of the city's municipal institutions and civil service, the limits of their jurisdictional authority over key issues like housing, and the intrusion of external events (like the COVID 19 pandemic and the re-eruption of the movement for Catalan independence). Barcelona en Comú representatives and activists always had an 'ecosystem' perspective on their efforts and saw their power as stemming from their connections with the broader movement ecology within the city ("one foot in the institutions, a thousand in the streets!"). However, relations with that wider movement ecology were not always easy to sustain. The need for a cadre of people to work in civic administration drained the movement of key activists, one of whom told us they almost felt 'abducted' by the city institutions. And while elected representatives looked to the movements to support their agenda when it faced challenges, those movements were often understandably wary of too close an association with one political party, lest it harm their ability to progress their agendas with Barcelona en Comú's electoral opponents at another stage. And in any case, the movements often had other priorities than working at the municipal scale – the efforts of La PAH and other housing movements to secure rental reform at the National (rather than local) scale being a case in point. But despite all this, after eight years in office Colau and her comrades made significant gains on a wide range of policy fronts – from the city's first municipal dental service to important housing and public space improvements. Perhaps most significantly for the future, they were also able to use the resources of the local state to assist a range of commons-based initiatives such as neighbourhood centres and a digital decision-making platform (Decidim) to establish forms of financial and infrastructural independence that will enable them to survive beyond the electoral cycle.

Conclusion: An Ecosystem Approach to Community Organizing?

Seeing community organizing and other social change approaches as taking shape within a broader ecology of people power strategies offers a range of helpful agitations to community organizing, and in particular to Alinsky-style organizing. The perspective we have outlined is offered as means for disorganizing and reorganizing the place of organizing within such an ecology, from a silver bullet that is opposed and preferable to other strategies, to a strategy with discrete strengths and limits that can exist in relationship with other strategies. We conclude with three reflections on what an ecosystem approach might mean for community organizing practice.

Firstly, a people power approach lets us locate organizing amongst a broader ecosystem. It recognises that organizing is a powerful way to make change, calling out what organizing does best

– leadership development and powerful relationships across difference. It also makes clear that when other strategies like playing by the rules and mobilizing are combined with organizing, the result is distinct because of organizing's strengths. Yet in recognising organizing's strengths and limits it makes clear that at times it will be useful for organizing to partner or be combined with other people power strategies and sometimes organizing might not be the best response. For instance, while some have tried to 'solve the problem' of how organizing can scale, a people power approach suggests that it may be more useful to accept that organizing does not easily scale change across places and if fast change is needed, a different people power strategy might be more useful.

If it is accepted that organizing will sometimes need to partner with other people power strategies, then the second challenge is a reflective one – how good is organizing at relating to people who use different forms of people power? While organizing is all about relationship building, organizers frequently have poor relationships with people that make change differently. Alinsky's hyper-critical posture has a legacy where too often relational curiosity is replaced with steely critique, this is most acute when it comes to those who mobilize or run for office. It is a little ironic that while organizing teaches how to build open-hearted relationships across difference that this somehow doesn't apply to people making change in different ways.

But organizing's relational practice offers a guide here; being curious about another person's strategy does not require an organizer to become a mobilizer or even to agree about strategy. Relating is about understanding why they, and you, have come to choose a preferred strategy. In the same way that we ask faith members or union members to not be evangelical and try to change others, we would do well to take our own advice. These conversations should not try to convince others about the merits of organizing (or the limits of another person's strategy) but create a space where curiosity can give way to agreeing to disagree on our approaches to change and recognise that at times we might have cause to work together despite our differences.

We saw this modelled in Hong Kong amongst mobilizers, where younger and older leaders didn't agree with each other's approaches, but they learnt that criticising each other made them both weaker. In a different way, Barcelona also showed that a productive co-existence doesn't require mobilizers and organizers to sit down together and make a plan, it can involve seeing how the strengths of one can be harnessed by the other. In that case mobilizing's capacity to turn people out created an opportunity for organizers to identify new leaders. What is required is for organizers to bring an ecosystem mindset to relationships with others and recognise that fundamentally we are stronger if we have relationships across a political ecosystem, even if in our heads we believe that others are doing it 'wrong.'

Finally, the people power approach argues that organizers cannot be good at everything and no one, and no strategy, can do it alone. There is a humility at the heart of this approach that forgives us for our weakness as well as credits us for our strengths. Some of the things that organizers struggle with are not a result of personal failings, but limits baked into organizing as a strategy. This is not to make excuses, but to suggest that in trying to improve our work we might be looking in the wrong places. We might learn more about how to do amazing assemblies by talking to creative mobilizers rather than other urban organizers. Opening our horizons to the broader political ecosystem might lead us to ask new questions, like what would it look like to engage with people running for office in a new way? Especially considering the mutual aid movements under COVID, is

there a greater place for prefigurative work in organizing? How might we learn from groups like La PAH who have no connection to the Alinsky tradition? Or how might US Alinsky organizing disrupt its own swagger as the 'creators' of organizing and learn from the endless examples of successful organizing efforts in continents like the UK, Europe and Oceania?

Of course, these suggestions are not without their own challenges. Indeed, we would not want to suggest that this 'ecosystem' approach is a silver bullet! Cooperation and coordination among the diverse elements of a plural political ecology is not just a matter of goodwill. As Nunes (2021) suggests, while ecological plurality is the way the world *is*, the different elements of that plurality will be more or less coordinated. Their combined actions are likely to exist on a spectrum from being an accumulation of uncoordinated efforts through to exhibiting intentional and functional coordination. Our point is to suggest that an ecosystem orientation is a necessary element of cooperation and coordination, and that it is possible to hold simultaneously a commitment to the principles of community organizing while also treating the broader question of building power as a 'shared worksite' with others coming from different traditions and perspectives. The significance of the challenges we all face, and the limits of our existing efforts to address them, would seem to demand nothing less.

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