

AN UNFINISHED REBELLION:

Narrative and Structural Change in Philadelphia

Malav Kanuga

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Photos taken by the author; images and video stills courtesy of Amistad Law Project, Reclaim, and Movement Alliance Project.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Malav Kanuga’s research uses ethnographic and historical insight to explore the organization of freedom in the collective experiences of urban life, politics, and popular mobilization. He is a longstanding participant in several movement-based media projects.

Malav Kanuga is a cultural anthropologist trained in ethnographic and archival studies of space, culture, and power, as well as uneven development in an internationalist and historical framework. As an urban researcher and as an activist, his work on the cultures and histories of popular mobilization and imagination attends to the articulations and resistances to domination and hierarchy in the urban and social lifeworlds of racial capitalism.

His current research focuses on and accompanies organizing around carcerality, freedom, and public democratic media citizenship. He is interested in how and what communities communicate as they mobilize, and how movements leverage established as well as grassroots media opportunities to change narratives shaping both the policies governing consent and constraint, and the politics and legacies of liberation.

Additionally, Kanuga’s research in postcolonial and comparative urbanism is informed by a historical approach to the contemporary form and meaning of city life. His research broadly addresses value and difference in urban lifeworlds; popular imaginaries and movements; territorial contestations and state spatialities; and uneven urban histories of housing and labor informality.

His doctoral dissertation, “When We Demand Our Share of the World: Struggles for Space, New Possibilities of Planning, and Municipalist Politics in Mumbai,” combines urban history and ethnography to interrogate the political nature of developmentalism and the ways it conceptualizes and orders urban life, as a method of uncovering layers of meaning, conflict, and action suffusing and interrupting urban modes of development and governance. His archival and activist-ethnographic fieldwork — as well as his participation in various urban campaigns and pedagogic initiatives — is directly shaped by ongoing struggles against the governing of shared life and planned abandonment.

ABOUT THE REPORT

“An Unfinished Rebellion” analyzes narrative and media-based organizing in Philadelphia around issues of policing and public safety in the wake of the 2020 protests following the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The report describes coordinated initiatives around community narrative power as an integral part of existing and emerging citywide coalitions. It also highlights the significance of narrative power for broader social movements formations in the context of a series of crisis facing everyday Philadelphians, and concludes with a call for mass organization that can shift the narratives presently governing the city and society.

SUMMARY

This report reflects on recent narrative and media-based organizing initiatives in Philadelphia since the 2020 rebellion following the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. It discusses these approaches to media activism in light of wider trends in community organizing and mobilization in Philadelphia and highlights three distinct but overlapping strategies prevalent among progressive organizations responding to the interconnected crises of urban violence, policing, criminal justice and issues of housing, education, and work. The strategies include community organizing for policy reform, popular mobilizations around electoral strategy to shift governance, and mass street-based protests most exemplified by the 2020 summer uprising which expressed a deeper rupture with current governance structures and the ongoing management of crises through reforms.

These different strategies are found across a range of community mobilizations and narrative responses to multiple crises expressed through a nationwide reckoning on police and racial violence. They also inform the nature of recent coalition building efforts in the city. The strategies and organizations that characterize the prevalence of community mobilization in the city around issues of social, economic, and criminal justice are rooted in the ongoing history of governance and disinvestment in the city as well as the political and racial economy of established media that narrate the effects of these policies. The report brings attention to the deeper political, economic, and racial histories shaping this moment of “conjunctural crisis,” where multiple and potentially terminal crises are increasingly challenged by various movements and mobilizations. This is an important moment, the report concludes, for community-based initiatives and interventions that can shift media narratives around policing and urban violence and also shift who is served by those narratives, contributing to the long-term process of building “narrative power” across a wide range of community and movement organizations.

What follows is a discussion of media-based community organizing in Philadelphia that analyzes a range of initiatives for structural and narrative change in the city.

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INTRODUCTION

“We demand an immediate end to the criminalization of race, poverty, mental health, ability and immigration status through the multiple carceral systems that target Black Philadelphians.” —Philly Black Radical Collective, “Thirteen Demands,” June 2020

On May 30, 2020, thousands of people gathered near the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum in solidarity with the mass demonstrations erupting across the country in the wake of George Floyd’s murder by Minneapolis police and the police murder of Breonna Taylor in Louisville. Thus began the Philadelphia uprising. The convergence poured out onto the streets, eventually surrounding City Hall before marching through the corridors of center city. The protests and uprising in Philadelphia—as in other cities in the United States—was remarkably multiracial and multiclass, galvanized in part by a number of organizing initiatives and social struggles in preceding years (#blacklivesmatter activism, anti-deportation and immigrant detention, anti-gender violence, and antifascist organizing alongside low wage and housing struggles), the prevalence of organizations committed to broad-based political education as part of their campaign work, as well as the widespread voluntarism of young unorganized people across race and class. Additionally, a number of mutual aid initiatives had sprung up in various neighborhoods during the first desperate months of the COVID-19 pandemic, which focused on food distribution, elderly care, medical assistance, as well as tenant support against eviction, and further prepared people for direct action and solidarity work. The mass rebellion in the spring and summer of 2020 was perhaps the largest popular mobilization against policing in US history. The rebellion was unprecedented both in terms of the numbers of people who poured into the streets as well as the sudden public reckoning with established media narratives around policing, racial violence, and Black life among journalists and the public.



The multiple state and federal police agencies that occupied Philadelphia in response to the first days of mass mobilization created a climate of intimidation and set the stage for weeks of widespread police violence and abuse against demonstrators. The police and city officials relied on a longstanding narrative of law and order in their response to the demonstrations. This framed dissent as disorderly and criminal, justifying repression and targeting participants as “outside agitators,” “hooligans,” and “violent protesters.” The police tear gassed whole city blocks in West Philadelphia, near 52nd and Market Streets, which was a locus of the rebellion both over the summer and in the fall, following the murder of Walter Wallace Jr by Philadelphia Police in October 2020.



The police trapped hundreds of people who stopped traffic on Interstate-676 on June 1, tear gassing them and pointing their guns at panicked protestors while helicopters equipped with LRAD sound weaponry hovered above the crowd. Police Commissioner Danielle Outlaw denied any police abuse before being forced to walk back her statement after a local activist journalist [released damning video footage to the New York Times](#).

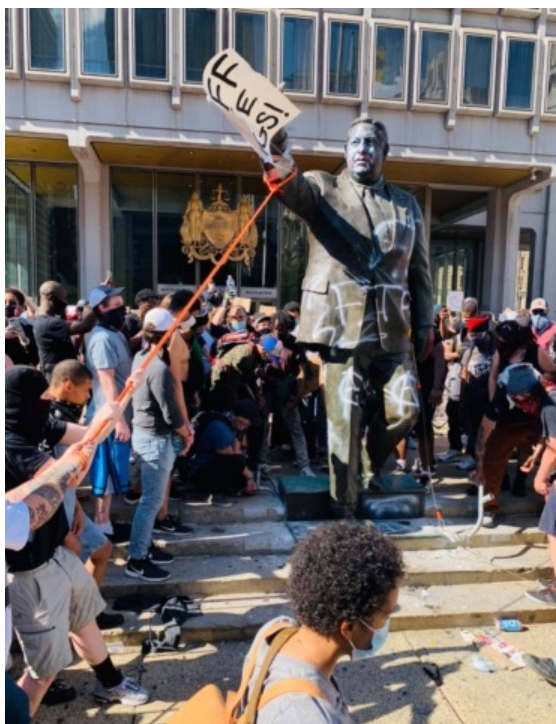
On June 2, following two days of mass demonstrations, including rioting and “looting,” The Inquirer published the reactionary headline “Buildings Matter, too.” Nearly forty staff of color at the paper called out “sick and tired” in an act of protest. The cultural and institutional biases of the city’s paper of record were further corroborated by an independent Diversity and Inclusion audit released months later that offered a detailed view of the systemic lack of diversity and “cultural competency.”

Anger around police abuse and impunity, the devastation of gun violence, despair at deep-seated poverty, alongside experiences of divestment from public education, housing, and work opportunities are all factors that mobilized Philadelphians during the summer rebellion. So too have media narratives of crime and poverty in the city, which further criminalize youth of color and pathologize already vulnerable communities, been long standing issues of community concerns. Over the previous year, members of Free Press, Media Alliance Project, and the Media, Inequality, & Change Center engaged in workshops and dialogues with community organizations to discuss media coverage across Philly neighborhoods. A common theme emerged: families struggling with violence in their neighborhoods are dissatisfied with crime and police coverage, which misinform community of the core issues and available solutions, foster distrust, and maintain a prevailing sense of hopelessness and lack of safety amidst “over policing.” Community organizers see how biased reporting on criminal justice and urban violence supports police narratives that perpetuate the ongoing harms of the carceral and criminal legal system. The Police and Urban Violence working table emerged with those convening organizations alongside Amistad Law Project, Youth Arts and Self-empowerment Project, and Reclaim Philadelphia; and later with newer members such as the Black and Brown Coalition PHL.

Now called the Shift the Narrative coalition, the initiative seeks to help Philadelphians build narrative power to promote transformative and community-based solutions that go beyond abusive policing, punitive sentencing, and criminalized re-entry; as well as to challenge how crime is reported in the newspapers, and to redefine what “public safety” means for a city that has overpoliced and economically underdeveloped much of its Black and Brown communities.

The work is focused on two aspects of *narrative intervention*. First, it directly addresses coverage created by local media and establishes community accountability and participation in reporting, which identifies how newsrooms report on issues affecting communities. This work focuses

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on creating community sets of guidelines and accountability processes rely upon a transformative justice framework of restoring relations after acknowledging and accounting for harm.

The process, which includes a series of strategic community meetings with *The Inquirer*, has been led by Free Press and involved a number of individuals and groups such as YEAH Philly, JEVS, and the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, who have identified the harms and abuses of power as residing in the structure and culture of newsrooms with regard to: single-source reporting, most often of authoritative accounts of community affairs offered by police and their spokespersons; language use that undermines the humanity and dignity of those reported upon; as well as reporting styles that rely on abstract notions of “safety” that obscure the structural and systemic nature of urban violence by divorcing it, for instance, from policies of social abandonment and policies of criminalization and policing; a lack of commitment to journalistic ethics and standards as well as “human-first” style guides and “trauma-informed” reporting training that respectfully acknowledges harm in order to sensitively address community information needs; and other routine newsroom reporting practices that play a part in silencing community voices and eliding their experiences and needs.

A forthcoming study, conducted by the MIC Center, which includes analysis of *The Inquirer*, has confirmed community perceptions of these practices and the biases of local media. A content analysis of the paper before and after the uprising revealed that in *The Inquirer’s* coverage of policing, the police were the most frequently cited source, appearing in 81% of coverage. Police presence is ubiquitous in reporting on local crime, appearing in 92% of all stories, whereas victims of crime appeared in 21% of stories. Comparing the period before Floyd’s death to the period after, the practices shifted somewhat, for instance: the percentage of stories that cited police sources decreased modestly from 86% to 78%, while government sourcing increased from 51% to 65%, and the percentage of stories relying only on police sources fell from 36% to 17%. At the same time, there was an increase in the percentage of stories citing community-centered voices such as protesters, activists, and advocacy organizations (from 7% to 30%), civilians harmed by the police (from 4% to 15%), and community organizations and service providers (from 8% to 18%). It is clear that the mass rebellion in its early days opened up terrain for narrative intervention work to build on.

The other part of narrative intervention work involves supporting communities to tell their own truth and stories through narrative creation that builds self-determination in representations of the community. This takes a number of forms, including digital media training and development via podcasts and social media, partnerships with local public media such as PhillyCAM, as well as op-eds, town halls, and community surveys. Overall, this shift addresses the need for new messages, frames, stories, and languages to intervene and replace harmful narratives. These narratives have further criminalized people experiencing the violence and trauma of planned underdevelopment and pervasive poverty; pathologized their experiences of vulnerability; sensationalized

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Identifying the need to shift narratives requires not only creating new media, but also tracking and strategically organizing against existing narratives by analyzing news media regularly for the representations / overrepresentations of crisis (crime, violence, and justice) and the agenda that more policing seems to serve in that narrative of crisis. It also entails identifying what community perspectives are routinely disregarded. That is, analyzing the news with an abolitionist perspective that is critical of the media's role in perpetuating carceral justifications of institutional violence and harm, at the expense of community-based frameworks around public safety and well-being.

Some of this work is tactical, as for example the need for “rapid response” narrative work around issues of urban and police violence to intervene “ahead” of the headlines. Overall, the strategy is to build community media power that may foster deeper transformative understandings of urban violence and to help develop a space for coordination to transform *whose stories* are told in local media, and *whose histories are acknowledged and accounted for*. The vision includes both centering narratives toward community-led solutions that offer public safety outside of policing frameworks, and also influencing the very media practices that threaten community power and consolidate the legitimacy of police powers as authoritative sources on issues of crime, safety, and community well-being.

This work of narrative intervention depends upon a critical understanding of the legal history of what Michelle Alexander refers to as “racialized social control” (2010: 16) as well as the political economy of those narratives of “law and order” and “criminal justice” that have justified ongoing condemnation and harm for Black, Brown, and working-class people. This includes the unprecedented normalization of mass incarceration as the unquestioned way problems of punishment, reform, and criminal justice are imagined and expected to be addressed, or what Angela Davis refers to as a politically-produced imagination in which, “the prison is considered an inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives” (2003: 9). Since the advent of the “war on drugs” in the seventies, and the domestic war on terror in the past twenty years, the media have played a crucial part in facilitating the policy agendas of a state and corporate expansion of mass incarceration as well as the concentration of police powers and resources with narratives of crisis and decline. This helped establish widespread acceptance of racialized understandings of “crime” which have provided ample justification for state and federal criminal justice policies to roll out law and order initiatives in “an attempt to re-engineer a socioeconomic system in crisis” through the criminalization of race (Parenti 1999: 29). In the relatively recent era of prison reform, “diversionary programs” and so-called “progressive reform” efforts on state and federal sentencing, bail, parole and probation have in fact expanded the prison industrial complex through new policies and contracts that deepen the carceral forms of surveillance and control and serve a state-corporate privatization agenda (Alexander 2010, Law and Shenwar 2021).

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In short, the criminalized narratives of a “crisis” have conjured a “moral panic,” to put it in Stuart Hall’s terms, that then create the justification for a set of policies intended to “police the crisis,” even as crime rates began to fall in the eighties and nineties (Hall 1979). As Ruth Wilson Gilmore has described, crisis is about instability “that can be fixed only through radical measures,” around which whole institutions and policies have come in to “create stability from instability”—and in the process fashion a new order by entrenching hierarchical relationships, geographies, and means of capital accumulation. This depends upon, in her well-known conception of racism, on “state-sanctioned and extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (2007: 28). The prevalence of social and economic policies of abandonment and privatization in recent decades are part of a wider project of neoliberal restructuring of race and class relations, as well as resources and opportunities, and moral standing in society.

Moreover, the racial history of what Khalil Gibran Muhammad (2010) refers to as “the condemnation of Blackness,” and more generally what Sylvia Winter refers to as “narrative condemnation” is long embedded in establishment media. As the Free Press’ recent Media 2070 essay documents, newspapers have harmed, traumatized and in countless instances brutalized communities of color by promulgating and exciting the myth of racial inferiority and criminality. The media have in many documented instances fortified the settler colonial and white supremacist projects of the ruling elite, have orchestrated both profitable markets of enslaved Africans and lynchings of Black Americans during the long era of Jim Crow, an ongoing legacy found in the sensationalized reporting on Black criminality and impunity to Black death by state forces, which have justified and normalized oppression and consolidated state and capitalist control over ever more people, land, and resources.

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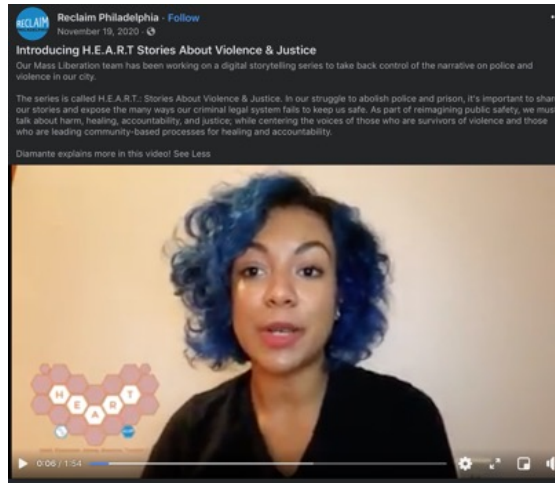
Ultimately, the media have done the work of not only establishing what news is fit to print but help to determine “who matters” and “what matters” for certain ruling orders. This critical understanding of the racial and political economy of the media identifies the operations of power and unfreedom in the “free press” as long standing and also determined in historically specific ways through the expression of a range of ruling class agendas. In this era of mass incarceration, detention and deportation, national security and public safety, this is narrated not only in criminal justice reporting, but through selective portrayals and narrative omissions of work, housing, education, food insecurity, and other crises caused by public disinvestment.

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The focus of community-based narrative work is therefore not only on those aspects of reporting and media that deal with public safety but also about developing the “narrative control” to determine the needs and desires of communities. Initiatives like Amistad Law Project’s “Everyday Philadelphians Want to #DefundThePolice” as we well as “Safety We can Feel” by Youth Arts Self-empowerment Project suggest there is already a deep abolitionist imagination in the community that sees solutions to violence and crime outside of police and prison frameworks. These media efforts also offer an important reckoning with the consequences of vital public resources being systematically defunded for a corporate agenda that has entailed greater police

powers. Amistad has developed two additional community-based media initiatives: the Move It Forward podcast, which addresses a number of themes such as defunding policies, gendered experiences of urban violence, and the troubled experiences of re-entry; and #PracticalAbolition, which is an animated series of videos exploring de-escalation and breaking the cycle of violence in the community. Reclaim Philadelphia's Heal, Empower, Atone, Restore, Transform (H.E.A.R.T) series looks at survivor-centered restoration and healing from gendered-based oppression and sexual violence.





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The rebellion expressed widespread outrage and condemnation of police violence and highlighted important issues that intersect with policing and sentencing. Significantly, the focus on police as an institution of criminal justice and order has also galvanized attention to a series of interconnected crises facing Philadelphians that emerge from the complex arrangement of policies that maintain class power in the “poorest big city” in the US. In this context, a range of popular calls to “defund” and “abolish” the police have resonated widely, in part because the police have been the most visible “frontline” of those policies and institutions of the state that orchestrate ongoing high unemployment, underemployment or low wages, coupled with disinvestment through low tax bases. Ruth Wilson Gilmore refers to

this as “organized abandonment” and disinvestment through uneven and unequal housing and food security, as well inequalities in the school districts that lead to racialized poverty and wealth dis-accumulation. Alongside broader attacks on workers’ rights on the job, foreclosures and gentrification that drive displacement from historically Black and working-class neighborhoods is an additional factor that organizes racialized accumulation of wealth in the city. Manning Marable (1982) traces the central racial logic of how US capitalism developed and underdeveloped its racialized populations as part of a larger class project that unevenly distributes (as well as withdraws) resources and surplus across society.

Not coincidentally, Philadelphia has a longstanding history of police and state violence (See “[Black and Blue: Police brutality against Black people in Philadelphia: A timeline](#)”). The city has one of the highest rates of incarceration in the country, despite a declining jail population since 2015 (see [Philadelphia’s participation in the Safety and Justice Challenge](#)). It spends as much incarcerating people as it does on streets and health departments combined, and more than anything else except police and human services (which also often back into carceral systems such as child welfare and elderly care). The city’s police budget has also nearly doubled in ten years. In last year’s round of budget hearings, it was reported that the Philadelphia Police Department is expected to receive one-quarter of the city’s nearly \$5 billion budget, and \$14 million more than what was proposed in the Mayor’s initial budget.¹

Meanwhile, a poverty rate of over 23 percent has compounded over years of disinvestment and underfunding of public schools and housing in the city, while redlining at the job and home, as well as rezoning have encouraged the largely white suburbanization of wealth in the counties surrounding Philadelphia that has further entrenched the city’s population into racialized enclaves of poverty and largely white bastions of wealth. The pandemic has only intensified the long decline in jobs and the enduring policies of abandonment, with the unemployment rate surging to 15 percent in the summer of 2020.

The profound generational experiences of racism in the forms of anti-Blackness and white supremacy are structurally embedded in the history and evolution of a range of public institutions that discipline, repress, and govern Philadelphia’s working communities of color. The Fraternal Order of Police have a particularly strong hold on determining the practices guiding policing, as well as influence over elected officials and governing policies, and framing of community relations in Philadelphia. Police violence and terror imposed on Black communities are routinely conducted with impunity due to the power of the police union as well as their presence in narrative sourcing for print and broadcast news accounts of police actions and practices, as well as crime and urban violence. An analysis of local coverage of George Floyd protests from Reframe and Media Inequality & Change Center, for instance, found that headlines prioritized official responses to protest over protesters’ demands or context for the unrest.²

1 [Juliana Feliciano Reyes](#). “Philly plans to increase police funding while cutting city services. Critics say that’s a mistake.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jun 2, 2020. <https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia/philadelphia-police-funding-increase-george-floyd-protests-20200602.html>

2 Aubrey Nagle, “Local Media Responds to George Floyd: How Philadelphia Newsrooms Covered a Week of Protests,” Reframe and Media Inequality & Change Center, June 2021.

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Moreover, as one of the five largest media markets in the country, Philadelphia's newspapers have largely promulgated a narrative structure that upholds the city's racial and economic divides. This is maintained by reporting that relies upon the racial, patriarchal, and class interests of a monied, white, male and suburban citizenship base of the city and, relatedly, a law-and-order criminal justice discourse framed by police interests and perspectives.

In fact, a damning audit of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* recently conducted by Bryan Monroe and Andrea Wenzel of Temple University found that the paper has fallen woefully short on sourcing and editorial practices that represent the range of voices, culture, and texture of community achievements and issues of the city's longstanding Black, Indigenous, and migrant communities; highlighting its gendered and sexual diversity, and grappling with the rich and plural histories of Philadelphia's micro-neighborhoods. In both newsroom culture and its structure, which so often reports on complex issues such as crime as "beats," fails to make these connections, nor offer perspectives and solutions from communities most impacted.

NARRATIVE POTENTIAL IN A CONJUNCTURAL CRISIS

Philadelphia has a rich history as a city of protest and grassroots resistance to the managing institutions of the state that orchestrate the larger system of neoliberal governance, through street and neighborhood related activities and citywide community-based coalitions as well as ongoing advocacy for policy changes with occasional support from elected officials. The conditions of activism and advocacy today are indeed inherited from years of movement in the context of the political economy of the city, its governance, and its media structures.

In the context of the rebellion, a renewed force for narrative power building is beginning to shape community mobilizations, grassroots organizations, and collectives in coalition. As such, the movements behind the "defund" and "abolish" slogans are building upon a range of voices calling for the need to shift narratives in Philadelphia around the systemic nature of urban violence, the historic condition of policing in the city, and the mechanisms that criminalize and incarcerate young, predominantly Black, Brown, and migrant working-class communities of Philadelphia.

Building these coordinated initiatives around community narrative power is integral to expanding the wider societal power and potential of this unfinished uprising. Most significantly, narrative work is needed to express the interconnectedness of the multiple crises that everyday Philadelphians are experiencing: of urban violence, policing, criminal justice and issues of housing, education, and work. Community-based narrative work may bring attention to the deeper political economic and racial histories shaping this conjuncture of organizing in and beyond the crisis. It may also allow a range of community mobilizations and organizations to deepen their level of coordination to respond to the conjuncture of crises facing Philadelphians.

Organizing for structural and narrative change around entrenched policies of disinvestment, policing, and the wider carceral network emerge through three distinct but overlapping politics of crisis and resistance. What are the main areas of narrative power building in which organizing for structural changes are happening?

REFORMULATIONS OF THE CRISIS

First, there is a range of grassroots organizations that mobilize around policy reforms and narrative reformulation of existing policy frameworks. From here come a variety of responses to the laws, practices, and ordinary workings of the institutions that have, with their own trajectories, contributed to a complex of policing and policy making of crisis. This policy orientation involves putting pressure on specific elected officials, state departments, and other complicit entities to make necessary progressive changes to how these policies function.

As these policies are set in place over a period of time, they become entrenched in a layered and historically constituted neoliberal project that manages the uneven distribution of resources to address social issues, through policy and budgetary commitments to policing, sentencing, housing, detention, education, etc. The policy framework of progressive organizations often addresses a specific question—for instance, cash bail or funding for Group Violence Intervention—with the goal of reforming the outcomes of how that aspect of the state machinery is geared to either deliver “security” through allocated resources or perpetuate harm and exacerbate the very conditions targeted by policy.

The narrative work central to this organizing consists of reformulating policy by focusing on the lived and experienced effects of punitive or harmful policies. It depends on narratives that can distinguish between meaningful and necessary reforms from the perspective of harm reduction and restoration, and that can distinguish from those that consolidate state and police powers and abilities to define the crisis and the reasonable measures and responses.

This terrain of narrative work around policy is vital for a long abolitionist arc, namely the abolition of a society that creates these policies in the first place and the creation of freedoms of people through other policies entirely. This is what Reclaim Philadelphia posits as the work of mass liberation in response to mass incarceration.

The question is whether this strategy can reform and reformulate existing policy frameworks toward an abolitionist horizon that abolishes the whole conditions of possibility of the crisis as well as the policies and police that manifest the crisis. An evolving and increasingly intersectional abolitionist vision, renewed by decades of learning and reflecting on abolitionist work in the prison industrial complex, has indeed informed this approach. As vital as new narratives are for policy reforms, the shift in narrative must also offer a common ground from which new alliances can emerge. This would be necessary in order for communities to win reforms while dismantling the very conditions that have been so destructive and devastating to their lives.

How the experiences of detrimental policies are expressed, and new narratives organized, is paramount to forming a *narrative bloc*, or a new convergence of social forces capable of disrupting and dismantling existing narratives of the dominant ruling powers. This depends

in part on breaking down the political boundaries that policies often impose on communities and of challenging the racial and class divisions those policies have wrought. In other words, the creation of narrative blocs rests on undoing the very boundaries or identities of bases from which an alliance of mobilized social forces are governed.

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CRISIS

Several new coalitions have come into being with the purpose of running progressive candidates and influencing the outcomes of elections. Coalitions and community organization-led initiatives mobilize mass power and influence from various communities for their candidates with the expectation that their movements can be represented by a progressive agenda carried by their officials in city hall and the state capitol. Once “inside,” power and narrative shifts are intended to emerge from within newly occupied parts of the state. This relies upon a translation of different forms of narrative power: (1) first, the mass form of power mobilized by ordinary people and the organizations who translate their everyday experiences of the crisis as well as mobilize them; (2) second, power represented in the form of elected officials, translated by progressive policy scripts that function as representations of the crisis; and (3) third, the power of the state, translated through legislative action whose narratives function to represent the crisis as a problem of policy.

The reliance on political surrogates places singular emphasis on candidates and representatives as the locus of structural and narrative power to be translated. What is the relationship of this figure to the movement that put that figure into motion in the first place? The *expectation* of that translation also largely determines the degree to which left candidates who claim power believe they can simultaneously reclaim or retranslate power for the “people.” This is the task of a left that seeks to govern in the crisis.

The challenges of mobilization here are in part defined by the nature of coalitions in the neoliberal era. Navigating crisis and instability, the established ruling order must reliably stitch together coalitions of elite and ordinary people through partial material gains and also a compelling enough story of how society works. This order depends on widespread consent to govern, despite uncertainty and without guarantees. The stability of the project depends on a balance of democratic popular representation as well as repressive or coercive forms of rule. The assumption common to policy and electoral strategies of change is that progressive policies can in fact help stabilize a new governing coalition, through its many crisis-tendencies and contradictions.

REFUTATIONS OF THE CRISIS

A third orientation was the most pronounced during the spring and summer uprising of 2020, but since has waned: mass demonstrations and occupations of physical space in the streets in a direct confrontation with the police, and at times the wider forces of state and federal police, including the national guard.

While the wider demonstrations surrounding the rebellion brought many people to the streets whose imagination of popular change relies on policy reforms and elected officials, through its many different centers, the rebellion constitutes a refusal of policing and racial violence and a refusal of the state powers to reform or elect “differently” in order to better govern this crisis.

Here—and elsewhere—the street movement was at the heart of the unfinished rebellion, which refutes the above strategies while galvanizing a much larger narrative horizon. Simply put, the social energies on the streets could not be adequately addressed or represented by the imagination of those other spheres or orientations of organizing. While the wider demonstrations surrounding the rebellion brought many people to the streets whose imagination of popular change relies on policy reforms and elected officials, through its many different centers, the rebellion constitutes a refusal of policing and racial violence and a refusal of the state powers to reform or elect “differently” in order to better govern this crisis. The conditions of ungovernability implicit in the rebellion are not limited to the tactical level of street skirmishes with the police or looting, but rather the larger consciousness of autonomy and self-determination, a narrative of not being governed by the crisis and therefore refusing the terms of official discourse.

Mass street demonstrations in the arc of a rebellion—which in 2020 included a range of rebellious activities including assemblies, marches, strikes, public teach-ins and mobile community kitchens, street defense against the police, property destruction—brought together the widest coalition of multiracial and multi-class participants in the movement. These rebellious activities were not organized or led by any one organization but drew participants from all organized sectors alongside the mass of people who are not part of formal organizations or are not represented by them directly (except tangentially through efforts at “base building”).

The mass was largely composed of those unrepresented by the progressive electoral project or the policy reform one. Nevertheless, as their power was demonstrated in the streets, Black and Brown communities have also continued to push for more responsive progressive representation in local government. In tandem with those efforts, however, is the autonomy of rebellious organizing in the streets, as a refutation of the premise of electorate and policy approaches. The narrative power generated here—of community control, autonomy, and self-determination—is not implicitly part of the same project and therefore is not readily translatable into the other domains of organizing. Its power is far more immediate and preliminary, and as such what people do in the streets and the narratives they generate for themselves from those experiences are the basis of a different project.

To sustain itself, the rebellion would need to rely on more and more projects of narrative power building in coalition. This coalition would have to build narratives that can change the stories that policies tend to tell and change the narratives of authority that police and elected officials of a neoliberal state, including its reform-minded and progressive aspects, rely upon. Thus, it also has to create the conditions to defend new popular narratives in part by consciously refuting the powers that would subordinate them to the state.

However itinerant, this refusal is a force that established left electoral and policy-oriented initiatives as well as politicians have to reckon with as they “reformulate” and “represent” these responses to the crisis. Attempts to reformulate and represent the

crisis—against its rebellious refutations—are invariably aided by local and national media structures as well as the normative framework of “law and order” that provide police a mandate to exercise extraordinary powers against the rebellion. For instance, the counternarrative about the street movement is evident in the police response to the uprising (brutal repression) and the media framing of the rebellion (“Buildings Matter Too”), as are the stakes in propagating and defending new narrative powers emerging from movements.

Incomplete and underdeveloped as the rebellion remains past its first year, the movements that sustained it have faced and will likely continue to face widespread repression from the state (police abuse and impunity as well as legislation that criminalizes protest) and harmful media misrepresentation. It will be important to the wider development of the rebellion that repression and attacks against the spirit of the rebellion are met with solidarity to the most vulnerable on the frontlines and with greater compassion and support by a wider public.

TOWARD A NARRATIVE BLOC

Arrayed alongside each other, we see different forces operating in a field of crisis politics. On the one hand, there is a robust reform world in Philadelphia that is making the links between police and other policies; and with those who are elected on progressive platforms to enact these reforms, we see an active project that is attempting to govern the city and the crisis better, hopefully in tangible ways on the ground and day-to-day. On the other, we see the power of refusal in the streets and an imagination of abolition come into being that includes the end of police, ICE raids, evictions, and the self-determination of community control on the affairs of those most affected by the crisis. Its imagination and its presence in the streets are part of its narrative power that has an unrivaled ability to bring in a wider range of participants to the streets. But absent from the development of narrative blocs through the coordination of a range of organizations doing community-based narrative and media work, it is limited by its spontaneity and volunteerism.

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The dominant logics of a combined movement largely rest on the tensions of its forces: the reformist proposition, which promises better budgets, more humane laws, and more accountable officials; and the rebellion’s abolitionist imagination which is rooted in community self-determination. They overlap to the degree that a coordinated set of interventions and shifts in existing ruling narratives can be orchestrated by a narrative bloc that can see its way *beyond the crisis*.

Central to this is an analysis of the ways in which the crisis is understood as well as how its structures are expressed through feeling and experience. This is important because the stability of the existing order depends on widespread consent to the ongoing crisis conditions in our society. Strategic shifts in narrative are what it takes, in part, to achieve a shift in consensus and action.

Evidently, no established consensus or ruling narrative bloc exists without a degree of disagreement, or *dissensus*. There are tensions and contradictions that cannot be easily or directly squared in how consent to be governed is achieved and maintained through the narratives available to us. Those tensions periodically become perceptible in moments of collective grief, public pain, and in response to acts of state violence or white supremacist terror. The contradictions become too much to bear and occasionally, as in the summer of 2020, are cracked open by a mass refusal that temporarily breaks consensus. In these moments, new narratives bloom from a fertile radical imagination, nurtured by so many initiatives on the margins of new society.

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Though it may wax and wane, the rebellion is now permanently part of a cycle of struggle that will likely have lasting consequences on the future of race, policing, and the governance of our crisis-times. Currently this cycle, though not led by any one strategy, includes mass protest, community organizing, and electoral campaigning in the city. Each are guided by different analyses of the crisis and strategies for mobilization. Each mobilization to come is a mobilization of narrative power that articulates the limits and possibilities of this moment.

It is significant therefore that in a profound moment of reckoning and instability, a range of community mobilizations and organizations have deepened their level of narrative coordination, both in terms of critical analysis of the relations between *policies, police, and crisis*; as well as the nature of alliances and forms of organization that can respond to the conjuncture of crises facing Philadelphians. The narratives themselves depend on imagination and ability to sustain mass organization.

While organizations capable of building mass participation remain underdeveloped, it is through the coordination of a narrative bloc—a federation of diverse organizations doing this work—that mass power may be organized at work, in schools, in our neighborhoods, in prisons, in hospitals, and perhaps, too, in city hall. This depends in part on a political understanding of how a number of existing narratives have historically come together to form the complex of instituted truths, ruling norms, established expectations, and cultural values around well-being, safety, and care and welfare in this society. The struggle is to advance both the narratives and the social forces that knit together a different conception of society, and mobilize the imagination to both create it and defend it.



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