Contentious buildings: The struggle against eviction in NYC's Lower East Side

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Abstract
The article focuses on the mobilization carried out by tenants living in a rent-stabilized building in NYC's Lower East Side. Their action was a central part of a large and successful struggle against the landlord, blocking his continuous attempts at eviction. The main research question is: what are the reasons of the success of this action? In other words: what has tipped the balance in favor of the tenants in a conflict in which the landlord clearly had stronger economic, political and power resources? The article argues that this success was highly based on the intersection of three main elements: the specific resources of the tenants, the organizational resources of the territory and the institutional and legal configurations. Moreover, the study considers these three levels closely interconnected and mutually influencing each other. Based on the direct observation of the mobilization, on semi-structured interviews and on biographical sources, the article aims to contribute to the understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of the fight against evictions. The article also aims to contribute, theoretically and methodologically, to a relational and interactionist approach both for the study of social movements and of gentrification and to strength the dialogue between the two fields.

Keywords
eviction, gentrification, housing, interactionism, Lower East Side, NYC, social movements

'This is harassment? Are you out of your mind?'

'Someone claiming to be from building management came to ring at doors and check whether the people inside are the people on the lease . . . This was [X], a private investigator, former cop and former fire marshal, working for [the new landlord] We spoke

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briefly in my apartment – he saw my helmet and told me about his new BMW bike . . . This was social but nosy.'[1] This is how Angela, tenant of a rent-stabilized apartment in a building on New York City (NYC)'s Lower East Side (LES), describes in writing her first contact with the new landlord's 'intermediary'. It was October 2013, and he had just bought the building where she had been living for almost 20 years, as well as more than a hundred other buildings mostly composed of rent-stabilized apartments.[2] The situation is immediately clear to Angela: 'We spoke in my apartment but I should have spoken to him in the hall . . . He told me that he also has a private investigation business, in case I should ever need such a service . . . He explained that buyouts are possible, including both money and excused rent, within "reasonable" demands. I said I was not interested and did not ask about the range of "reasonable".'[3]

This first encounter was followed by many others, all with the aim of creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, intimidating the tenants, and making them more vulnerable to attempts at eviction and buyout offers. From the beginning, Angela reveals this feeling of fear in her tenant diary: 'I am considering shredding papers now that I know that there is a private investigator working for the owner, aggressively working to push out tenants.'[4] After several 'visits' similar to the one described above, and increasingly aggressive, she directly faced the 'intermediary': 'I said that I did not want to discuss this with him and did not want to be harassed any longer.'[5] Confronted with his reaction ('This is harassment? Are you out of your mind?'), she noted on her diary: 'No appointment, showing up at my door unannounced and demanding my time is harassment.'[6]

The recognition of these 'visits' as harassment' was the first step for Angela's taking action against it. Initially, the reaction involved the other tenants of the building, and, later, the housing organizations active in the LES. The building become the epicenter of a larger, successful mobilization against the landlord, and, more in general, against the 'attack' carried out by real estate developers, aimed at bringing rent-regulated houses into the free market.

Focusing on this effective mobilization, this article analyzes the forms and strategies of anti-eviction activism. It looks at how the risk of eviction negatively impacts the life of tenants and at how their mobilization, conversely, helps contain this impact thanks to the sharing of resources, emotions and the solidarity built up through social networks internal and external to the building.[7] The main question underlying this research is what counted in the tenants' favor faced with a landlord whose economic, political and power resources were incomparably stronger? I address this question by concentrating especially on the tenants' resources for mobilization, on the role of networks – particularly the organizations Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES) and the Cooper Square Committee (CSC)[8] – and on the political configuration of NYC. I consider all these levels – micro dimension of activists' resources, meso-level of organizations and networks, and macro-level of the politics, policies and legislation in the city – as correlated and reciprocally influencing each other.

From the perspective of social movement studies, this article analyzes the impact, in housing conflicts, of urban changes provoked by gentrification. Examining the specific context of LES, it particularly addresses the role of first new residents – who have been called 'marginal gentrifiers' (Rose, 1984) – in the resistance against subsequent phases

of gentrification. Theoretically, this article aims to contribute to strengthening a relational and interactionist approach both for the study of social movements and of gentrification and to putting into dialogue the two fields.

Towards an interactionist understanding of mobilization processes and gentrification

The relationship between urban transformations and the emergence of urban social movements has been mostly analyzed through a structuralist perspective. In a recent book addressing the urban struggles in the context of the intensification of neoliberal urbanism provoked by the 2008 financial and economic crisis and its underflow, the authors develop a structural analysis 'that focuses on processes of large-scale urban transformation in the shape of what has been called "neoliberal urbanism" – and explores to what extent, and how, these developments involve the formation of new urban social movements in Europe' (Thorn et al., 2016: 8). In their distinction between social movements and uprising, these authors are particularly inspired by Manuel Castells, who states that, while 'a social movement is never reducible to a structural trend', 'urban revolts' are the result of 'spatialised ethnic segregation, poverty, economic inequalities and political alienation' (Castells, 1983: 50). A similar structural approach is also adopted in a recent study focused on the case of Southern Europe urban movements in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis (Fregolent and Nel·lo, 2021: 7).

From the point of view of social movement studies, the debate about the conditions which are potentially favorable to the emergence of protests has never been brought to a final agreement, and this is also true in the case of the large amount of research carried out on the wave of anti-austerity contention following the 2008 crisis (Accornero, 2017; Accornero and Ramos Pinto, 2015; Giugni and Grasso, 2016). Conversely, what is consensual is the fact that the existence of cleavages, injustices and grievances cannot be considered in itself a predictor for mobilization. In fact, as Charles Tilly pointed out – in his long-term historical analysis of protests in Europe – if social and economic injustices, inequality and cleavages are the rule in history, protest is actually the exception (Tilly, 1981).

Social movements theory has primarily focused on the role of political contextual conditions in the rise and fall of mobilization. One of the concepts most used to describe these conditions has been that of Political Opportunity Structure (POS). According to Sidney Tarrow's definition, political opportunities are 'consistent – but not necessarily formal, permanent or national – dimensions of the political environment which either encourage or discourage people from using collective action' (Tarrow, 1998: 32). Despite introducing a more careful analysis of the structural factors – in this case political – which would allow or discourage mobilization, this approach has nevertheless been increasingly criticized, particularly because of its unilateral top-down dimension. In this sense, Olivier Fillieule considers opportunities as elements which are 'continuously updated through the relationship with the movements' (Fillieule, 1997: 97). On developing his 'political process model' (PPM), Doug McAdam, on his side, considers the emergence of social movements as 'a combination of expanding political opportunities and indigenous organizations, as mediated through a crucial process of collective attribution'

(McAdam, 1999: 2). The 'cognitive' work developed by organizations in this process, through a process of collective framing,[9] is thus particularly relevant.

In their attempt to move beyond the classic opposition between structuralist and non-structuralist perspectives, Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper developed a dialogic critique of the PPM. Besides recognizing its evolution in relation to the POS model, and particularly due to the introduction of some interactionist aspects in the relationship between environmental conditions and protest, these authors criticize it for its 'strong bias in favor of metaphors of "structure"' (2004: 4). What they propose is to move beyond the existing 'gap and misunderstanding' between the philo-structuralists and the structuralist-critics, and renounce 'universally valid propositions and models'. At the empirical level, this means acknowledging the 'historically shifting' and 'sequences of processes and events that give rise to varying forms of social movements'; at the theoretical level, recognizing 'that a variety of concepts and theories may help us "hit" this moving target' (2004: 27).

With this background in mind, I consider structural and non-structural approaches as complementary. This epistemological flexibility can be better achieved through an approach which pays the attention to the continuous interactions between agents and structures and their reciprocal co-building. Concretely, I adopt a 'players and arenas perspective'[10] (Accornero, 2019a, 2019b; Accornero and Ramos Pinto, 2020; Duyvendak and Jasper, 2015; Jasper and Duyvendak, 2015; McGarry et al., 2016), which may be able to bridge the gap between structures and agents, between micro, meso and macro-levels, and between state and non-state actors, 'by giving equal and symmetric weight to protestors and to the other players whom they engage, and by focusing equally on players and the arenas in which they interact' (Jasper, 2015: 9). Such a perspective is similar to the one Matthew Desmond adopts to explain the advantages of 'relational ethnography', which 'gives ontological primacy, not to groups or places, but to configurations of relations' (Desmond, 2014: 554).

This discussion of my analytical approach, even if lengthy, is necessary in order to explain through which lens I aim to build the proposed dialogue between social movement and gentrification studies. In fact, the debate between perspectives focusing on structural elements ('supply') and others focusing on the role of actors ('demand') has also crossed the development of gentrification studies. On the side of 'supply' theories, Neil Smith stressed the prominent role of investments: 'Gentrification is a back to the city movement all right, but of capital rather than people' (Smith, 1979: 547). On the side of 'demand' theory, Sharon Zukin identifies the agent of gentrification in 'white-collar jobs who had markedly non-traditional households and styles of life' (Zukin, 1987: 131).

This polarization and the deterministic view emerging from both perspectives have been increasingly disputed. Damaris Rose recognized the continuous interaction of these two apparently opposing dynamics and its uncertain results and questioned the existence of direct, causal relationship between them: 'What conceptual grounds exist for assuming that these "first stagers" and the "end-stage" affluent residents have anything in common?' (Rose, 1984: 58). Loretta Lees, on her side, affirms 'I do not want to choose between economic Marxism and cultural postmodernism . . . I want to utilize a productive tension between the two' (Lees, 1994: 138). Lees also recognizes that gentrification is not the same everywhere (Lees, 2000), while John Joe Schlichtman and Jason Patch

consider it not 'as a single storming of the city' but more as a 'complicated project inter-twined with other processes' (Schlichtman and Patch, 2013: 1503). Hence, if a 'structural approach provides us a very sharp understanding of the macro-level' it 'gets a bit more fuzzy as one "zooms in"' (Schlichtman and Patch, 2013: 1492). From another angle, similarly to that suggested by Jasper and Goodwin for the study of social movements, Chabrol et al. adopt a 'pluralistic view, able to include the large varieties of causes, actors, phenomena under the label of gentrification' (2016: 44).

Against this background, this article focuses on the intersection and reciprocal influ-ences between the micro-level of the tenants' and activists' life trajectories, the meso-level of the networks (the building, the local organizations, the neighborhood and its history), and the macro-level of structural change in the neighborhood and of institu-tional politics, shaped by gentrification dynamics.

Methodological reflections

I lived in the LES building in question between October and December 2016. I was a visiting scholar at the CUNY Graduate Center with the aim of presenting and discussing the results of my research on the long-term effects of activism. However, I partially devi-ated from this original aim because of the circumstances of my stay. The building has 19 apartments, with only 10 occupied by tenants at the time. It was thus easy to make friends with my new neighbors and to quickly become part of the building's life. What I did not know on my arrival was that I was going to be living – for some months – at the very epicenter of one of the most important mobilizations for the right to housing in recent years in the LES.

I started getting familiar then with the pervasive relevance of housing in NYC, where the 'tenant–landlord' relationship is at the crux of a large part of the city's social life and social organization. And it is frequently a deeply uncertain relationship, affecting all aspects of the tenants' life (Desmond, 2017). Thanks to Angela, I had the opportunity to attend the meetings of the GOLES association, and I accompanied various actions organ-ized by both the GOLES and the CSC, some of them in front of the NYC Housing Court, when the civil cases against the landlord were filed. Attending the cases was also impor-tant for my research, as were the hours spent in the housing court room waiting for them. Cases are in fact always delayed and this gave me the possibility of watching other cases happening in the meantime and observing the less formal dynamics of downtimes.

During the months I lived in that building, and in my following visits, I had several conversations with my neighbors, which helped me build up a background to the events, giving them shade and depth. I also carried out semi-structured interviews, especially with some of the tenants, tenant organizers, tenant lawyers, and academics who are also involved in the housing struggle. In total, I collected six participant interviews between December 2016 and February 2020. This means that I interviewed some informants more than once, at different stages of the mobilization (for each of these informants I have counted these various discussions as only one participant interview). During this period, I also kept in contact with informants by email, through numerous exchanges, to the present time.

During one of the subsequent trips, Angela shared with me her almost 100-page-long 'Tenant's Diary'. The document focuses in particular on harassment episodes; negligence in building maintenance and management; dangerous and unhealthy situations in the buildings and apartments; communications with the landlord's company; contacts with the GOLES and CSC and with the City; protest, press and legal events. It also compiles information – such as pictures, detailed descriptions, emails, SMS – sent by the other players involved in the conflict, such as other tenants, tenant organizers, the landlord and his intermediaries. Through its lens, we can understand the tenants' daily experience of life under threat of eviction; relationships with neighbors, with the landlord (and his intermediaries), with the tenant organizations and the city; and the effects of the institutional environment on the tenants' trajectories. We can also see how, aside from being demanding in terms of time and resources, the mobilization is also a powerful resource in itself, able to contain the impact of the threat of eviction, of the uncertain housing situation, and of the harassment.

Finally, I turned to official documents in order to understand the housing systems and their impact (also in quantitative terms); the role of legal instruments and other forms of tenant protection; and housing policies. The dialogue between all these sources helped me connect the different levels of my research.

Lower East Side between resistance and commodification of the past[11]

Jason Hackworth and Neil Smith consider that gentrification has passed through three waves. Before the oil crisis of 1973, the first wave took place only in specific neighborhoods in some large cities of Europe and north-eastern USA. The second wave started in the late 1970s, when it was more diffused, benefited from strong state support, was intertwined with cultural dynamics and faced the first anti-gentrification movements (Smith, 1996). After a period of stagnation, around 1993 a third wave began that was less interconnected with cultural factors, the role of corporate capital as well as the weight of the state increased, and it also occurred in more remote neighborhoods. Moreover, globalization facilitated the involvement of larger transnational developers, while the struggle against the process became weaker.

In the late 2000s, some authors suggested the addition of a fourth wave starting around 2002 (Lees, 2008), particularly defined by the financialization of housing and by the consolidation of favorable state policies. More recently, Manuel Aalbers proposed the introduction of a fifth wave beginning with the 2008 crisis, characterized by growing corporatization and shaped by the development of platform capitalism (e.g., Airbnb) (Aalbers, 2018: 6).

The LES only partially reflects the subsequent developments of gentrification described above. The neighborhood seems to be contemporaneously showing features of different waves, without following always the temporality described by these authors. Actually, gentrification came to the LES later than to other NYC neighborhoods. According to Janet Abu-Lughod, 'it is hard to explain how a district so close to the financial, governmental, and corporate centers of one of the world's greatest cities has persisted for some 150 years as a zone housing people of very modest, even marginal,

means, apparently insulated from the tremendous forces of change which washed around it' (1994: 18). Among the reasons for this specificity, she highlights the fact that the 'eastern margins of the zone originally lay in swampland'; and that this area 'was left out when the subway system was designed to favor the larger avenues' (1994: 18).

LES went through the first gentrification phase in the late 1980s, when new residents arrived attracted by the affordable housing and the local emancipated culture and historical background. They integrated into the local urban fabric and considered themselves part of the neighborhood, with many on the front line of the struggle in its defense (Mele, 2000). People with this profile and motivations still continue to arrive now (particularly in rent-stabilized houses), nevertheless, since the late 1990s, the process also reflected different aspects. The echo of LES's alternative cultures – accurately framed by real estate developers – also began enticing other types of residents, and the process started to be led more 'by profit-seeking land development firms' than by individual new residents (Hackworth, 2002: 816).

The historical contentious background of the LES was thus transformed in a seductive brand. In fact, since the mid-1800s, the LES and particularly Tompkins Square Park has been one of the main epicenters of social conflict in NYC (Shine, 2011). This was also the setting of one of the first anti-gentrification struggles ever, taking place on the night of 6 August 1988, when many protestors occupied the park in response to its announced curfew, aimed at 'cleaning' the area (Smith, 1996). The demonstration was violently repressed by police, but the curfew failed. However, the park renovation project continued, with the park being closed in June 1991 and reopened a year later, as a 'domesticated' recreation space for the new residents.

Nevertheless, besides the 'commodification attempts' by real estate developers, the LES's history of struggles has actually been an essential frame for later mobilizations in the neighborhood. For instance, the GOLES association's Director of Housing Services frequently referred specifically to this conflict, called 'Tompkins Square Park riot' during the interview. He drew attention to the role it played in the creation and life of the association itself, whose headquarters overlook the park.[12] He also referred to the squatting movement in the 1980s and 1990s, in which the association was involved and that contributed to consolidating its role.[13]

A contentious building

Affordable housing in NYC is divided between two main systems: public housing and private rent-regulated housing. The latter system aims to protect 'tenants in privately-owned buildings from illegal rent increases',[14] being further divided into two sub-systems: rent-stabilized and rent-controlled housing. Rent-controlled housing is the oldest system and applies to residential buildings constructed before 1 February 1947, where the tenant is in continuous occupancy prior to 1 July 1971, and for this reason is, today, almost residual. The rent-stabilized system includes buildings constructed between 1947 and 1974, as well apartments removed from the rent-controlled system. In 2014, there were 3,400,093 housing units in NYC, of which 1,029,918 (47.2%) were in the rent-stabilized system. [15]

If between 2011 and 2014 the rent-stabilized stock of housing units increased by 0.2% (around 9000 more units), in 2015, the system lost 8009 units.[16] Real estate investors

played a central role in this process. Like the landlord of the LES building analyzed in this article, investors frequently bought rent-stabilized buildings with the aim of, mostly illegally, evicting tenants and renting or selling the apartments in the private sector. Many strategies have been adopted to achieve this objective. Landlords often offer tenants buyouts in exchange for 'voluntarily' leaving their apartment. Tenants may accept this for different reasons. Some take advantage of their improved financial position to rent or buy a better apartment; some because they are in desperate financial straits; others, notably immigrants who are not fully fluent in English and people with meager educational or social resources, do not fully understand the terms of the offer and think that if they do not accept, they risk sanctions or legal problems.[17]

Neglecting building maintenance is another frequent strategy adopted to encourage tenants to leave, with serious consequences as buildings become increasingly unhealthy and dangerous. Other forms of harassment are real physical threats or pressure based on alleged legal irregularities, as well as attempts to cancel the rent payment.[18] Research has shown that these strategies are more successful among more vulnerable tenants: 'Displacement appears slightly more likely among the foreign-born, female-headed households, those in poverty and those in older age-groups' (Newman and Wyly, 2005: 25).

In such a context, the importance of external resources and their collective socialization for protecting these deprived tenants is evident. Among them, I focus on individual resources of other tenants (especially educational, cultural, political and social), on the solidarity and organizational resources provided by networks and associations, and on the available institutional and legal resources. With respect to this last point, the 2014 election of Bill De Blasio as mayor entailed the inclusion within the administration of many former housing organizers and activists, a trend that was consolidated in the following 2018 elections. Thanks to this, new bills were introduced to protect tenants living in rent-regulated apartments. Among them, the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act, signed in June 2019, was probably the most significant housing law approved in NY's recent history.[19] Housing social movements have greatly contributed to the institutional conditions that led to this legal success. Moreover, the new legislation, and the way it was framed by housing organizations, confirmed the rightness of the fight, and strengthened and legitimated its players.

The LES building analyzed here was part of these events. As noted earlier, the building has 19 apartments, only 10 of which were occupied at the time of the research. As the informants explained to me,[20] these apartments were vacant because, when the people who used to live there left, the previous owner took the opportunity to stop renting them, in order to have vacant apartments that could be immediately renovated and make the building more attractive for buyers. In fact, landlords have the obligation to renew the rent-regulated lets; nevertheless, before the 2019 Act, they could renovate the apartments and add 1/40th of the costs to the monthly rent, which could only happen when the apartment was empty. This price increase was enough to allow the landlord to bring the apartments back onto the free market.

The aim of the new landlord who bought the LES building was to evict all the other tenants, through legal and mostly illegally strategies, and embark on a full restoration of the building, as he was also doing in many other buildings in Manhattan. This project nevertheless failed because of the resistance of the tenants. This also made it impossible

for the landlord to simply renovate and rent the apartments that were already empty at higher prices: new free-market tenants would have not paid high rents to live in a building in such poor condition. This is how Angela framed the entire process to me: 'the landlord had the vacant apartments gutted, hoping to push out the others in the building and to renovate the entire building, but the tenants organized instead'.[21]

Most tenants live in the building alone, or share their apartment some of the time with family members or partners. Although none of the tenants are native to the LES, eight have been living in the building for over 20 years. Mark is Italian-American, and he was around 50 years old at the time of the interviews. He has been a tenant in the building for 27 years. He recognizes that he has been part of the radical changes in the neighborhood during this time. He highlighted the role that he and other neighbors have played in revitalizing the area's cultural and social life. Without explicitly using the term 'gentrification', like other interviewees he does not consider its dynamics completely negative. Specifically, he refers to positive aspects, such as making the neighborhood safer, a culture of alternative cafés, music bars, small retailers, stores, and other places of local socialization. But he claims these are now at risk because the new generation of residents and real estate investors have radically changed the 'neighborhood identity'; this has led to an exponential rise in the price not only of housing but also of services so that life is less and less affordable for older neighbors. He notes in particular 'young people working in the financial district . . . without any knowledge or even interest in the local culture and history'.[22] Mark is not alone in this view. Other studies showed that the 'Lower East Side's early gentrifiers see new bars and nightlife as threats to the sociocultural environments that they remember, the people and places that they were strongly attached to, the public spaces they inhabited' (Ocejo, 2011: 285). Mark recognizes that he has helped to make the LES what it is now, and, paradoxically, to increase its attractiveness 'for the investors, who now want to evict us'.[23] This feeling was also detected by other scholars. For instance, Newman and Wyly state that 'Longtime residents are frustrated that after years of fighting to improve their neighborhoods during periods of severe disinvestment, now that the neighborhoods are improving, these residents will not be able to stay' (Newman and Wyly, 2005: 45).

Like Angela, Mark was forced to leave his apartment for several weeks by city housing inspectors in February 2017 as the ceiling was unsafe; he complains that 'the economic compensation was very poor and not enough for me to live in another place – a bed and breakfast – with my child, especially because I had to pay for food in restaurants, since I didn't have anywhere to cook'. He also experienced various forms of harassment, such as the presence of 'unknown people' – paid by the landlord – in the building, knocking on tenants' doors and asking invasive questions about their lives, jobs and families. He also suffered from the 'laundering'[24] of a monthly rent payment made by check, which he was obliged to pay again. As this account shows, if it is true that many of these first new residents have a different educational and sometimes professional status from the previous working-class inhabitants, nevertheless they do not always have better economic resources. Their negative reaction against some changes in the neighborhood, as described above, therefore also has underlying material reasons – the increased cost of living and the risk of eviction – and not only cultural motivations based on the preservation of the local identity and fabric.

A researcher at NYU with a doctorate in microbiology, before living in the LES building, Mark lived in a nearby squat and was a member of a group he defines as 'anarchist-punk'. Referring to his anarchist past, Mark says he has never trusted organized politics, associations, or legal actions, and his engagement in the mobilization is limited to participating in protest actions and meeting inside the building. However, as stressed by other tenants, his communication skills are essential during protests, especially for contact with the media.[25]

Angela is mixed-race American,[26] and she was aged around 40 at the time of these episodes. She has a PhD in human rights and has worked for several organizations as a consultant on gender, sexuality, human trafficking and prostitution. She arrived in the LES when she was a student in the late 1990s. As a new resident in the area, she witnessed the process of early gentrification that had started in the 1980s intensified in the LES in the following years, which deeply transformed the local social fabric.[27] Angela too has a positive attitude towards some of the changes in the neighborhoods: 'When I arrived here, there weren't stores, cafés, restaurants and the area was very dangerous . . . I like the new cafés, restaurants, stores, life is nicer and simpler.'[28] Nevertheless, she does not express negative feelings towards more recent new 'incomers' in the neighborhood and their nightlife and she frames the situation mainly through her and other tenants' 'right to stay put' (Newman and Wyly, 2006).

The fact that both these tenants have a PhD is not inconsistent with the profile of many 'first' new residents in the neighborhood. As Angela explained to me, when Mark and she arrived there, neither of the two had a PhD. She recalled that the building and the neighborhood were very different, and that in the meantime, the older people retired, and some moved away; for instance, one elderly couple returned to the Dominican Republic. She revealed that she knows one of the other neighbors since college, a Chinese-American librarian who moved into the building when she introduced him to the management. She also mentioned that an older African-American woman, a long-time resident in the building, was an editor of books before retiring, and another neighbor was a video editor, also retired. She thus noted the following: 'So everyone has a profession . . . Because of rent stabilization, most of us who moved in shortly after university were able to stay for decades, and our careers progressed accordingly, with some people moving away due to jobs . . . and others moving when they wanted to have a family . . . Some people's careers moved forward but we all stayed in our small apartments.'[29]

'But the tenants organized instead': Daily life and resistance against the threat of eviction

These previous reflections are crucial to understand the profile of the tenants who are the protagonists of the events analyzed in this study and to situate them in the larger picture of gentrification narratives, in the LES and elsewhere. As mentioned, the importance of Angela's role in promptly 'decoding' the situation in the building – after the arrival of the new landlord – as one of harassment and attempted eviction, and in organizing the reaction to it, was crucial. This aspect has been often referred to both by the other tenants and by the housing organizers. Angela's 'Tenant's Diary' is a detailed document of this reaction. In addition to many problems with the conditions in the building and apartments

due to the lack of maintenance – lack of hot water and heating, rain infiltration, part of the ceiling falling down – other situations of harassment and eviction attempts are mentioned, such as 'late payment notifications'. The older African-American woman referred to before was 'told that a check was lost and would she resend it, which she did, but the check had been cashed despite Y's[30] assurances that it would not be'.[31] On another occasion, this woman 'was returning in a cab with her groceries. Y saw her . . . picked up her groceries and told her to take his arm. She said she wanted to take the stairs herself without his help . . . He then went up the stairs too quickly for her to keep up and she described feeling vulnerable and endangered by him.' After this, Y said to her that 'she should not live alone, and . . . that the owner would pay for her to move to a retirement home'.[32]

References to local housing organizations began in 2014. In June, Angela quotes a press conference organized in Tompkins Square Park, during which Y was present and took pictures of participants. In the same month, Angela received the first contact from the State Attorney General's office about building management. She 'explained about the harassment of residents by a private investigator, that there has been a lot of turnover since the building was bought'.[33] A summary of this conversation was sent to GOLES, along with the contacts of other tenants who agreed to participate in the mobilization. From that moment onwards, GOLES and the CSC started following the case and offering organizational and legal support. Notwithstanding, the contacts made by tenants and the data they had gathered, particularly on Angela's initiative, encouraged other tenants to become involved and contributed to the success of the action.

As mentioned above, the protest took different forms and the events took place in different locations. Actions were organized in front of the NYC civil court when the cases involving the landlord were scheduled. Other actions were organized by tenants and housing associations in Tompkins Square Park. Other events gathered people in front of the building. One took place on a particularly cold day in December 2016. The door of the building and of many apartments were left open so that the participants, and especially journalists, could enter and see the poor condition of the common and private spaces. In the street, while coffee was offered to participants, tenants were showing pictures of particular situations – such as a ceiling falling down – which had made the apartments uninhabitable for weeks. They also narrated their experiences of harassment and answered journalists' questions.

Nevertheless, the tenants were aware that allegations regarding the building's problems could lead to an order to vacate. This happened in February 2017. Angela describes it as follows: 'I showed the inspector my ceiling, he asked for a broomstick and poked at it . . . he saw the cracked ceiling in #2 and spoke to his supervisor. We were both relocated [Angela and Mark]. We are allowed to come and go and get things as we need, but cannot sleep there because of the risk of the ceiling coming down.' Shortly after, 'the Red Cross arrived . . . They gave me the information, and I declined a place to stay, but I will ask them for the debit card for displaced people to get food on Monday. I was really in shock by then.'[34]

Garboden and Rosen note that, 'while the execution of an eviction notice – along with the physical removal of a family from the home – is endemic in the lives of the urban poor, its frequency pales in comparison to the number of poor families who face the threat of eviction each month . . . even when they are not forced to relocate' (2019:

638–639). Actually, as these stories show, this threat of eviction and its consequences also have profoundly negative effects for tenants that cannot be considered, *stricto sensu*, poor. Nevertheless, tenants with more social, educational/cultural and organizational resources can have more chances to face – and to help others to face – this threat so that its effect can be contained and even transformed in a resource for mobilization (for instance, through the potential impact of these situations in the media).

The mobilization by the LES building tenants has effectively stopped the harassment and illegal eviction attempts and forced the landlord to start repairs and maintenance works. This mobilization also added weight to the penal case against the landlord, which ended with him being charged with fiscal crimes[35] and sentenced to one year in jail. During the period in jail, the civil cases – including those for harassment – continued and ended up in a settlement that obliged him to pay $8 million, which was used to create a Tenant Restitution Fund.

This LES's story is just one of the many stories shaping gentrification's dynamics and their complexities. With their own specificities – as unique and specific as all biographies – the trajectories of many of its protagonists (particularly Angela and Mark) are not atypical in gentrification developments. First gentrification narratives focused on the dynamics of displacement of the working-class, low-income residents by new, wealthy residents (Marcuse, 1985). The evolution of the phenomenon showed that its dynamics can be much more multifaceted. In many places, in fact, first 'incomers' are themselves, in following moments, under the pressure of subsequent waves of gentrification and displacement.

Furthermore, as Rose underlines, it is also difficult to establish a direct causal, consequential connection between these different phases and consider these marginal gentrifiers as pioneers of following processes. Some authors also show that they can actually 'protect' the neighborhood from aggressive real estate's speculation (Estevens et al., 2020; Mendes, 2012). In a meticulous analysis of the case of Paris, first new residents in gentrifying neighborhoods are characterized as mostly government employees, working in a 'social' activity, students, people whose livelihood depends on 'small jobs'. Moreover, they are particularly visible in neighborhood life, and are present in associations, local politics, and cultural and social activities (Collet, 2005: 11). For this reason, according to Slater, these incomers 'cannot be reduced to popular slanders of "yuppies," not least because the negative connotations of that term are at odds with the "marginal" economic position of some gentrifiers . . . and the left-liberal politics that many gentrifiers demonstrate at the ballot box' (Slater, 2011: 576).

In the case of the LES, Ocejo notes that 'the Lower East Side has a long history of community activism, particularly in housing and land use, and many early gentrifiers are highly active in these issues' (Ocejo, 2011: 290) and that 'they serve as mediators between the neighborhood and city government through the community board and local groups' (Ocejo, 2011: 305).

My findings confirm and develop these perspectives. As already suggested by Rose in her pioneer study of marginal gentrifiers (1984), my research indicates that the role of these actors in shaping gentrification and its results is determinant and that, as underlined by Luís Mendes, they can be promoters of 'potential critical and emancipatory practice' (Mendes, 2012: 142). In this specific case, tenants' action has played a driving role in the

resistance against eviction and, thus, against further developments of gentrification. Therefore, if it is true that anti-gentrification conflict seems currently less disruptive than in the 1980s and that 'most militant anti-gentrification groups of the 1980s morph into housing service providers' (Hackworth and Smith, 2000: 468), we can also observe that this 'community organized' resistance can be nevertheless particularly effective in facing real estate's aggressive speculation and protect the more vulnerable residents. Moreover, it can be considered the main legacy of the 1980s struggles.

Conclusions

This study analyzed an effective tenants' mobilization in the LES that succeeded in stopping the landlord's attempts at evicting them. It identified three main elements underlying this favorable outcome. Among them, at micro-level, it firstly considered the tenants' resources for resisting and their socialization with neighbors. Secondly, at the meso-level, the role of the associations – especially the GOLES and the CSC – was also considered essential in organizing the tenants' actions, in framing the mobilization, and in connecting the action with the channels available for tenant protection at the institutional level of the city council. Finally, at the macro-level, the favorable political configuration in NYC during the period was a significant reason for the mobilization's success.

Even if it is not the object of this study, and my data are not able to empirically demonstrate it, we can argue that this and other struggles around the right to housing in the city carried out in previous years have also played a crucial role in building up the favorable political context, and, as a consequence, in the adoption of new housing legislation favorable to tenants. What *is* actually empirically evident from and significant for my analysis, is that these changes were framed as achievements of the tenants' movement by both the organizers and the associations, and that this has had a positive impact on their motivation and engagement.

This shows that opportunities for mobilization and for its outcomes – whether perceived or real – are co-built through an interactive process, in which individual actors, organizations and institutions all have an equally relevant role (Accornero, 2019a, 2019b). From this lens, the study contributes to strengthening an interactive understanding of mobilization processes, which, according to this perspective, at the same time impact and are impacted by structural changes and institutional dynamics. It also shows the reciprocal influence and frequent superpositions of the different arenas and players involved in the conflict – e.g., individuals, informal networks, organized associations, legal framework and players, institutional environment – whose boundaries look much less rigid than definitions suggest.

A 'players and arenas' perspective in social movement studies is therefore able to meet and contribute also to a relational understanding of gentrification, and vice versa. In fact, as Chabrol et al. emphasized, 'gentrifiers and gentrified are not always where we are looking for them' (2016: 46), and gentrification is not just a succession of steps 'inexorably ending in the replacement of popular with wealthy people . . . this process adapts itself to the neighborhoods' specificities, and the neighbors' individual experiences produce different situations' (2016: 16). For this, the processes triggered by gentrification 'cannot be reduced to mechanisms of exclusion . . . under relations of domination new forms of social networks could develop' (2016: 18).

A perspective able to interlink – at empirical, analytical and theoretical levels – the role developed by structural change and by the actors involved in them, at the crossroad of social movements and gentrification studies is, in my view, a fruitful and promising path for further research.

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Notes

1. Angela's 'Tenant's Diary'. Angela shared and authorized me to use this document for my research. The names of all these events' protagonists were changed, the building will always be referred to as 'the LES building', and the landlord simply as 'landlord'.
2. On the rent stabilization system in NYC, see next section on 'Affordable housing in NYC and local politics'.
3. Angela's 'Tenant's Diary'.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. For the role of solidarity in anti-eviction struggles see Santos (2020).
8. The GOLES is a 'neighbourhood housing and preservation organization that has served the Lower East Side of Manhattan since 1977' (www.goles.org/). Similarly, the CSC, created in 1959, 'works with area residents to contribute to the preservation and development of affordable, environmentally healthy housing' (http://coopersquare.org/about-us/our-historical-accomplishments).
9. According to Robert Entman, 'To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient' (Entman, 1993: 52). The framing process is particularly important for social movements, 'Since mobilization does not always require pre-existing collective identities, activists' efforts to strategically "frame" identities are critical in recruiting participants' (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 291).

10. Players are defined as 'those who engage in strategic action with some goal in mind' (Jasper, 2015: 10), while an arena is 'a bundle of rules and resources that allow or encourage certain kinds of interactions to proceed, with something at stake' (Jasper, 2015: 14).
11. Goulding (2000).
12. Interview with the Director of Housing Services of the GOLES.
13. Ibid.
14. NY State Division of Housing and Community Renewal Office of Rent Administration, *Rent Stabilization and Rent Control-Fact Sheet*; https://hcr.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2020/11/fact-sheet-01-09-2020.pdf
15. NYC Department for Housing Preservation and Development, *2014 NYC Housing and Vacancy Survey*; www1.nyc.gov/assets/hpd/downloads/pdfs/about/2014-HVS-initial-Findings.pdf
16. Changes to the Rent Stabilized Housing Stock in New York City in 2015 (2016 report). The document is no longer available. Reports for later years are available (for 2017 and 2018) but in the framework of my study, which focuses on the years 2013–2017, the 2016 report data are the most relevant.
17. Interview with the Tenant Organizer and Housing Counselor at the CSC.
18. Frequently the payments are made by check, and in some cases the landlord denies he has received it and asks for another one. I call this eviction strategy the 'laundering' of rent payments.
19. Besides many other points, this new law makes rent regulation a 'permanent feature of NY's housing law'; and 'rent stabilized apartments will no longer be eligible for deregulation simply because they cross a certain rental rate upon vacancy' (Stein, 2019: 2). Interviewees consider the adoption of this law as a specific conquest of the housing movement (interview with Samuel Bruce Stein; interview with the Tenant Organizer and Housing Counselor at the CSC).
20. Particularly Angela and the Tenant Organizer and Housing Counselor at the CSC.
21. Information provided by Angela through email exchange (November 2020).
22. Interview with Mark.
23. Tenants' meeting and press event in front of the LES building, 15 December 2016.
24. See note 18.
25. Interview with Angela.
26. This definition was agreed with her.
27. Interview with Angela.
28. Ibid.
29. Information provided by Angela through email exchange (November 2020).
30. Y is another employee of the landlord's company, hence also remains anonymous.
31. Angela's 'Tenant's Diary'.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Among other fiscal crimes, there is the fact that he had lied about his rental income to banks in order to refinance his loans. The false documents he gave to banks for this purpose included claims that rent-stabilized units in his buildings were market rate.

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Interviews

Angela, an LES building tenant (NYC, last interview on 20 March 2017 and following communication by emails until November 2020).

Director of Housing Services of the GOLES (NYC, 19 November 2016).

Mark, an LES building tenant (NYC, last interview on 20 March 2017).

Patrick Tyrrel, tenant lawyer (NYC, 25 October 2017).

Samuel Bruce Stein, researcher at the CUNY-Graduate Center, urbanist and housing activist (NYC, last interview on 4 February 2020 and following communications by emails until April 2020).

Tenant Organizer and Housing Counselor at the CSC (NYC, last interview on 30 January 2020).

Author biography

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Résumé

Cet article porte sur la mobilisation menée par les locataires vivant dans un immeuble à loyer stabilisé dans le Lower East Side à New York. Leur action a joué un rôle central dans la lutte engagée contre le propriétaire, qui a permis de bloquer ses tentatives continues d'expulsion. La question principale abordée ici est : quelles sont les raisons du succès de cette action ? Autrement dit, qu'est-ce qui a fait pencher la balance en faveur des locataires dans un conflit où le propriétaire avait clairement plus de ressources économiques et politiques et plus de pouvoir ? Je montrerai dans cet article que ce succès s'explique en grande partie par l'intersection de trois éléments principaux : les ressources spécifiques des locataires, les ressources organisationnelles du territoire, et les configurations institutionnelles et légales. Je considère par ailleurs que ces trois éléments sont étroitement interconnectés et s'influencent mutuellement. À partir de

l'observation directe de la mobilisation, d'entretiens semi-structurés et de sources biographiques, l'article vise à contribuer à la compréhension des diverses dimensions de la lutte contre les expulsions. L'article vise également à contribuer, sur le plan théorique et méthodologique, à une approche relationnelle et interactionniste dans l'étude des mouvements sociaux aussi bien que dans l'étude de la gentrification, et à renforcer le dialogue entre les deux domaines.

Mots-clés
Expulsions, gentrification, interactionnisme, logement, Lower East Side, mouvements sociaux, New York

Resumen
El artículo se centra en la movilización llevada a cabo por los inquilinos que viven en un edificio con alquiler estabilizado en el Lower East Side de Nueva York. Su concurso fue una parte esencial de una lucha exitosa contra el propietario, bloqueando sus continuos intentos de desalojo. La principal pregunta de investigación es: ¿Cuáles son las razones del éxito de esta acción? En otras palabras: ¿qué inclinó la balanza a favor de los inquilinos en un conflicto en el que el propietario tenía claramente más recursos económicos, políticos y de poder? Se argumenta que este éxito se basó en gran medida en la intersección de tres elementos principales: los recursos específicos de los inquilinos, los recursos organizativos del territorio y las configuraciones institucionales y legales. Además, se argumenta que estos tres niveles están estrechamente interconectados y se influyen mutuamente. A partir de la observación directa de la movilización, de entrevistas semiestructuradas y de fuentes biográficas, el trabajo pretende contribuir a la comprensión de las dimensiones multifacéticas de la lucha contra los desalojos. El artículo también pretende contribuir, teórica y metodológicamente, a un enfoque relacional e interaccionista tanto para el estudio de los movimientos sociales como de la gentrificación y a fortalecer el diálogo entre los dos campos.

Palabras clave
Desalojos, gentrificación, interaccionismo, Lower East Side, movimientos sociales, Nueva York, vivienda