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### **Walls and Graffiti**

#### **The Strategic Value of Urban Space**

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Connections

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## 1. Introduction

This contribution aims at critically reflecting on the notion of strategic value of urban space by focusing the discussion on walls and graffiti in Istanbul. Once briefly highlighted how state and marketing strategies abuse public space, I will introduce graffiti as a traditionally illegal practice (Campos, 2009) of “spatial misuse” (Özkan, 2008) that transgress property relations and spatial norms. In other words, I approach graffiti for their speculative significance in challenging existing (b)orders between public and private property and enacting alternative territorial boundaries.

Henri Lefebvre’s classic work *The Production of Space* (1991 [1974]) offers my main theoretical framework to then examine the space reclaimed by graffiti by exploring two interrelated issues: first, how it displays the contradictions of space and, more specifically, the one between exchange- and use-value; secondly, to what extent it is and remains a (re)appropriated space (i.e. a “counter-space”). Problematizing the partial acceptance of graffiti as (street) art when their tolerance and/or even promotion respond to profit-making dynamics, I address graffiti in Istanbul as a case study to verify Lefebvre’s argument that the power(s) tend to reabsorb any produced difference into the dominant system. Accordingly, in the last part of my paper I will argue a strategic value embodied by the space (re)appropriated by graffiti in general and I will explain why I suggest that the space produced by specifically political graffiti embody a counter-strategic value by analysing the reactions to the graffiti made during the Gezi protests.

## 2. The instrumentality of walls between misuse and abuse of urban space

*Boundaries* indicate the presence of (b)orders that confine territories. Either jurisdictionally recognised or not, accepted and/or imposed, visible or invisible, fixed or mobile, borders mark the limits between areas subjected to different authorities, to their relative orders and thus to different conditions of access and, most importantly, *use*. Crossing them is possible, and in certain cases it means transgressing them. Rather than a border, a wall is a boundary, one that is visible and often loaded with symbolic meanings. As for walls in cities, like other separating devices such as fences and gates, they are used as boundaries to indicate the border between two

private spaces/properties or between a private space/property from a public one; and the association of (urban) space with property is the issue that I would like to address. Calling for your attention on examples from Istanbul, the city where I currently live and on which my research focuses, I would like to remind how walls are visible surfaces and social interfaces, exercising a communicative function according to the purposes of different actors and users.

The state uses public space for civic/national propaganda and outdoor advertising for marketing purposes. This let me introduce a notion that I will discuss in details later, the one of strategic value of walls and, in general, of (urban) space, whereas by strategic – following Lefebvre’s theorization – I refer to their instrumentality in reflecting and enacting strategies of centralistic and plutocratic power(s). As for graffiti, despite acknowledging substantial differences between graffiti as legacy of the hip hop culture initiated in the peripheries of New York in the 1970s, street art as post-/neo-graffiti, I use graffiti as an umbrella term to refer diversified interventions, thus also including forms of creative resistance as well as writings for everyday practices. Referring to the examples offered in these pictures, I would like to introduce the notions of *abuse* and *misuse* of space.

Misuse is the improper use of something, in this case a space, which is meant to be used for another purpose; abuse refers to a morally and/or legally unacceptable use that often implies violence and eventually also longstanding consequences. Approaching graffiti as a traditionally illegal practice (Campos, 2009), I address graffiti as an example of those practices that Derya Özkan (2008) calls of “spatial misuse”. Transgressing accepted normative spaces, established property relations and their related (b)orders, illegal graffiti misuse public space and abuse private property. Whether they might abuse public space depends, for instance, on the degree of violence involved in their specific messages (e.g. graffiti ‘death to Alevis’ in Ankara). Conversely, outdoor advertising does not misuse public space and walls. In fact, it privatizes them in accordance to a legislative regulation granting the right to rent or buy space without taking into account the scale of the entailed visual pollution, a scale that urge us at least to problematize the abuse of public space at stake. And what about state’s civic/national propaganda? Being in compliance with the existing legislative regulations, it certainly does not misuse public space and walls. Yet, private property represents not only– at least in my opinion – one of the main abuses in history of space, but also the measure to organize and model space in general

(Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 376). The publicness of space depends not only on its formal and morphological boundaries but also and mainly on its public use (Bernardoni, 2012: 298). However, public space, as notion historically constructed in the Western tradition of thinking (Bilsel, 2007, 75) and translated into the Ottoman/Turkish context, refers to the state's domain and to the space that is not private property (yet) (Tanju, 2008: 233). Questions like 'whose territory is public space?' and 'who has the right to be entitled to decide how to use it?' calls for attention to the urgency of overturning a longstanding top-down definition and normative regulation of space and society. Accordingly, I speculate on graffiti as *interstitial* practice that provisionally fills the chasm between enduring (b)orders of legality and potentially alternative boundaries of legitimacy.

### **3. Beyond (b)orders of legal property: graffiti as boundaries of legitimate (re)appropriation**

Remarking that I assume not only juridical (b)orders but also aesthetic and moral (b)orders as limits to criticize and challenge, I address graffiti beyond rhetorical and prejudicial distinction between ugly vandalism and beautiful (street) art. If a boundary designates the end (and the beginning) of a territory, and – as already mentioned – a wall is a boundary between two property (b)orders, I then assume graffiti as new boundaries of reclaimed space. At this point of the analysis we need to ask what kind of space is the space reclaimed by graffiti. A preliminary question to answer is: do graffiti produce space? Yes, re-signifying existing places and giving new meaning to them by marking new territories. However, Ley and Cybrisky (1974: 504) argued that, as "territorial markers", graffiti "ascribe a proprietary meaning to space". Besides, Murray Bookchin (1995) mentioned spray-can graffiti as one of the principal expressions of lifestyle anarchism, that is to say anarchism understood and lived as a "personalistic commitment to individual autonomy" vs. social anarchism as a "collectivist commitment to social freedom". I cannot deny that graffiti are often the outcome of individualistic instances that have nothing to do with political engagement but rather respond to competitive dynamics of a forbidden game in the search for fame and recognition. However, while partly agreeing with Bookchin, and shifting the focus of the analysis from the possible subjective motivations behind the practice to

the spatial implications that the practice carries and to the alternative territorial boundaries that it potentially enacts.

Considering graffiti as thought-provoking, I aim at evaluating the theoretical and political significance that they embody. Referring to the Lefebvrian distinction between property and appropriation as main conceptual tool of analysis, I argue the *ambivalence* of graffiti in functioning as alternative and yet enduring property boundaries on one side and as boundaries of (re)appropriated space on the other one. "Social space" (Lefebvre, 1991[1974]) in general, and thus also the territories generated by graffiti, in fact, reflect and mediate the contradiction between property and appropriation, and the contradiction between property and appropriation is nothing but the contradiction between exchange value and use value of space (Lefebvre, 1991[1974]: 356). Understanding the contradictions embodied by space is crucial in order to understand to what extent graffiti stays a practice of spatial resistance before eventually becoming an instrument itself in reinforcing the capitalist organization of space.

By 'spatial contradictions' Lefebvre (1991[1974]: 358 and 365) meant those socio-political contradictions of society that, coming effectively into play in space, become contradictions of space. His theory of contradictory space detected the conflicts between quantity vs. quality, homogeneity vs. fragmentation and exchange vs. use value, all internal to the abstract space, which is the space produced under the capitalist mode of production. Abstract space *appears* uniform, homogeneous and coherent (everything is subjected to its logic), yet – as Lefebvre put it (1991[1974]: 373) – "differences endure on the margins of the homogenized realm, either in form of resistances or in the form of externalities [...] what is different is [...] what is *excluded*: the edges of the city, shanty towns, the space of forbidden games, of guerrilla war, of war". Socio-spatial contradictions are very important simply because they are interstices/cracks in the systems where potential resistance in the form of counter-spaces and counter-projects can be generated. (Re)appropriated space is then a counter-space, a space that is "against quantity and homogeneity, against power and the arrogance of power, against the endless expansion of the 'private'" (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 382). (Re)appropriated space is a space whose logic resists to the domination of a state that produces space naturally acting "in accordance with the aims of the capital (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 375). Bearing in mind that resistance might be conscious or unconscious, direct or indirect, whereas the direct and indirect

are not the same as active and passive, I argue that the alternative territories drawn by graffiti represent counter-space. Either as forbidden game with unintentional political significance or a communicative act of intentional political protest, graffiti challenge existing property (b)orders and normative space. Yet, the space reclaimed and (re)appropriated by graffiti is a counter-space at least so far as it is not swallowed by the dominant norms and thus reduced to normative space. In fact, as clearly pointed out by Lefebvre (1991 [1974]: 382): “it happens that a counter-space and a counter-project simulate existing space, parodying it and demonstrating its limitations, without for all that escaping its clutches”. This introduces the issue of the process of normalization of graffiti at the hands of institutional actors or, in Lefebvrian terms, of the absorption of (re)appropriated space.

#### **4. Absorption of (re)appropriated space**

Understanding the *normalization* of graffiti requires a preliminary parenthesis on the process of their occasional legalization, which, in turn, is related to their partial acceptance and/or even promotion as (street) art embodying high exchange-value and potentially adding exchange-value to cities. Graffiti, in fact, are more and more raising the interest of not only non-practitioners and academicians like for instance me but, above all, of the world of official art as well as of local administrations. What calls for my attention is not so much the changing of the cultural meaning of a practice that, eventually ceasing to be a subculture, is from time to time either taken into galleries or permitted in assigned spaces with the excuse of aiming at valorising youth creativity. I do not focus too much on the process of its decontextualization that jeopardizes (compromises) an *elusively* authentic meaning that the practice might traditionally have. In fact, even when legal-ized and recognised as art, graffiti can continue to carry a socio-political significance since their potential as vehicle of expression of socio-political critique would not be necessarily excluded. However, much more important for my critique of normative spaces are the economic reasons and the political implications of the process of normalization of graffiti. Banksy’s (art)works are usually used as the easiest example to understand why both official art and local administrations protect them from the risk of being overwritten in order to preserve the exchange value that they embody. Let’s instead figure out this process

in the context of Istanbul's city-centre by looking at two examples in the same district, Beyoglu. Although in Beyoglu there are not so many graffiti as one can find in other European capitals (yet), I can infer a similar path by reflecting on the different reactions to different types of graffiti and thus suggest what I call ambivalence of graffiti in marking alternative territorial boundaries as previously mentioned. Let us have a look at these photos.

While graffiti writers do not cease to be punishable by law, certain graffiti in certain areas, like for instance Galata, are not only not being removed by the authorities but they also became one of the characteristics adding (exchange) value to the city (Bernardoni, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. The graffiti on the left side are there since at least three years and they are not being removed (not only Kripoe's yellow fists that, since we are in Berlin, you might probably be familiar with, but also the writing saying "no border, no nation, no fucking borders"). And this probably because they both (= together) contribute to create the alternative flavour of Galata, a neighbourhood that already went through a deep gentrification process.

In the picture on the right side you can instead see the reaction to the graffiti on the scaffolding of the Emek cinema on Istiklal Caddesi, the main commercial artery of the city-centre, at 10 minutes on foot from Galata. Bear in mind that the Emek cinema is in itself a highly contested space with an extremely deep symbolic significance: in May, citizens protesting for the transformation of the historical landmark into a shopping mall have been paid back with water cannons and teargas. The graffiti against the destruction of the Emek have been covered the day after they have been made, and all this happened few weeks before occupygezi started. It is quite self-evident how the graffiti for the Emek are merely of protest, embodying no exchange value but only a highly symbolic value as outcome of the use value of the Emek cinema itself. And the same can be said for the majority of the graffiti made during the weeks of the protests in June, but I will return on this issue later when I will discuss of the counter-strategic value of graffiti.

The normalization of the space (re)appropriated by graffiti into the dominant logic simply confirms the tendency to the commodification of everything or, to say it with a Lefebvrian terminology, the tendency of the abstract space of capitalism to englobe

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<sup>1</sup> As eloquent example I propose an excerpt from an article appeared in a Turkish airline company's magazine, thus intentionally addressed to Istanbul's visitors: "the unique city where Asia and Europe, East and West come together [...] Istanbul's graffiti-covered walls, antique shops, museums, high-end stores and places of worship radiate joy and every corner is worth discovering" (Pegasus Magazine, 2012: 28).

all the differences that are generated either within or outside the system. As he write (1991[1974]: 373): “sooner or later [...] the existing centre and the forces of homogenization must seek to absorb all such differences”. An analysis of the differences generated by graffiti is then instrumental to evaluate to what extent graffiti is a practice of resistance. Lefebvre distinguished between induced, produced and reduced differences. *Induced* differences remain “within a set or system” since, generated by repetition without resisting to the logic of the system, they are differences “internal to a whole and brought into being by that whole as a system aiming to establish itself” (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]: 372 and 382). Conversely, *produced* differences presuppose “the shattering of a system” and “escape” the system’s rule (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]: 372 and 382). *Reduced* differences are instead those differences “forced back into the system by constraint and violence” (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]: 382). It is then clear to grasp how the differences “*produced*” by graffiti become “*reduced*” differences as soon as reabsorbed into the system by a plutocratic state that – I repeat and highlight – “by constraint and violence” (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]: 382) either assimilate graffiti as (street) art for its exchange value or erase graffiti of unambiguous political protest. A general and yet crucial question then arises: how to avoid (re)absorption? Despite it might sound tautological, I would answer: keep on resisting! Or, in other words, as advocated by Lefebvre, keeping on producing counter-spaces, which, in turn, are potentially instrumental to the production of a new space and new society, out of the “clutches” of plutocratic states. More importantly, the dominating forces will succeed in absorbing the produced differences, if – as Lefebvre argued (1991[1974]: 373) – these “retain a defensive posture and no counterattack is mounted from their side”, since “in the latter event, centrality and normality will be tested as to the limits of their power to integrate, recuperate, or to destroy whatever has transgressed”. The importance of what Lefebvre wrote in the 1970s, and more specifically of the urgency of a “counterattack”, appear more than up-to-date nowadays, particularly in Istanbul, where the ongoing resistance for the (re)appropriation of the city provides me with further material to elaborate the notion of (counter)strategic value of space and walls.

## **5. Strategic and counter-strategic value of walls**

Strategies refers to a long run *plan* to achieve specific aims, whereas tactics refer to



the means used to achieve the given objectives; in other words, tactics are specific actions in specific places to reach a strategic aim. Given that the terminology I am dealing with usually refers to a military or market context, I would like to preliminary point out that one can stand on anti-militarist and anti-capitalist positions and at the same time be a militant, whereas by militant I mean a citizen actively participating in the struggle to resist and “counterattack” monetary and authoritarian powers in what we can easily call – at least in Istanbul nowadays – an urban war for the (re)appropriation of our spaces, including parks, squares and entire neighbourhoods. According to Lefebvre, power is equal violence (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 358), and abstract space is a political and normative tool of power to implement its military and political strategies (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 358, 377 and 391), whose aim is “the removal of every obstacle in the way of the total elimination of what is *different*” (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 371). The same goes for urban speculation, for the space of architects and urban developers, whose plans and calculations respond to specific strategies and relative tactics (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 360)<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, “the goal of any strategy is still, as it always been, the occupation of a space by the varied means of politics and of war” and “the most effectively appropriated spaces are those occupied by symbols” (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 366). Applied to the subject of my research, this implies that walls are not mere display surfaces but rather strategic tools in implementing the division of space in properties as well as strategic communicative devices, not only occupied by symbols but often also loaded in themselves with deep symbolic meaning. Hence, it is possible to speak of a *strategic value* of space, and per extension, of walls. Besides, is it possible to ascribe to space and, per extension, to walls also a *counter-strategic value*?

Due to a legacy of a geopolitical tradition and military terminology, counter-power(s) usually stigmatise the idea of a (spatial) strategy. Following Lefebvre (1991[1974]: 419 and 374), in fact, (spatial) strategy is traditionally associated with the “the side of power” and is equal logic. Conversely, the aim of a “counter-project or counter-plan”

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<sup>2</sup> This because this space is “the space of the dominant mode of production, and hence the space of capitalism, governed by the bourgeoisie. It consists of ‘lots’ and is organised in a repressive manner as a function of the important features of the locality” (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 360). Segregation and subdivision, for instance, are tactics deployed in view of strategic aims of homogenization (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 365). Spatial strategies aim at increasing the exchange value of space by forcing for instance certain social or ethnic groups to move from one district somewhere else and thus to leave space for other incoming elites (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 375). As widely discussed by David Harvey, capitalism is constantly in motion and implies a process of annihilation of space and time, a creative-destruction process instrumental to the capital’s limitless reproduction and expansion (Harvey, 1989)

is “promoting a counter-space in opposition to the one embodied in the strategies of power” (Lefebvre, 1991[1974]: 381). Yet, given the scale of the resources and violence of the power(s), I suggest that tactical operations remain a sort of disturbance actions with a small-medium scale of efficacy. The occupied Gezi Park, for instance, was a counter-space that made possible the victory of a very significant and yet very small battle. Therefore I advocate the urgency for long run planned actions and I suggest that what Lefebvre defined “counter-project or a counter-plan” is actually a counter-strategy, whose revolutionary aim is a “project of a different society, a different mode of production, where social practice would be governed by different conceptual determinations”, and such a revolution of social relations requires a “revolution of space”, an “urban revolution” (Lefebvre, 1991[1974]: 419). State that not only organizes space according to the interests of the dominant classes, but that also sets itself above society (Lefebvre, 1991[1974]: 383). Reversed, this means that a counter-strategy should aim at an organization of space from below. Furthermore, Lefebvre pointed out that “what runs counter a society founded on exchange is a primacy of *use*” (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 381), and if “it is the political use of space [...] that does the most to reinstate use value” (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 356). Hence it follows that strategic value of space is strictly related to exchange value and property, as opposed to counter-strategic value, use value and appropriation. Strategic planning of space implies the definition and regulation of normative (b)orders and relative boundaries. Conversely, counter-strategic planning should include tactics to challenge them in order to enact alternative boundaries of “spatial misuse” and to produce counter-spaces by (re)appropriating normative spaces, particularly those with highly symbolic and political significance, and among which walls. At this point of the argumentation, in order to evaluate the strategic and counter-strategic value of graffiti, I would like to speculate on the practice itself as well as on selected political graffiti both preceding and following the recent protests of the Occupy Gezi “movement”<sup>3</sup>.

## **6. Counter-strategic value of graffiti**

As discussed above, the space reclaimed by graffiti (and the alternative territories

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<sup>3</sup> Putting the term movement into inverted commas, I would like to stress the necessity to discuss whether the mass in the park/square/streets of Istanbul and Turkey can be approached as a movement in itself.

that they mark) embodies the contradiction between property/exchange value and (re)appropriation/use value. Accordingly, and depending on the context, the spatial practice of graffiti can embody both strategic and counter-strategic value. Graffiti is surely a tactic and not a strategy, and a tactic is also their re-absorption into the abstract space of the dominant system. Their occasional tolerance and promotion – as already discussed – is due in fact to certain graffiti's contribution in adding exchange value to urban space and in this sense then graffiti, when normalized, embody a strategic value. Conversely, as long as they represent a tactic of (re)appropriation of space, graffiti embody a counter-strategic value, whose analysis, though, requires a fundamental distinction.

As practice of spatial resistance violating normative space and property relations, and thus producing counter-space, any illegal graffiti is a (re)appropriation of space and embodies a political significance but not necessary a counter-strategic value. In other words, if (spatial) counter-strategy requires and entails spatial planning, then not all graffiti embody counter-strategic value simply because of their being illegal. A counter-strategic value of graffiti depends on the modality of the spatial resistance involved. Those graffiti that do not display explicit political messages of textual or visual critique of the system do not embody a counter-strategic value, insofar only indirectly contributing to the critique of normative spaces. Conversely, when graffiti are thought and implemented as tools of mediactivism (or eventually street-artivism), displaying explicit messages of political content, they embody a counter-strategic value<sup>4</sup>. The resistance that they produced is in fact the outcome of a conscious and intentionally political act. This has a remarkable implication: it means that even legalized and normalized graffiti, when displaying political messages, can embody a counter-strategic value, while at the same time embodying strategic value [e.g. I am thinking of the documentary film 'El regreso de Lencho' in Guatemala].

I would like to remark how the notion of value refers the possibility of estimating and measuring the worth of something and, furthermore, that the value of something is different according to the specificity of the context in which is used and/or exchanged<sup>5</sup>. Accordingly, among those graffiti that are tactics of mediactivism/mediartivism and thus embody counter-strategic value, it is possible to detect a subset of graffiti with a higher degree of exchange-, use- and/or

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<sup>4</sup> Could this difference explain the chasm between individual lifestyle and social anarchism (see Bookchin)?

<sup>5</sup> Harvey's example of the use value of elephants: obviously not the same in the US as in India.

(counter)strategic value depending on their specific location. In order to discuss their potential counter-strategic value, I will take in consideration two sets of graffiti, the first observed in the neighbourhood of Tarlabasi and the second documented during the Gezipark protests.

Graffiti writers often spontaneously and randomly intervene on walls and yet they might also choose a spot according to particular reasons. The graffiti I documented last year in Sakızağacı Street. are particularly significant for their place-bond and site-specificity. Tarlabasi is a neighbourhood of the Beyoglu district, the cultural, commercial and tourist city-centre of Istanbul. According to trendy categories, Tarlabasi could be defined as mainly multicultural and only sporadically intercultural: it is in fact populated by a large number of Kurdish immigrants from South-East Turkey, by many migrants from Africa as well as from neighbouring countries and by a day-by-day increasing number of youngsters attracted by its cultural flavour not less than by its cheap Sunday vegetable market. Whether or not the presence of both Turkish and foreign students, artists and young professionals – like me among them – is the result of remnants of Orientalist attitudes can neither invalidate the hard-and-fast general laws of trans-global gentrification processes nor stop the proliferation of guest-houses and fancy hotel-residences. Tarlabasi is undergoing a deep and traumatic process of renewal, which will contribute not only to a larger strategic urban redevelopment plan but also to a controversial project of social engineering: many of its migrant inhabitants are being automatically forced to move out of it. Sakızağacı Street is thus in itself a strategic place, loaded of high exchange-, use-, strategic and thus counter-strategic value. The graffiti in these pictures [\[photos\]](#) are not visible anymore, not because they have been deleted, but because the renewal of the buildings where they appeared has already started. Their counter-strategic value depends on their location since the same graffiti in another neighbourhood would probably be equally powerful but would not have the same significance. Tarlabasi as chosen location for activism opens up the inevitable question of the visibility of those graffiti and its relation to the measure of their counter-strategic value. Known in fact for being a conservative neighbourhood of crime, prostitution and poverty, Tarlabasi is a very central area, whose access is yet limited by invisible boundaries to either those living there or to those that are free from prejudices and related fears. In other words, those graffiti embody a deep counter-strategic value, whose degree cannot however be measured without taking

into account their audience and thus their scale of visibility. Surely, when it comes to visibility and its potential amplification, not to be overlooked is the role of media such as photography and the Internet, all the more so when the crackdown on visibility is a tactical operation responding to a wider and deeper strategy of repression, as in the case of the Gezi protests in general as well as of the graffiti that came out of them.

The Gezi protests sparked on the 28<sup>th</sup> May 2013 and, increasing in power, scale and participation, they lasted several few weeks. The graffiti that I could document in the very beginning of the protests are obviously limited to the area of Gezi park. As soon as the demonstrations reached their peak, graffiti started filling those streets that became both stage and object of contest. As already documented by several instant books and blogs, this was the case not only of the whole Taksim area but also of many of the areas in Istanbul as well as in other cities in Turkey where actions of both passive and active resistance sprang out.

The graffiti following the Gezi protests embody a high counter-strategic value depending on their contextual conditions of production, and, furthermore, they inspire me to suggest the importance of including political graffiti among the counter-strategic communicative tactics that the “counter-forces”<sup>6</sup> should promote and promulgate to (re)appropriate space with high symbolic meaning, namely walls and other visible surfaces. At this regard, Lefebvre would probably comment by repeating what he already wrote in 1974: “is it really possible to use mural surfaces to depict social contradictions while producing something more than graffiti?” (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]: 145). More than obviously graffiti is not a tactic sufficient to overcome power, but any analysis of revolutionary attempts would be incomplete without taking into account the constant presence of graffiti in large-scale political and urban uprisings and highly conflicting contexts, and thus without evaluating their role as well as their potential contribution to any counter-plan.

Easy to grasp are examples of graffiti on rather complex contested spaces like the Berlin and Gaza walls. Other contemporary and interesting examples are given by the graffiti following the uprising in Cairo, while images of political graffiti in the protests of the 1970s, in Europe as well as in a Turkey, seem to support my hypothesis. A powerful example that, full of historical and symbolic meaning, has resisted to the wear time is the notorious slogan ‘la beaute’ est dans la rue’: these

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<sup>6</sup> i.e. the forces “that seek to appropriate space” (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 392) organised for instance as grass-roots organisations

are in fact not archival pictures of the 1968 in Paris but images of respectively the door of the French Cultural Institute in Istanbul and a wall on Istiklal Avenue in the last June [photos]. What inspires me to suggest a counter-strategic endorsement of graffiti as a powerful tactic of re-signification of space is both their sudden emergence and widespread presence in the Gezi protests but also the immediate reactions to them, reactions that come from different actors at stake: protestors, audience and users of the social media, shop owners, and institutional actors. Let me phase the argumentation in by giving some detailed insights on the data gathered in the Taksim area, (in) which I personally intensively lived, and which I could barely leave, driven by a deep and rather physical than rational feeling of responsibility in taking part to the resistance.

Who made graffiti during those days? Many people did, and any attempt at categorizing the writers into well-defined groups would be pretty difficult. Without discussing in details the social and political composition of the park and the square, it is sufficient to say that people from different age and walk of life took a spray can in the hand and, feeling free from the control of the authority in the (re)appropriated areas, wanted to leave a personal trace on the wall express their opinion. As Lea Nocera (2013) remarked, the unscrupulous sarcasm shackled the creativity: in many cases graffiti recalled Erdogan's statements, by upsetting them and making jokes out of them. However, needless to repeat in details, the spectre of capitalism and the skeleton of the state always wait in ambush: not only spray cans – together with gas masks, Guy Fawkes masks and Turkish flags – were one of the main gadgets being *sold* in Gezi park and on Taksim square during the weeks of the resistance. What remains of those graffiti? Few of them are still visible, and among them some of them strategically not removable, like the Atatürk that an old man draw everywhere [photos]. An army of painters covered them up and the majority of them have become a countless amount of grey paint spots, as if cleaning the walls would be enough to make peoples mute and dumb. Labelled as crime, surely those graffiti have been removed because considered products of mere acts of vandals (capulcular)<sup>7</sup>. Yet, can we suppose that they have been removed also because they are powerful tactics contributing to the (re)appropriation of space? In a excerpt that I

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, in the recent declaration of the Higher Education Loans and Dormitories (KYK), Turkey's official student loan institution, "painting" is included among those acts of terrorism such as resistance, boycott, occupation, writing, slogan-chanting that "violate the right to education" and for which students can be excluded from the supply of education loans (Hurriyet Daily News).

already quoted above and that I consider important to recall again, Lefebvre pointed out how “the goal of any strategy is still, as it always been, the occupation of a space by the varied means of politics and of war” and “the most effectively appropriated spaces are those occupied by symbols” (Lefebvre 1991[1974]: 366). With regards to walls and to the Gezi protests, the clearest example in confirmation of this comes from the photos picturing the Atatürk Cultural Center (the famous building in the square) covered by banners of a variety of political organizations first and then recouped by the power that, once the police evacuated Taksim square using a massive amount of tear gas, regained possess and control not only of the space of the square but also of the façade of the AKM, where only huge Turkish flags and a flag of Atatürk ’s portrait still today dominate the visually strategic space.

In summary, when we advocate the production of counter-spaces, we refer to the urgency of creating places autonomous and independent from the laws of the power, and these might include but not be limited to squatted houses and gardens, self-managed factories, communal solidarity kitchens, re-occupied squares and parks. It is also true that the space produced by graffiti can be “conceived” and “perceived” but not fully “lived” (Lefebvre 1991[1974]) as place of resistance, insofar it can be only mainly visually consumed. Yet, it is undeniable that certain graffiti (re)appropriate space and create a new territory of shared communication, whose use and access are not delimited by fixed boundaries. Not only everyone can in fact arm her/himself with a spray can and write on the walls, but also overwrite on someone else’s writing. These photos, for instance, show how feminist activists overwrote on sexist slogans, and how walls speak, telling us stories and making debates among strangers possible [photos]. While propagating ideas, graffiti contribute *de facto* to the development of a communitarian identity, by generating a feeling of belonging to a shared space and to a *community of purpose*. Graffiti enable interaction not only within the community of writers but potentially also between walls and any passer-by, i.e. any user-inhabitant of the city. For instance, walking on the Taksim area during the days of the protests and looking at the walls full of these graffiti meant – at least for me – I’m walking through the re-occupied/liberated space. During the Gezi protests many graffiti recalled several of the slogans chanted in the streets and, among them “Taksim bizim, Istanbul bizim!” (“Taksim is ours, Istanbul is ours!”). In short, looking at those graffiti meant I’m walking on *our* side, because both Taksim and Gezi are *ours* (*‘bizim’*), whereas the expression “our” refers not to

property with exchange value but to (re)appropriated space with high use- and counter-strategic value. Whether instead the debates on walls, the space produced by graffiti and urban space in general are to be defined as 'public' is another question.

## 7. Open conclusions on the notion of public (space)

Pointing out that graffiti “create and multiply urban territories rather than merely occupying them”, Andrea Brighenti (forthcoming, unpublished) argues that, when dealing with graffiti we are dealing with territorialism not as “a primordial exclusive appropriation of a place”, but rather “with interventions that take place in public space – and interventions in public space can only be intervention *on* public space”. As he continues: “there is no blank public space to which words and tags are then added, but it is precisely those words and tags as addresses that make space public”. Following Lefebvre’s framework and the discussion developed so far, I would comment Brighenti’s remarks by questioning: if space does generally not escape the binomial partition into public and private, and if (re)appropriation is different from property, is there any way to (re)appropriate space other than re-occupying it, whether the re-occupation by counter-forces becomes a liberation? Furthermore, what I understand from Brighenti’s remarks is that he stresses that (public) use makes space public and, while agreeing on the fact that it is use that mainly define a space and not merely its legal definition, I yet would like to highlight that a rethinking of the notion of public (space) is not what I am aiming at. Even after a re-definition of the public that would overcome the traditional association of public with state’s domain, the notion of public would remain a legacy of a European tradition of thinking that can exist only as the opposite pole of private (property). Conversely, re-occupying is an act that can be transformed into a constituent process to guarantee our “right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1991[1974]) according to boundaries of use and to conditions to access a space beyond any (b)orders of national belonging, sexism, racism or representative democracy<sup>8</sup>. My aim is highlighting that the controversy on

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<sup>8</sup> Is there a way to conceptualize and guarantee the ‘right to the city’ with a political framework of social anarchism? Bookchin’s libertarian municipalism? A ‘right to the city’ implies the ‘right to the difference’, which, in turn, cannot be understood only as right to belong to a minority (of lgbt, of leftists, of activists, of altermondists etc). The right to the difference as defined by Lefebvre seem to me to entail the right to choose whether I



borders between public, private and state domains stems not only from the normative question of who should have the right to use urban space and how, but rather from the following one: who has the right to be entitled to define those borders?

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(together my community of purpose) want to live under the capitalist domination or in other society. Given that I do not force capitalists to get out of their sick system of thought, and I leave them the right to live with/for money, I feel the urgency to resist and fight to get our right to live in other way accepted and recognised.

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