

## **The struggle to belong**

***Dealing with diversity in 21<sup>st</sup> century urban settings***

Amsterdam, 7-9 July 2011

### **The Right to the Goutte d'Or: Techniques of a Contemporary Urban Conflict and Limits to the *Right to the City* Ideal**

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Paper presented at the International RC21 conference 2011

Session: nr. 5.2 (RT) Public space: Governing diversity

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**Abstract:**

The *Quartier de la Goutte d'Or*, which is mostly referred to as the *Quartier Barbès*, is located in the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris. Within the French capital but also internationally, the Goutte d'Or has the reputation of being predominantly frequented by people who originate from the former French colonies. However, according to influential French nationalist political groups such as the *Bloc Identitaire*, the Goutte d'Or is "islamized" by "adversaries of French culture" who challenge the laical state by performing religious practices in public space. Especially the Friday prayer which is held regularly by hundreds of practicing Muslims in certain streets of the Goutte d'Or constitutes a matter of public debate. Crucial to this debate is the question how the ideal of a *right to the city* (Lefebvre), to free performative and symbolic appropriation of urban space, should be construed.

This essay will contest the concept of the right to the city with regard to a particular conflict that arose at the Goutte d'Or in June 2010, when the movement *Apéro Géant Saucisson et Pinard* (Big Aperitif Sausage and Pinard Wine), a group that was created in the online social network *Facebook*, claimed their version of a right to the city by planning an aperitif with pork sausage and wine in order to provoke practicing Muslims on a Friday at the Goutte d'Or. Although, the aperitif was forbidden by the French municipality before it could even take place, the conflict continued in the French media, on the Internet as well as in other French cities, where the *AGSP* movement was imitated. Meanwhile the *AGSP Facebook* group persists until now. Paying particular attention to online media's influence on contemporary urban conflicts, my analysis will point to the challenges of governing conflicting claims of right to the city, thereby questioning Lefebvre's demand with regard to practicability.

## The Goutte d'Or

Barbès – ce n'est pas moi qui est bâti son métro aérien et ses magasins Tati ;  
 Barbès – c'est ici que j'ai grandi parmi les clandestins les bandits et ceux qui maudits ;  
 Barbès – son boulevard et ses bazars, ses rues bizarres où faut pas s'retrouver par  
 hasard.

---*Viens Faire un Tour à Barbès*. Ahmed Koma, Cheb Tarik and DJ Maze

The song *Viens Faire un Tour à Barbès* portrays the Quartier de la *Goutte d'Or*, which is located in the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris (France). By referring to illegal immigrants (“clandestins”), bandits, bazaars and strange streets, the rap song problematizes the Goutte d'Or's reputation. The Goutte d'Or, which is mostly referred to as *Quartier Barbès*, is the “quarter of the accursed” (“ceux qui maudits”), “where you should not be accidentally” (“où faut pas s'retrouver par hasard”). In terms of its negative reputation, the district thus represents a central version of what is usually associated with the French suburbs, the *banlieues*. Stereotypically, this image is related to the fact that the Goutte d'Or is predominantly frequented by people who either themselves or whose families originate from the former French colonies, most notably from the Maghreb but also from West Africa and the French Antilles.

However, frequentation statistics have shown that about 80 percent of the people who linger at the Goutte d'Or during daytime hours do not necessarily live there (Toubon and Messamah 382). Due to the district's special location in the north of Paris, in close proximity to the city's northern train station, the Goutte d'Or is infrastructurally well-connected with the northern Parisian banlieues. But also in relation to the urban center of Paris, which is demarcated from its outskirts by the Boulevard Périphérique, the Goutte d'Or has a privileged position. Adjoining the junction of the two boulevards Barbès and Rochechouart as well as the orthogonal crossing of two important metro lines, which run through Paris's from north to south and east to west, the Goutte d'Or is situated at a nodal point of several essential urban traffic lines. Besides, the quarter borders at the *Butte de Montmartre*, Paris's landmark mountain and popular tourist attraction. Therefore, the Goutte d'Or's frequentation at daytime, especially at the weekend, does not reflect its inhabitation but rather its status as a space of trade, transit and tourism.



Fig. 1-2: Frequentation and location of the Goutte d'Or.

In this paper, I will first briefly retrace the Goutte d'Or's development throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century focusing on the question why it is nowadays not only considered as a so-called multi- or intercultural quarter but also as a supposedly “delicate district.” This notably includes the analysis of performative and symbolic practices which influence not only the district's perception in everyday life but also its image in public and municipal discourses.

Against this background, I will explore a conflict which recently arose in the Goutte d'Or, a conflict between practicing Muslims, who pray within the quarter's streets every Friday, and the movement *Apéro Geant Saucisson et Pinard* (AGSP), which is related to the French nationalist political group *Bloc Identitaire*. By employing the concept of the right to the city, which was devised by Henri Lefebvre in the 1960s, my analysis aims at pointing out the challenges of governing conflicting demands of city appropriation, demands which are specifically linked to national symbolism and religious ritualism.

### **The Becoming of a “Delicate District”**

The Goutte d'Or's contemporary physical, economic and social structure as well as its reputation cannot be fully comprehended without taking into consideration the quarter's particular history in relation to the city of Paris and its municipality. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Quartier de la Goutte d'Or, whose name “golden drop” derives from the vineyards that were formerly located in this area, constituted an agricultural outskirts of Paris which comprised a royal traffic route connecting the city of Paris with the commune Saint-Denis as well as a fish trade route directed towards the North Sea. When from 1842 onwards the French railway was

constructed in this area, the Goutte d'Or underwent considerable transformations: it quickly urbanized into a zone of trade, transit and habitat because many industrial workers, often involved in the construction of the new railway system, began to settle at the Goutte d'Or (Toubon and Messamah 49-62).

In 1859, the quarter became officially affiliated to the city of Paris. Simultaneously, Georges-Eugène Haussmann's renovation of Paris transformed the Goutte d'Or into an area that, till this day, is marked by the contrast between the Hausmannian vast, monumental structures and the district's formerly rustic guise, which is characterized by a large number of unevenly arranged small and narrow streets as well as by simpler and cheaper building structures and materials than in most of the other Parisian central districts (Toubon and Messamah 65). Beyond that, the Hausmannization of Paris led to a reduction of residential properties, a corresponding augmentation of real estate prices and a consequential gentrification of the city. This correlation forced many workers inhabiting the Goutte d'Or to move into the Parisian suburbs. Yet, the quarter's reputation of being a working-class neighborhood remained influential (Toubon and Messamah 27).

In the following historical period, different migration waves changed the Goutte d'Or considerably. Especially the influx of migrants from the Maghreb between 1920 and 1940 as well as the immigration of people from West-Africa and the French Antilles in the 1970s considerably changed not only the socioeconomical structure of the Goutte d'Or but also the image attached to this specific quarter in Paris. In 1982, the rate of non-migrated inhabitants of the Goutte d'Or ranged between 40 and 60 percent. Beyond that, the Goutte d'Or developed into a pivotal point for travel and migration from North-West Africa into France (Toubon and Messamah 19). This tendency has been demonstrated by frequentation statistics in the 1980s which showed that almost seven percent of the people who frequent the Goutte d'Or at daytime are travelers coming from either the Maghreb (6%) or from West African countries (0,8%) (Toubon and Messamah 382).

Simultaneously, the public reputation of the Goutte d'Or, especially its significance in urban planning discourse, deteriorated. In 1983, Paris's municipality officially labeled the residential blocks in the Goutte d'Or "îlots sensibles" (delicate blocks) designating an urban area that is supposedly endangered by an overpopulation of "migrant workers," a decay of real properties as well as an increase of delinquency (Bacque and Fijalkow 69-70). Consequently, a number of urban restructuring policies, which included the strategic relocation of the quarter's inhabitants as well as the establishment of a police headquarter in the middle of the Goutte d'Or, were launched. However, the district continued being a thorn

in the eye of Paris's municipality, which, twenty years later, lamented the alleged overcrowding of public spaces, the assumed relative absence of European trade commodities and illegal activities such as the so-called "vende à la sauvette" (illegal street sale) at the Goutte d'Or (Bacque and Fijalkow 68).

Although this image of a "delicate district" remains influential, recent research also identifies developments indicating a coming gentrification of the Goutte d'Or. Characteristic for this impending gentrification is the settlement of a wealthier class of professionals working in the creative industries at the Goutte d'Or. Moreover, Paris's municipality plans to rearrange the quarter's commercial structure in order to attract the presumably more expensive "commerce of quality" (Bacque and Fijalkow 80). Yet, despite these recent developments, the Goutte d'Or's reputation as an intercultural district which subverts what, in contrast, is considered as Paris's dominant urban culture and society persists. How can this reputation be grasped and illustrated? In order to substantiate the Goutte d'Or's image semiotically, I propose to take recourse to the concept of *urban imaginary*.

### **Retracing the Goutte d'Or's Image**

Referring to Edward Soja's writings on the *Postmetropolis*, in which Soja identifies crucial phenomena marking the complex and sometimes conflicting impacts of globalization and deindustrialization on contemporary cities, I understand the term *urban imaginary* as "our mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality and the interpretative grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate, and decide to act in the places, spaces, and communities in which we live" (Soja 324). A site-specific urban imaginary arises from an indeterminable amount of signifying practices that take place at a specific urban location. Beyond that, urban imaginaries result from the representation of urban spaces in different media such as in film or in literature.

With regard to the Goutte d'Or, the image of an intercultural and subversive district can first of all be ascribed to the trade forms present at this place. Commercially, the Goutte d'Or is characterized by an agglomeration of small shops selling products which are marketed as specific to the needs and preferences of people originating from the former French colonies and their purported cultural traditions. Besides, the quarter accommodates a large amount of discount trade, most notably the chain department store *Tati*, as well as an extensive amount of call shops selling long-distance telephone calls at low-priced rates. Moreover, it should be mentioned that the Goutte d'Or is known for its informal economy, although this type of trade is more difficult to prove. Whereas the black marketing of cigarettes in the metro station

Barbès-Rochechouart and the trade of items such as grilled maize-cobs, watches and sunglasses on the Goutte d'Or's sidewalks is well perceivable during the day, drug-dealing forms the rather hidden side of the district's parallel economy. Thus, the selling of products that are deemed "non-French" as well as the partly recognizable presence of different forms of shadow trade contribute to the contemporary image of the Goutte d'Or.



Fig. 3-6: Shops at the Goutte d'Or.

Furthermore, the immense amount of people present at the Goutte d'Or every day affects how the quarter is perceived in everyday life. Compared to other Parisian districts, the Goutte d'Or thereby stands out due to the fact that the majority of the people frequenting this place has a so-called "migratory background." Beyond that, it is striking that many of these people habitually use the streets not only to walk on them or to shop, but also in order to meet and linger. During daytime hours, it is very common that people, in particular men, stand in front of the Goutte d'Or's shops, talking and observing other passers-by. Hence, the way people behave at the Goutte d'Or affects how the quarter is conceived. The Goutte d'Or's

image is linked to manners of *performing* the district's public places. In this context, an outstanding spatial practice that considerably impacts the Goutte d'Or's image is the Friday prayer, for which practicing Muslims gather every week at 2 p.m. in the streets around the mosque *Al Fath* (Rue Myrha).



Fig. 7-8: People frequenting the Goutte d'Or.

Fig. 9-10: Practicing Muslims praying in the streets of the Goutte d'Or. (Sources: <http://ripostelaique.com/Nos-videos-les-plus-spectaculaires-6408.html> and <https://francaisdefrance.wordpress.com/tag/rue-myrha/>)

The Friday prayer at the mosque *Al Fath* temporarily transforms the Goutte d'Or's streets into a spiritual space, a space that is disentangled from the everyday rhythms of the city of Paris. Men kneeling on the streets, their shoes taken off, their faces directed towards the mosque, performatively transform the Goutte d'Or's streets into a zone of religious practice, creating an image that does not comply with more conventional and conformist ways of imagining Paris. Paris's postcard-image as a space where fashionably dressed Parisians walk, shop or have coffee and red wine in little street cafés is clearly contradicted by the prayer performance. Instead, the prayer contributes to a more heterogeneous image of a city that is



marked by diverse cultural practices. This diversity is also reflected in textual, visual and sonic sensations at the Goutte d’Or.

What perpetuates the image of the Goutte d’Or as an intercultural quarter are not only performative practices but also the striking presence of Arabic characters on storefronts and merchandise, the posting of announcements promoting either “musique d’Afrique” (music from Africa) or “multicultural” concerts and the playing of music styles such as Zouk and Rai in shops, on the street or in the metro station Barbès-Rochechouart.



Fig. 11-13: References to diversity in music at the Goutte d’Or.

Similarly, graffiti, posters and stickers that demonstrate political resistance reproduce the Goutte d’Or’s image as a subversive urban space. Affixed to the Goutte d’Or’s buildings and objects, these images promote political associations – most notably the Fédération Anarchiste (Anarchistic Federation) but also the Front de Gauche (Left Front), advertise political weblogs such as the *infokiosques.net*, lament surveillance and police power, refer to recent political events or comment on international political issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus, different political voices, which often tend to oppose the present political regime, express themselves via the Goutte d’Or’s physical space, by means of public material structures which are located within this district, thereby reinforcing the Goutte d’Or’s image as a politically subversive, “delicate” space within the city center of Paris.



Fig. 14–18: Statements inscribed in material space: “Il dort dans la rue et des logements sont vides” (He sleeps in the streets and the lodgings are empty) – Fédération Anarchiste; „Liberté pour tous les prisonniers. <http://infokiosques.net/mauvaisesintentions>” (Liberty for all prisoners); “Police partout – justice nulle part.” (Police everywhere – justice nowhere) – Fédération Anarchiste; “Israel boycott Gaza, Palestine vivra! Manifestation à Paris” (Israel boycott Gaza. Long Live Palestine! Demonstration in Paris).

However, the production of the Goutte d’Or’s image is not confined to the quarter’s geographical boundaries. As mentioned before, urban imaginaries are just as well created in the media – in tourist guides, TV broadcasts, newspaper articles, films or in literature. With regard to the Goutte d’Or, especially French newspapers and weblogs, the online video portal *Youtube* and the social web-network *Facebook*, co-create the Goutte d’Or’s image by representing, framing and staging the quarter textually as well as (audio-)visually. This process can be simulated by typing the words “Barbès Paris” into the image research function of the popular search engine *Google*. Amongst the first results that pop up are images of men wearing Kaftans in front of shops, of protests and crowds in the Goutte d’Or’s streets, and of the Friday prayer at Rue Myrha. The word combination “Quartier de la Goutte d’Or” produces similar results: scenes from police operations in the streets, young men of migratory

background standing in front of a bar, and, since a while, of a reddish poster advertising the movement “Apéro Géant Saucisson et Pinard” (Big Aperitif Sausage and Pinard wine).

### **The *Apéro Géant Saucisson et Pinard* Movement**

The entry of the exact word combination “Apéro Géant Saucisson et Pinard” into *Youtube*’s search engine produces eight results. The first result is a 1.22 minute video uploaded by the user “saucissonetpinard.”<sup>1</sup> The video begins by showing black and white video recordings of the Goutte d’Or that were shot in the late 1940s and derive from the public database *Institut National de l’Audiovisuel* (INA). The recordings show a waiter placing a chair in front of a restaurant, a man wearing hat and suit who leaves a shop, women buying vegetables at a market, strollers passing by a café terrace, two women in a tailoring shop and people sitting at a bar. The video is accompanied by the French cabaret singer Aristide Bruant’s song *À la Goutte d’Or*, sung by François Béranger. The caption reads: “La Goutte d’Or était un quartier populaire des XIXe et XXe siècles. Son nom vient de la couleur vin [sic] que ses vignes produisaient.” (The Goutte d’Or used to be a popular quarter in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its name derives from the wine color that its vines produced.)

Subsequently, the video displays a photograph of the Rue Myrha from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Abruptly, the music changes into an instrumental composition reminding of dramatic Hollywood movie scenes. Simultaneously, the video shows color recordings of practicing Muslims who knee on the contemporary Rue Myrha and carry out their Friday prayer in front of the mosque *Al Fath*. The video goes on contrasting 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs of distinct streets of the Goutte d’Or with contemporary scenes of practicing Muslims carrying out their prayer at exactly the same streets.



Fig. 19-20: Shots from the AGSP *Youtube* video.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vleF-NSM6fM>

In the last part of the video, the music changes into Yann Tiersen's *J'y suis jamais allé* which has become well-known due to Jean-Pierre Jeunet's film *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001), while the previous praying scene freezes into a red-brownish, drawing alike picture that comprises the heading: "Résistons Joyeusement à l'Islamisation" (Let's Joyously Resist Islamization). The next frame displays a bottle of wine and two loafs of bread in front of a picture, framed by red flowers. Again, an editing filter transmutes the image into a drawing alike picture entitled: "Apéro Géant Saucisson et Pinard." The last two frames show a building's roof which, again, freezes into a drawing that comprises the heading: "À la Goutte d'Or le 18 Juin à 19 Heures" (At the Goutte d'Or the 18<sup>th</sup> of June at 7 p.m.) as well as the small capture: "Pour plus d'infos RDV sur facebook" (For more information rendezvous at facebook).



Fig. 21-2: Shots from the AGSP *Youtube* video.

The described *Youtube* video constitutes a composition of different images and filmic scenes that expresses a certain attitude towards cultural diversity and urban space. As a form of narrative, the video recounts a chronological timeline. It reiterates the Goutte d'Or's appropriation throughout recent history: Having been a popular place of conviviality, a place where the supposed "habits of French culture" such as strolling along the street and drinking wine were the standard, the district became "colonized" by what is generalizingly framed as "the Islam." The video further proposes that a means of "joyously" re-appropriating the quarter would be to wallow in the formerly mentioned traditional habits.

The video thus departs from the concept of cultural homogeneity. It stages an urban "crash of civilizations," understood in the way Samuel Huntington formulated it in his controversial work *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1996), namely as "an intercivilizational clash of culture and religion" (54), as a clash between

opponents who do not have much in common, trying to put through their different cultural practices and rituals at a contested cityscape. Rather than articulating cultural exchange or hybridity, the video therefore expresses duality, a situation of binary opposition and mutual exclusion. In this context, it suggests that the repression of a different “civilization” from urban space can only be achieved by means of adversary symbolic spatial appropriation. Hence, it proposes an aperitif, notably with pork sausage and wine, as a strategy of symbolic urban “counter-appropriation.”

For that purpose, the video remarkably makes use of *symbolic violence*. While it nostalgically stages the Goutte d’Or’s history “before immigration,” which expresses itself quite obviously via the cheerful music, the Muslim prayer is portrayed as something threatening, which is also indicated by the music as well as by the particular choice of words. For instance, the term “islamization” reminds of the term “colonization” and connotatively insinuates “quasi-imperial” motivations behind the religious prayer practice. Especially against the background of French colonial history, to create this connotation is not only inappropriate but also provocative. Yet, who is behind this provocation?

The AGSP video belongs to a group that has been set up within the online social network *Facebook* in June 2010. Related to the AGSP movement is the French nationalist political group *Bloc Identitaire*, which, inter alia, became known in 2004 for distributing the so-called *soupe identitaire* (identity soup), a traditional French pork soup, in several eastern Parisian districts. The original intention of the *Facebook* group AGSP was to meet in the Goutte d’Or’s Rue Myrha on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2010 at 7 p.m. in order to have a public aperitif with sausages and wine. The symbolic significance of this gesture would have been twofold: On the one hand, the aperitif can be interpreted as a festive commemoration of Charles de Gaulle’s *Appeal of June 18*. On the other hand, the gesture stirs up the impression of an affront against practicing Muslims who usually meet in the Rue Myrha on Fridays for their weekly prayer. This affront would be particularly provocative, since the consumption of alcohol and pork meat belongs to the *haraam*, the register of practices forbidden in Islam.

Indeed, the AGSP organizers’ framing of the movement confirms this suspicion that the aperitif is intended as an offense. For instance, the AGSP *Facebook* profile claims that “the Rue Myrha and other streets of the quarter are occupied, especially on Fridays, by resolute adversaries of our wines, our territory and our sausage products.”<sup>2</sup> Ridiculous as this statement might sound, the movement was taken seriously by the group’s members, advocates

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<sup>2</sup> Original wording: “Parce que la rue Myrha et d’autres artères du quartier sont occupées, particulièrement le vendredi, par des adversaires résolus de nos vins de terroir et de nos produits charcutiers.”

of Muslim's rights and the Parisian municipality, who, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June 2010, prohibited the aperitif before it could even take place.

Yet, despite this municipal prohibition of the aperitif event, a compensatory aperitif at the Parisian *Place d'Étoile* was held on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2010. Meanwhile, the *Facebook* group AGSP persisted and its number of members rapidly increased at about 1,900 people per week (reference date: 11 Dec. 2010). Beyond that, the AGSP was imitated by a number of homonymous movements at other French cities. Contrastingly, several counter movements were organized such as the *Facebook* group "Contre le groupe 'AGSP'" (Against the group "AGSP"), which counted 653 members (reference date: 11 Dec. 2010), or the group "Apéro géant Cachir Hallal et Thé à la Menthe à Paris!" (Big Aperitif Halal<sup>3</sup> Cachir Sausage and Mint Tea at Paris!) with 128 members (reference date: 11 Dec. 2010).

Thus, the conflict over the right to the Goutte d'Or continued to be carried out – if not physically, in the Goutte d'Or's streets, then at least discursively, within the Goutte d'Or's medial extensions. On the level of content, the AGSP conflict envisaged a central geographical location, whereas the means of this dispute were spread into online communication media. In fact, online media played an outstanding role within the described conflict insofar as, by means of these communication platforms, a group of nationalistically motivated people could be mobilized to claim their alleged right to the Goutte d'Or. Moreover, online media provided a network for the AGSP movement to spread into other French cities as well as to continue even after a municipal decree prohibited its planned physical performance at the Goutte d'Or's streets.

Meanwhile, heated debates about the municipal prohibition of the AGSP at the Goutte d'Or were held in the French media. These debates mainly interrogated the municipal interdiction's compatibility with civil rights to freedom of action. In fact, the debates precisely addressed questions of rights to the city by asking: To whom and under which premises should the right to free performative and symbolic appropriation of urban space be granted? Does the presumed right-wing motivation behind the AGSP movement render the public aperitif illegal? Does not the Friday prayer just as well constitute an illicit practice of appropriating urban public space, especially if you view it as an affront against the French laical state model? In the context of these disputes, the city was often not only viewed as a geographic and socioeconomic entity but also as a symbolic locus, where questions national identity, immigration policies and legality become unavoidably intertwined.

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<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the haraam, the word "halal" refers to the register of practices allowed in Islam.



Fig. 21-23: Discussions about the AGSP on French television. Source: i>Télé (19 June 2010)

In order to disentangle these questions on a more theoretical level, I will now introduce Lefebvre's concept of the *right to the city*. To contextualize Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city in the Western history of urbanization, I will first outline Lefebvre's concept of the *urban fabric*. After having set my theoretical framework, I will critically apply the concept of the right to the city to the described AGSP conflict.

## Questioning the Right to the City

To grant or deny a right to the city predisposes a clear-cut notion of what urban space concretely means, how it can be distinguished from non-urban space and what the term “urbanization” designates in this context. In order to define these concepts, Lefebvre retraces the development of cities historically from the *political city* in antiquity, to the *merchant city* in the middle ages to the *urbanization of society* which Lefebvre ascribes to the emergence, development and Post-Fordist transformation of the industrial city. Thereby, Lefebvre’s notion of urbanization is closely linked to the concept of the *urban fabric*, which dissolves the dichotomy between urban and rural (Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution* 13-14). Lefebvre argues that industrialization mobilized historical core characteristics of the city, such as concentrated political, economic, intellectual and religious interaction, to expand into the rural. Simultaneously, production industry, a formerly rural feature, intruded the urban core. The center remains but transmutes into an aesthetic product, an image of the city (Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution* 12). Within this dynamic, centrality and expansion are mutually intertwined.

The urban fabric can be described by using the concept of ecosystem, a coherent unity constructed around one or several cities, old and recent. Such a description may lose what is essential. Indeed, the significance of the urban fabric is not limited to its morphology. It is the support of a more or less intense, more or less degraded, ‘way of life’: *urban society*. [...] The ‘urban-rural’ relation does not disappear. [...] Moreover, urban cores do not disappear. The fabric erodes them or integrates them to its web. These cores survive by transforming themselves. There are still centres of intense urban life such as the Latin Quarter in Paris. The aesthetic qualities of these urban cores play an important role in their maintenance. (Lefebvre, *Writings* 72-73)

What is striking about Lefebvre’s description of the urban fabric is his emphasis on relationality, on enacted relations between a new form of center and its periphery. The expressions “erosion” and “web” thereby suggest that both, center and periphery, melt into a mutually dependent enacted structural dynamic.

Central to this thought is the idea of the city as an *oeuvre* (66), a synthesis which, in simplified terms, accrues from the material form, the representational reproduction as well as the everyday use of urban space (Lefebvre, *Production* 33). The social ideal behind Lefebvre’s *oeuvre*-conception consists in the idea that the city composes the product of a joint “labor” practice, which Lefebvre conceptualizes as *inhabitation*, that is “the plasticity of space, its modelling and the appropriation by groups and individuals of the conditions of their existence” (Lefebvre, *Writings* 79). Yet, the fundamental critique expressed in Lefebvre’s work *The Right to the City*, which was first published in 1968, draws upon Lefebvre’s



suspicion that cities are precisely losing their oeuvre-character as a consequence of their commodification. At first glance, Lefebvre puts forward a classically Marxist argument when he claims that the city enters “more completely into exchange and exchange value” because the “urban centre becomes a high quality consumption product for foreigners, tourists, people from the outskirts and suburbanites” (Lefebvre, *Writings* 73).

Thereby, the juxtaposition of use and exchange value indicates that Lefebvre applies Karl Marx’s theory on *commodity fetishism* to the city. According to Marx, capitalist economies produce commodities that are “independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race” (Marx 83). On the other hand, laboring subjects alienate from their products of work by being forced into “treating their products as commodities” (Marx 91). Similarly, the urban centre becomes mystified into a valorized spatial product that gets estranged from its original producers, the city’s *in-habitants*. Yet, Lefebvre’s dialectical theory on the urbanization of society is more complex and ambiguous, since Lefebvre distinguishes between *the city* and *the urban*. For Lefebvre, “the urban is based on use value” (131). Correspondingly, the practices of participative and socially interactive space production, of *inhabitation*, do not completely disappear but shift into the decentralized parts of the urban fabric. In contrast, the city transmutes into an alienated and homogenized spectacle, a commodity that, however, remains an influential center of power as well as a highly contested place to live. Geographically and in terms of symbolic significance, the city remains central, whereas the urban fabric absorbs the oeuvre. The potential for integration, appropriation, exchange, confrontation and creative production of the city (Lefebvre, *Writings* 101-102 and 131), that is the most important practices composing the city as an oeuvre, therefore disperse into the urban fabric. Hence, the potential for a localized assemblage of urban life, for a *taking place* of the common oeuvre at a specific venue, vanishes.

With regard to the above described AGSP conflict, this thesis applies insofar as, due to a municipal decree, the negotiation between two different groups claiming their right to symbolically appropriate the Goutte d’Or, by praying vs. by having a non-haraam-compliant aperitif, did not take place but, instead, was dislocated into the media, most notably into the *Facebook* interface. Confrontation, which Lefebvre claims to be a part of the urban oeuvre, dispersed into the World Wide Web. Therefore, today’s urban fabric appears to not only dislocate the urban from the center into the rural but also to virtualize spatial appropriation. However, how can the decision that reinforced this virtualization of the conflict be assessed according to Lefebvre? In other words, how would Lefebvre, who posits simultaneity and

encounter as the “supreme reasons” of the urban oeuvre (129), assesses the municipal decision to prohibit the AGSP and let the conflict dislocate into the contemporary, virtualized urban fabric?

I suggest that a movement such as the AGSP has not exactly been envisioned in Lefebvre’s *The Right to the City*, even though certain passages of this work read like an almost prophetic prediction of the AGSP conflict.

A big game is played before us, with various episodes whose meaning is not always evident. [...] As a place of encounters, focus of communication and information, the *urban* becomes what it always was: place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and the unpredictable. This moment includes the implosion-explosion of latent violence under the terrible constraints of a rationality which identifies itself with the absurd. (129)

Indeed, Lefebvre pre-assessed the bizarre modes of conflict that a potentially violent fight over the right to the city center would produce. However, he did not foresee the groups and motivations involved in this particular conflict. Departing from a Marxist perspective, Lefebvre argued that in modern capitalism, urban life, which he equates with the use value of space (131), is banned from the city center in favor of consumable urban sensations. The fight for urban life therefore constitutes a fight to make the city less of a commodity and more of an oeuvre.

In contrast, the subjects of the AGSP conflict do not fit into Lefebvre’s basically Marxian conceptualization of the right to the city. For Lefebvre, “only the working class can become the agent, the social carrier or support” (Lefebvre, *Writings* 158) of the right to the city’s realization. Neither of the opposed forces in the AGSP conflict can precisely be identified as this group, “the working class,” because, in the first instance, the AGSP dispute cannot be grasped in terms of commodification vs. appropriation or in terms of exchange vs. use value of the city. Yet, the iconic productivity of the above described fight for the right to the Goutte d’Or well contributes to the spectacular character of the Goutte d’Or as a commodified urban center. In this context, the notion of *the spectacle* derives from Guy Debord’s correspondent work *The Society of the Spectacle*. Debord, whose theory was inspired by Lefebvre’s earlier writings on the *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947) and who maintained a close friendship with Lefebvre (Pinder 363) argues that the spectacle is “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images”(4). The iconic mediation of social relations thereby becomes perpetuated until “representation takes on an independent

existence”(18). According to this, capitalism creates a culture that, driven by the standard to make everything consumable, replaces reality with its images.

Debord’s argument suits the AGSP conflict insofar as this specific fight for the right to the city predominantly develops along moments of symbolic confrontation. Nonetheless, the imaginary generated by the AGSP conflict is not primarily intended for consumption and therefore skirts Lefebvre’s basically Marxist conception of urban exchange value in a consumerist spectacle. Thus, the inadequacy of applying Lefebvre’s right to the city concept to the AGSP conflict partly results from the fact that the concept does not fit this particular conflict’s subjects: a group of practicing Muslims defending their right to pray in the streets of the Goutte d’Or and a right wing association provocatively defending their right to have a public aperitif at the same place.

This friction between the object and the concept of my analysis implies a second incoherency between the AGSP conflict and certain *interpretations* of Lefebvre’s concept of the right to the city. The fact that Lefebvre includes the access to education, work, culture, rest, health and housing (157) into his demand for urban life presumably inspired David Harvey to adapt the concept of the right to the city by interpreting it as a global struggle for social welfare and democratic codetermination (Harvey 40). The AGSP conflict, however, eludes Harvey’s interpretation of Lefebvre’s right to the city conception since, in this case, the fight over the right to the Goutte d’Or does not primarily concern a struggle for the access to social institutions or economic resources. Rather, as I hope to have demonstrated before, this particular conflict is about symbolic sovereignty over the Goutte d’Or’s public space. The issue of doing something *at* and *to* the city’s visible surface thereby stands out as crucial.

Unlike Harvey, Lefebvre emphasizes the symbolic dimension of the fight over the right to the city more adequately by insisting on “the need for information, symbolism, the imaginary and play” (147). This does not mean that I disagree with Harvey’s very committed general analysis of capitalism’s proceeding global urbanization due to privatized over-accumulation. Instead, my point is that Harvey’s very accentuated comprehension of the right to the city does not cover a phenomenon such as the AGSP conflict, which, after all, forms a potentially violent problem for the contemporary city of Paris.

In fact, the AGSP conflict’s symbolic violence could, at a certain point, turn into physical violence. Maybe it would already have shifted into a physical combat if the Parisian municipality had not forbidden the aperitif at the Goutte d’Or. However, implemented from above, the municipal prohibition of the AGSP contradicts Lefebvre’s demand for “society self management” (autogestion), which constitutes an important part of the right to the city

concept (Gilbert and Dikeç 260). Although I definitely do not intend to argue in favor of a presumable right wing movement such as the AGSP, the AGSP conflict is a cause to point out the paradoxical tension between Lefebvre's demand for an unlimited right to urban confrontation, encounter and simultaneity and the actual challenges to the ideal's practical realization. Put differently, how can conflicting demands of a right to the city, demands that eventually exclude each other, be governed? How can they be made compatible with Lefebvre's ideal of the urban oeuvre as a form of unrestricted city-appropriation?

In their article "Right to the City: Politics of Citizenship," Liette Gilbert and Mustafa Dikeç note that "street protests, whether in the suburbs of Paris or in the streets of Los Angeles, act as reality checks" (259). Similarly, the AGSP conflict constitutes a new, challenging reality check for Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city because it shows how one group's unrestricted fight for the right to free use and appropriation of the city could easily turn into the symbolic disappropriation and provocation of other urban subjects defending their proper right to the city. Beyond that, the AGSP conflict establishes a context that represents a challenge to theories which interpret Lefebvre's right to the city as a hospitable principle, an ethical demand helping marginalized groups such as immigrants or *sans-papiers* to practice political co-determination and attain better living conditions (Gilbert and Dikeç 254). Because, if the right to free appropriation of the city is equally granted to everyone, regardless of legal status *or* political motivation, then there is an acute likelihood that regressive or discriminatory groups and movements such as the AGSP movement claim their version of a right the city as well.

In principle, the problem that I am highlighting addresses the general issue of practicing democracy with regard to concrete urban life. So far, the right to the city conception stands out as a relevant and dedicated ideal of "societal ethics" (Gilbert and Dikeç 261). However, it has not yet been specified into a practicable ethics of spatial negotiation. In the case of the AGSP, the municipal decree to prohibit the aperitif can only be a provisional solution to avoid a violent confrontation. At long sight, though, a third means of mediation and prospective reconciliation will be essential. For Lefebvre, the city itself constitutes such a mediation, a "mediation among mediations" (101) that achieves social relations "from the sensible" (103) by allowing social interactions to *take place* at a central site as well as to inscribe themselves into a physical material. In contrast, I argue that the city is not enough. Either rules regulating a just, democratic appropriation of the city or a third force of urban mediation has to be adjoined in order to transform the right to the city into a universally

practicable principle. The challenge of this project would be to organize this mediation democratically instead of imposing it from above.

With regard to the fight over the right to the Goutte d'Or, any principle or practice of mediation should by all means take into consideration the role of symbolic appropriation and prevent symbolic disappropriation. Rational and pragmatic "politics of place" have, inter alia, been defined as "[t]he playing out of difference in certain localities" which "can be both accommodative [...] and divided" (Bridge 1581). Ideally, a successful politics of the Goutte d'Or would thus enable both the practice of prayer as well as the practice of consuming pork and wine at the same urban venue without even having it perceived as a menace or provocation from either of the formerly depicted opposing sides.

## Conclusion

This paper focused on conflict about the Goutte d'Or, a district at the center of the French capital Paris. I briefly retraced the quarter's recent history and, using the concept of *urban imaginary* (Soja), described how symbolic and performative practices are constitutively involved in the construction of the Goutte d'Or's present-day image not only as an intercultural space but also as a so-called "delicate district" (*îlot sensible*).

Departing from this contextualization, I portrayed the 2010 *Apéro Géant Saucisson et Pinard* (AGSP) movement by analyzing its self-representation on the internet. In this context, I argued that the conflict provoked by this movement mainly draws upon symbolic violence and provocation and pointed to the crucial role of online communication media as possible platforms of symbolic violence, where urban confrontations can be prepared and situations of physical violence can be provoked.

To analyze this conflict, I applied Henri Lefebvre's concept of the *right to the city* to the AGSP conflict. I argued that, by transferring spatial confrontation and negotiation into the World Wide Web, contemporary online communication media virtualize what Lefebvre conceptualized as the urban fabric. Moreover, I problematized the municipal decree to prohibit the AGSP movement as a decision that does not comply with Lefebvre's ideal of a right to the city, to unrestricted appropriation of the urban center, and pointed to a friction between the concept and object of my analysis. Lefebvre's idea of a right to the city mainly concerns the working class's re-appropriation of the commodified urban center by means of *inhabitation*. In contrast, the AGSP movement constitutes a conflict between two parties claiming their rights to use the same urban space for conflicting symbolic practices. Since

both groups *consider* their spatial practices as mutually exclusive, their respective claims of a right to the city necessitate mediation.

As the described conflict mainly results from the AGSP group's systematic use of symbolic provocation, I argued that the ideal of a right to the city is as much about symbolic practices as it concerns the access to social welfare and democratic codetermination. The AGSP conflict has shown that signifying practices form a part of the oeuvre Lefebvre claims to be at the heart the right to the city. A successful governance of diversity with regard to 21<sup>st</sup> century urban public space therefore necessitates expertise not only with regard to the management of practical needs but also with regard to the reconciliation of culturally diverse and potentially conflicting symbolic claims of right to the city.

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