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Overwriting the City: Graffiti, Communication, and Urban Contestation in Athens  
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'We Have Met The Enemy And He Is Us'

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# OVERWRITING THE CITY: GRAFFITI, COMMUNICATION, AND URBAN CONTESTATION IN ATHENS

**Anna Marazuela Kim with Tara  
Flores**

## **Abstract**

To date, most discussions and analyses of strategic communications within the context of International Relations and Security Studies focus on the linguistic realm. Those that do recognise the power and role of images in these domains, particularly as they reflect upon the contemporary image wars waged by IS and other insurgent groups, tend to focus on the virtual realm of social media and globalized news networks. This article aims instead to articulate a methodological framework for understanding the force and potential of a distinctively spatial and material form of communication: graffiti. Taking Athens as a case study, the article articulates graffiti's role as a form of strategic communications in areas of social and political crisis, and further suggests its value as a non-violent means of negotiating conflict in areas with limited avenues for democratic expression.

**Keywords:** *graffiti, image war, strategic narratives, influence, soft power, strategic communication, strategic communications*

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## Introduction

Graffiti is a form of communication that has played a vital role in urban uprisings from Nicaragua to Northern Ireland and more recently the Middle East and the Arab Spring.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite both historic and ongoing significance, it remains relatively understudied in the field of strategic communications. Two broad shifts warrant its further exploration. First, while strategic communications has long been associated with practices of the state, the paradigm is rapidly changing to focus on the role of non-state actors in shaping the course of conflicts worldwide. Moreover, there is growing recognition among scholars of International Relations (IR) and Security Studies of an urgent need to understand the force and operation of images, as distinct from the linguistic realm.<sup>2</sup>

While the definition of graffiti is subject to scholarly debate, for the purposes of this study, the term is used broadly to encompass slogans, murals, and forms of street art.<sup>3</sup> The aim of the article is to contribute a threefold methodological framework for understanding graffiti's operation in areas of urban conflict, as a distinctive form of strategic communications. It is first defined as a tactical spatial practice: a physical means of reclaiming 'the right to the city'.<sup>4</sup> Second, it is explored as a mode of critical discourse: a staging of dialogue, dissent, narrative, and memorialisation in the restitution of a 'public sphere'.<sup>5</sup> Finally, graffiti is analysed as agentic image, actively inscribing civic

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1 While the level of conflict differs, the role of murals depicting political history in Northern Ireland provides a potentially useful comparison. On the murals, see Rolston, Bill, *Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 2010). On graffiti's role in the Arab Spring, see Schriwer, Charlotte, 'Graffiti Arts and the Arab Spring', Larbi Sadliki, (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, p. 36, who asserts that graffiti 'has become one of the most frequently used tools of psychological warfare'.

2 See the discussion by Lene Hansen in 'Theorizing the image for Security Studies: Visual securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis', *European Journal of International Relations* 17.1 (2010): 51–54; as well as Williams, Michael C, 'Words, images, enemies: Securitization and international politics', *International Studies Quarterly* 47(4) (2003): 511–529.

3 For recent overviews of the term, see *Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing and Representing the City*, Avrimidis, K. and Tsilimpounidi, Myrto, (eds.), (Routledge, 2016); and Ross, Jeffrey Ian (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* (Routledge, 2016).

4 The 'right to the city' is an idea that was first defined by Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 book *Le Droit à la ville*; it signifies more than right of access to a city's resources by its inhabitants but further the potential to be transformed through this. The idea has taken on renewed significance in the last two decades and figures in current agendas for a new civic urbanism, as evident for example in the United Nations' HABI-TAT III Policy Paper, 4-Urban Governance, Capacity and Institutional Development (29 February 2016).

5 The notion of the 'public sphere' was originally defined by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, tr. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge MA: The M. I. T. Press, 1989).

presence and creating new imaginaries that transform the meaning and potential of the city. Taking Athens as a case study, the article illustrates graffiti's role in civic resistance and mobilisation in areas of crisis with limited avenues of political expression. As cities and the urban fabric become strategic spaces, the study of graffiti expands the parameters of the evolving field of strategic communications and the current image wars, beyond linguistic or digital domains. The article concludes with suggestions for further lines of research on the affective dimension of graffiti and its potential for influence as a form of 'soft power', increasingly supported and appropriated by state and cultural institutions.<sup>6</sup>

### **Strategic Communications: The Shift from State to Non-State Actors**

Graffiti has a long history in military conflict and has taken on increasing importance in areas where urban territory is the ground of contestation. In a recent article in the journal of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Richard Clay and Neil Verrall document graffiti's role in conflicts of the past and present.<sup>7</sup> They suggest its further consideration from a strategic standpoint, as a communications tactic that is 'agile, disruptive, persuasive and cheap'.<sup>8</sup> In addition, from the perspective of intelligence gathering, they argue for its value as an indicator of attitudes and social processes on the ground, particularly in settings where direct measurement is difficult.<sup>9</sup> Given this two-fold value, the authors propose the efficacy of graffiti for military influence operations more generally, suggesting that military forces would benefit from drawing upon the example of non-state actors, and perhaps even work in tandem with them in arenas of conflict.

Traditionally, the field of strategic communications is viewed through state lenses and state-to-state practice. It is rooted in discussions of a whole-of-government approach, of bridging the 'say-do' gap, and of ensuring that policy and rhetoric are aligned.<sup>10</sup> To a greater degree than ever before, however, the development of strategic communications as a government tool is based upon models of effective communications strategies of non-state actors. The communications success of these constituents is part of a broader trend of how conflict has changed, particularly over the last century. As Neville Bolt has argued, following WWII a shift from inter-state to intra-state war and further to 'war among the people' has opened the definitional debate surrounding strategic

6 Nye, Joseph S., *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

7 Verrall, Neil and Richard Clay, 'Life Imitating Art, Art Influencing Life', *The RUSI Journal*, 161:2, (2016): 64–73.

8 Ibid., p. 70.

9 Ibid., p. 69.

10 See, for example, Paul, Christopher, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates* (Praeger, 2011).

communications to include revolutionary and insurgent movements in the shape of would-be states (Marxist-Leninist) or more recently, would-be supra-states (Salafi/Jihadi/Islamic). From a practical standpoint, these social movements turned militant groups have as valid a claim to be practitioners of strategic communications as do recognised states. Both US and UK military doctrines have begun to embrace this thinking, in order to effectively combat the success of the militant groups in communications. In the political arena, however, to recognise the claims on traditional strategic communications of challengers to established states is to legitimise de facto those dissident groups or movements. Perhaps for this reason, the field of strategic communications has lagged behind in its analysis of the varied communications tactics of these groups, though it is now quickly taking stock of their activities as communicators.<sup>11</sup> Beyond emerging groups that have reshaped and expanded the field, we should consider the broader phenomenon of the citizen witness / journalist, particularly in areas of conflict. Michal Givoni has described this as the ‘era of becoming a witness’; increasingly, images play a central role.<sup>12</sup> While the focus of such activity has been the rapid dissemination of information through social media, a parallel might be drawn to graffiti, which is similarly a form of witnessing and is also distributed through virtual pathways, most often social media outlets.

### Urban Space as a Site of Contestation

Another rationale for the study of graffiti is its deployment within the urban fabric of cities. Recently there has been growing scholarly interest in the city as the site of conflict. As social movements and the insurgent groups that sometimes grow from them increasingly coalesce and operate in urban spaces, the earlier paradigm of rural guerrilla warfare is beginning to shift. Some might argue that the city has always been perceived and used as a military weapon.<sup>13</sup> In the past, however, the military use of the city lay more in its physical and material strategic position. Battles over major cities, such as the siege of York in the English Civil War, were fundamentally battles over resources and physical territory, albeit territory with symbolic value.

Urban spaces have historically been considered strategic spaces; however, their strategic use has changed significantly over time. Their significance in the context of conflict is

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11 Bolt, Neville, ‘Strategic Communications in Crisis’, *The RUSI Journal*, 156: 4 (2011): 44–53. The question of who counts as a legitimate strategic communicator is complicated by a recent article which argues that effective strategic communications takes place only within an ethical framework of consensual international practices. See Frost, Mervyn and Michelsen, Nicholas, ‘Strategic Communications in International Relations: Practical Traps and Ethical Puzzles’, *Defence Strategic Communications* vol. 2 (2017): 3–33.

12 Givoni, Michal, ‘The Ethics of Witnessing and the Politics of the Governed’, *Theory Culture & Society*, 31, 1 (2011): 123–142.

13 McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill, 1964).

now not just physical or material, considering the city only as a site of territorial claims. Cities today are more commonly sites of contest between state and non-state actors over legitimacy and authenticity, as insurgents and social movements navigate the urban space, traditionally viewed as state controlled, in order to challenge state authority. As David Kilcullen has argued, the increased prevalence of urban conflict has resulted in a shift from contested geographical territory to contested networks of people.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, the control of geographical space does not necessarily translate into actual control. More important than geographical space in the urban context is how these spaces are interpreted and understood by the people inhabiting them. It is in this context that graffiti has particular strategic importance. While the urban territory of a particular city may be controlled by the state, the inscription of graffiti serves to demonstrate that the state does not maintain full control over that particular urban space. Following the broader communication shifts outlined above, non-state actors—citizens in this case—are using graffiti to symbolically wrest control from the state through strategic use of the urban environment. This approach to understanding the urban environment is underpinned by a constructivist view, which sees the world as constantly under construction in a recursive process of understanding.

‘Actors do not have a portfolio of interests that they carry around independent of social context’,<sup>15</sup> they are influenced by their surroundings. Equally, however, ‘social actors attach meaning to the material world and cognitively frame the world they know, experience and understand’.<sup>16</sup> Humans are constantly interpreting their surroundings and this interpretation is constantly being contested.<sup>17</sup> The iterative renegotiation of the meaning afforded to this social reality significantly reveals its capacity to influence human behaviour, something which is recognised by both state and non-state actors, albeit often unconsciously so. This is, of course, true of all environments, whether urban or rural. Humans are not independent of socialisation. The strategic importance of the city lies in its role as a site of socialisation. Cities are more densely populated

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14 Kilcullen, David, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (C. Hurst & Co, 2013).

15 Wendt, Alexander, ‘Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organization* 46, No. 2 (1992): 391–425.

16 Adler, Emanuel, ‘Seizing the Middle Ground’, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol 3, Issue 3, p. 321. This social constructivist approach is informed by Giddens’ notion of the duality of structure as something which constrains human action but also is (re)created by it. See Giddens, Anthony, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (London, 1979).

17 For a more psychological approach to this phenomenon, see Daniel Kahneman’s explanation and analysis of ‘priming’. In the 1980s, it was discovered that exposure to a word causes immediate changes in our association to this word and words related to it. This concept has since been expanded such that it is now accepted that our actions are influenced by what we have seen, heard and experienced prior to our actions. For more information see Kahneman, Chapter 4 ‘The Associative Machine’, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, (Penguin, 2012).

and have an increased presence of the state. As a result, the urban space is often more contested than the rural.<sup>18</sup> In addition, we might point out that disenfranchised individuals are more concentrated in urban environments and generally have greater access to communications technologies, so that inequality of access to resources in the city is more likely to give rise to political and social conflict.

Indeed, it is helpful to think in terms of socialisation if we want to consider more broadly cities and their function as the predominant sites of state control. The Chicago School of sociologists were among the first to analyse the impact of urban environments on the formation of identity. Focusing on the urban gangland surroundings of Chicago of the early 1900s, researchers led by George Herbert Mead examined the extent to which the self was the result of social interaction and symbolic systems.<sup>19</sup> Their results demonstrated a highly mutual relationship in which ‘situations are structured by individuals who, in the course of interaction, establish a joint sense of the present [...] and shape their conduct with respect to this collectively-established and situationally-sustained time-frame’.<sup>20</sup> More will be said below about cities as dynamic spaces of identity-formation and graffiti’s potential role in shaping it.<sup>21</sup>

### **Athens as a Case Study: Graffiti and Urban Conflict**

Athens is exemplary of the increasingly unstable, precarious condition of many European cities, one that parallels in microcosm the broader phenomenon of failed states and is therefore of interest to IR and Security Studies. In the wake of severe economic, social, and political crises, the city has become a site of chronic low-level conflict, with protests erupting into violence and anarchist take-overs of buildings and sectors where police no longer hold jurisdiction. Among the instruments of civic dissent at work in this milieu, graffiti would seem the least significant. Yet in terms of daily disruption, longevity, and reach, its impact has been arguably greater; it threatens to overwrite the ‘traditional’ image of Athens as one controlled by the state, the ancient home of democracy, with the image of a city in the hands of unpredictable non-state actors, whose messages and agency are everywhere publicly inscribed and who have reinterpreted the meaning of democratic participation.

<sup>18</sup> Tilly, Charles, ‘Cities, States, and Trust Networks: Chapter 1 of *Cities and States in World History*’, *Theory and Society* 39.3 (2010): 265–280.

<sup>19</sup> Mead, George Herbert, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviourist* (University of Chicago Press, 1964).

<sup>20</sup> Dmitri, Shalin, ‘Pragmatism and Social Interactionism’, *American Sociological Review*, 51.1 (1986): 16, cited in Bolt, Neville, *The Violent Image, Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries* (Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> On the role of the arts in cultivating civic identity and agency, see Kim, Anna M., et. al., ‘Brief on the Beautiful as an endowment of Thriving Cities’, (2015), online: <http://thrivingcities.com/endowments/beautiful>.





Figure 1. View of the Acropolis from the city center. Athens, February 2016 (photo by the author).

Athens has been described as one of the most ‘stained and saturated cities in the world’ and has become a rich context for the study of graffiti.<sup>22</sup> Dense palimpsests of writing, tags, and images cover railways, highways, and underpasses, traditional sites of illicit intervention because they are difficult to police. Entire neighbourhoods—such as Gazi, Psirri, and Exarcheia, the anarchist stronghold, which sits just adjacent to Kolonaki, one of the most fashionable districts—are covered in signs and images. In addition to its ubiquity throughout the urban landscape, the scale of graffiti’s presence is equally impressive. Stories-high graffiti murals tower over city streets, rivaling historic sites in their visual prominence. ‘Graffiti bombing’—a technique in which many surfaces are illicitly painted—is a regular occurrence. Most spectacularly, in 2013 the entire exterior of the Technical University of Athens was covered in one night. The university, situated in the Exarcheia district, is historically a stronghold of anarchist protest; it was the site of a 1973 student uprising that ended a seven-year period of rule by the military junta as well as major protests again in 2008 and 2012. Whether in protest or in pride, graffiti has effectively become ‘the signature’ of Athens, at times even celebrated by state and cultural institutions.

But as graffiti spills beyond activist or derelict areas to target buildings of historic significance, the city, whose fragile economy depends upon tourism, is in a constant

<sup>22</sup> Pangalos, Orestis, ‘Testimonies and Appraisals on Athens Graffiti, Before and After the Crisis’, in *Remapping ‘Crisis’: A Guide to Athens*, Myrto Tsilimpounidi and Aylwyn Walsh (eds.), (Zero Books: 2014), p. 154.



Figure 2. The restored Athens Academy and freshly graffitied fencing. Panepistimiou Street, Athens, July 2016 (photo by the author).

battle to control the ‘image’ of the city.<sup>23</sup> In the past few years, the Municipality of Athens has struggled to protect landmark monuments and buildings on Panepistimiou Street, which connects the working-class Omonia and the bourgeois Syntagma squares, both sites of recent protest. The historic thoroughfare showcases some of the most important neoclassical monuments in the city: the National Library, the Numismatic Museum, and the Athens Academy, which, as shown in the photo below (Figure 2), even after cleaning still bears a reminder of the always-present threat of its future defacement. As Konstantinos Avramidis notes in his study of the Bank of Greece, the buildings on Panepistimiou Street targeted by graffiti are more than architectural treasures. They are ‘symbols of nation, authority and capitalism’, rich in ‘noble’ classical materials, such as marble, and comprised of classical forms that reflect a mythic

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<sup>23</sup> Greece Is, ‘Athens Mayor Gets Tough on Graffiti’, 8 April 2016, <http://www.greece-is.com/news/athens-mayor-gets-tough-graffiti>



Figure 3. INO, 'Ignorance is Bliss'. Nicosia, Cyprus (public domain image).

national consciousness.<sup>24</sup> Their neoclassical vocabulary visually communicates a specific ideology regarding Greek national and bourgeois identity.<sup>25</sup> To deface such buildings with graffiti is to reach beyond their façades to attack the powers they institutionalise and represent. As seminal studies by David Freedberg, Dario Gamboni, and Bruno Latour have explored, images and monuments have long stood as proxies for persons and power. Their iconoclastic defacement both diminishes that power and also utilises it to construct something new. This 'creative iconoclasm' is a paradoxical dynamic central to graffiti that will be discussed further below.<sup>26</sup>

24 Avramidis, Konstantinos. 'Reading an Instance of Contemporary Urban Iconoclasm: A Design Report from Athens', *The Design Journal*, 18 (4), (2015): 524–25.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 522–23.

26 See Freedberg, David, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Gamboni, Dario, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (Reaktion Books, 1997); and Latour, Bruno, 'What is Iconoclasm? Or is there a world beyond the image wars?' in Latour, Bruno and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Kim, Anna M., 'Creative Iconoclasm in Renaissance Italy', in *Striking Images, Iconoclasm Past and Present*, Boldrick, S., L. Brubaker, R. Clay (eds.), (Ashgate, 2013): pp. 65–88.

In describing the most recent campaign against such acts of ‘vandalism’, local Greek authorities were careful to make a distinction between the graffiti and tags ‘without aesthetic value’, which they sought to eradicate, and ‘artistic’ murals that they intend to promote instead.<sup>27</sup> They highlighted the work of INO—an Athens graffiti artist with a growing international reputation—for prestigious public commissions. These include large-scale murals for the façade of the Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens (2010) and the Parliament of Cyprus in Nicosia (2016), works that have been featured in both the *New York Times* and *The Guardian*.<sup>28</sup> The image for the Cypriot Parliament presents two figures associated with the origins of democracy in ancient Athens, Pericles and Solon. Like many of INO’s works, vision is thematised in the image and there is a critical edge to its iconography.<sup>29</sup> Titled ‘Ignorance is Bliss’, the mural depicts the symbols of ancient Athenian democracy blinded by swathes of blue paint: an iconoclastic gesture and artistic signature that lends itself to multiple interpretations. The commission of a Greek graffiti artist to paint a prominent foreign government building (perhaps the first commission of its kind) and the Onassis Centre, as well as the provision of mayoral support to refresh derelict neighbourhoods with murals, seem a clear recognition by the state of graffiti’s power and centrality to contemporary Athenian culture.<sup>30</sup> While artists such as INO embrace the possibility of critique through such publicly commissioned works, others note an inherent tension in the government’s appropriation of what is essentially an independent art of dissent. ‘Make no mistake: Graffiti is a weapon of influence because it’s so apparent in the city’, said Charitonas Tsamantakis, an imposing, black-clad graffitiist who is publishing a book, *Hellenic Graffiti History*, in autumn of 2017. ‘The authorities want to embrace it so they can neutralize it and control it. It’s a way of breaking our spirit.’<sup>31</sup> The disdain of the artists towards the attempts of authorities to legitimise their art is an implicit recognition of the contest over the urban space, a recognition that legitimisation is not acceptance of their message but an attempt to control their message.

27 Ioannidis, Sakis, ‘National Library Stripped of Graffiti’, 13 May 2016, <http://www.greece-is.com/news/national-library-stripped-graffiti/>.

28 Recent press in *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* on INO’s work and Athens’ crisis: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2014/nov/11/contemporary-graffiti-art-on-the-walls-of-athens-in-pictures>; <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/16/world/europe/across-athens-graffiti-worth-a-thousand-words-of-malaise.html>.

29 For related examples see the artist’s website, online: <http://www.ino.net/>.

30 See Pangalos, Orestis, ‘Testimonies and Appraisals on Athens Graffiti, before and after the Crisis’, in Tsilimpounidi, Myrto and Walsh, Aylwyn, (eds.), *Remapping Crisis: A Guide to Athens*, London: Zero Book (2014), p. 164.

31 Alderman, Liz, ‘Across Athens, Graffiti Worth a Thousand Words of Malice’, *New York Times*, 15 April 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/16/world/europe/across-athens-graffiti-worth-a-thousand-words-of-malaise.html>.

The modern roots of politicised wall writings in Athens reach back to the Axis Occupation (1941), the Greek Civil War (1941–1949), and the years of dictatorship (1967–1974).<sup>32</sup> But its dramatic increase seems directly correlated with the city's recent, precipitous decline, which was preceded by a brief programme of urban renewal. Graffiti's present trajectory might be charted from 1998, when Greece held its first international festival in Athens in an area northwest of the Acropolis and ancient Agora, shortly after winning the bid to host the 2004 Olympic games.<sup>33</sup> Urban design festivals including graffiti were organized and supported to enhance the downtown and connect its archaeological sites along the Cultural Promenade. For a few years from 2000 onwards, several prominent large-scale projects were commissioned by city institutions as part of a cultural Olympiad that contributed to a shift in perceptions of graffiti as a legitimate form of street art.<sup>34</sup> Then, in the years of economic failure and flight from the urban core, the many disused and decaying buildings became the canvas upon which a young generation of graffiti writers made their mark. In 2007, the first Athens Art Biennale—'Destroy Athens!?'—announced with its title the recognition that the city could no longer sustain its image as a city of ancient or Olympic glory. It was instead a modern-day ruin: 'a socio-urban fabric of injustice, a place of increasing violence and brutality, a fragmented world of inequality'.<sup>35</sup>

More recently, the period between December 2008 and 2012 marks a critical juncture in social upheaval that is generally thought to have motivated the explosion of a specifically political graffiti in Athens. The Youth Uprising of 2008, catalysed by the police killing of fifteen-year old Alexandros Grigoropoulos in the Exarcheia district, which still bears many visual memorials to the event, was the beginning of a series of protests that went hand in hand with a politicised street art, including painted slogans and graffiti.<sup>36</sup> This was followed by the introduction of severe austerity measures in 2010, which left Athens in a state of socioeconomic emergency not seen since the 1940s. Between 2010 and 2012, personal spending capacity was reduced by 40 percent, leaving one-third of the population below the poverty line.<sup>37</sup> What began as peaceful demonstrations were

32 Avramidis, 'Reading an Instance of Contemporary Urban Iconoclasm', p. 519.

33 Leventis, Panos, 'Walls of Crisis: Street Art and Urban Fabric in Central Athens, 2000–2012', *Architectural Histories*, 1.1 (2013): 1–10.

34 Ibid., p. 19. 'Graffiti tourism' is an increasing trend in cities around the world, including Athens.

35 Ibid., p. 13.

36 Tsilimpounidi, Myrto, 'If these Walls Could Talk: Street Art and Urban Belonging in the Athens of Crisis', *Laboratorium*, 7(2), (2015): 75 on protests as a trigger for graffiti-making; Stavrides, S., 'The December 2008 uprising's stencil images in Athens Writing or inventing traces of the future?' in *Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing and Representing the City*, (Routledge, 2016), pp. 164–176.

37 Tsilimpounidi, 'If these Walls Could Talk', p. 78. On the crisis, see also Zaimakis, Yiannis, 'Welcome to the Civilization of Fear': On Political Graffiti Heterotopias in Greece in Times of Crisis', *Visual Communication*, 14(4): 373–396. pp. 377–79.

followed by riots and the destruction of numerous buildings throughout the core of the city. On 12 February 2012, forty-five buildings, including eleven listed historic edifices, were destroyed by fire across the downtown, ‘widening the multiple, deep wounds to the capital’s economic development, cultural heritage and urban fabric’.<sup>38</sup> Street art in Athens was deeply affected by the city’s new plight. Graffiti writers turned not only to derelict buildings, but also to destroyed architecture as their urban platform. According to a recent ethnographic study by Mytro Tsilimpounidi, contrary to the stereotype of graffiti writers as an uneducated, unemployed periphery, the majority of those active in Athens are between 25 and 35 years old, with middle-class backgrounds, university educated, and with regular daytime employment.<sup>39</sup> The economic crisis has been particularly severe for this cohort, with an estimated 55 percent of young people aged 18–30 falling below the poverty line.<sup>40</sup>



Figure 4. Graffiti in Psirri district. Athens, June 2016 (photo by the author).

38 Leventis, ‘Walls of Crisis’, pp. 5–6.

39 Tsilimpounidi, ‘If these Walls Could Talk’, p. 73.

40 Ibid., p. 78.

## Political Graffiti: Definitions and Typologies

Given its scale and ubiquity, making sense of the welter and variety of signatures, symbols, slogans, and pictures that comprise Athens' graffiti today presents a daunting task. To grasp its significance as strategic communications, it must first be defined and broken down into categories. Graffiti is generally understood as any illicitly-produced set of marks, writings, or images inscribed, drawn, or painted on public buildings or structures. Far from being a new invention, it has a long and continuous history from antiquity, the earliest examples dating back to Mayan and early Roman cultures.<sup>41</sup> The root of the term, however, lies in the ancient Greek *graphie*, which denotes both writing and picture. Conceptually, it is useful to think of it as encompassing and extending across the domains of both language and image. As visual theorist W.J.T. Mitchell notes, writing, as a physical, graphic form, is 'an inseparable suturing of the visual and the verbal, the "image text incarnate"'.<sup>42</sup>

During the 1960s, the term graffiti became associated with the urban phenomenon of signatures, or 'tagging', in cities such as Philadelphia and New York: a form of writing eventually evolving into a wider range of representations, including large-scale murals on subways and buildings.<sup>43</sup> It is this early period and type of graffiti, along with its perpetration by gangs, that informed public perceptions of it as a form of vandalism. In recent decades, however, graffiti has been acknowledged as a form of art, both by the public and the art world. It has also become a serious subject of academic study, not only in the field of visual culture, but for anthropological, sociological, political, and urban and architectural theory, all of which have expanded the range of its significance.

Clearly graffiti is a highly diverse cultural practice encompassing many forms. A schema for an initial breakdown of types—one that lends itself to a consideration of its status as an aspect of strategic communications—might be constructed along the continuum of the categories of writing and image implied by the term itself. At one end of the spectrum are signatures, tags, and symbols, such as numbers, at times stylized or calligraphic. These are codes or forms of internal communication produced by and for specific subcultures, such as hip-hop or gangs.<sup>44</sup> Although their function and meaning are not legible to a public audience, it might be argued that such markings of identity or territory nonetheless communicate, by virtue of their illicit nature, a form

41 Phillips, S.A., *Graffiti Definition: The Dictionary of Art*, (Grove Dictionaries, 1996). Online: <https://www.graffiti.org/faq/graf.def.html>.

42 Mitchell, W.J.T., *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), p. 95.

43 Pangalos, 'Testimonies and Appraisals', p. 155.

44 Avramidis, Konstantinos. 'Live your Greece in Myths: Reading the Crisis on Athens' Walls', *Professional Dreamers, working paper* No.8 (2012): 6–7.

of agency in their urban settings. As French philosopher Jean Baudrillard wrote in an early acknowledgement of graffiti's power in this regard, 'the strength of graffiti lies in its status as self-referential or "empty" signifier, allowing it to "scramble the signals of urbania and dismantle the order of signs".<sup>45</sup> On the other end of the spectrum we might place the clearly legible images—from the graphic stencil to colorful murals, often combined with captions—created with the specific intention of communicating social or political critique to a broader public. To this category we might add a related type: the defacement of a public building, monument, or image of historic, cultural, or symbolic significance, resulting in the creation of a critical 'counter-image'. Graffiti, once perceived as mere vandalism, works complexly and doubly as a form of 'creative destruction': an iconoclasm simultaneously constructing new significations as it attacks or dismantles existing ones.<sup>46</sup>

Recent ethnographic studies in Athens have begun to delineate the distinctively politicised character its graffiti has developed in response to the combined socio-economic and political crises of the past eight years. Analysing 1100 graffiti-related documents in core neighbourhoods of Athens, researcher Yiannis Zaimakis organises these in three categories of content that we will briefly canvass before turning to an analysis of their status as communication.<sup>47</sup>

**Protest graffiti** refers directly to Greece's social and economic crisis: the severe austerity measures of the 'Troika' (the tripartite committee of the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) and authoritarian measures in governance that have led to increasing repression.<sup>48</sup> A much-reproduced image by the Athens-based graffiti artist Bleeps plays upon the title of a popular television show *Greece's Next Top Model* to produce a captivating yet disturbing image rendered in the colours of the Greek flag. The country's condition is likened to one of amputation: a reference to Greece as subject to the economic experiment of austerity.<sup>49</sup> The visual effect of the image is particularly striking as the beautiful figure seems to emerge from the wall towards the viewer, the paint below her injured leg bleeding onto the sidewalk in painted streams. Bleeps is among a growing number of graffiti artists who combine their work with political commentary disseminated through the web on blogs and Facebook, multiplying their reach and impact.<sup>50</sup> Equally legible and compelling

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45 Baudrillard, Jean, 'Kool Killer', or 'The Insurrection of Signs' in I.H. Grant, trans., *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, (London: Sage, 1988/1976), p. 81.

46 See note 23 above.

47 Zaimakis, 'Welcome to the Civilization of Fear'.

48 Ibid., p. 374.

49 Drakoplou, Konstantina, 'Art and Politics: Bleeps' Politically Charged Paintings on the Walls of Athens', in Tsilimpounidi and Walsh, (eds.), *Remapping "Crisis": A Guide to Athens*, pp. 218–19.

50 Online: <https://www.facebook.com/Bleeps.gr/>.





Figure 5. [bleeps.gr](http://bleeps.gr), 'Greece: Next Economic Model'. Psirri district, Athens (public domain image).

as a political provocation is the work of Political Zoo (a reference to the Aristotelian idea of the *politikon zoon*). Much like the British graffiti artist Banksy, this Athenian collective deploys the highly readable stencil technique, often to critical, satirical, and humorous effect.<sup>51</sup> The resulting work varies from the simple to the elaborate, such as a piece that refers to a history of repressive governments from the post-Junta period to the present.<sup>52</sup>

51 Zaimakis, 'Welcome to the Civilization of Fear', p. 385.

52 Ibid, 384–85; for recent interview with the group, see Tsilimpounidi and Walsh, 'Painting human rights', p. 118.

A second category, **conflict graffiti**, broadly captures work that is dialogic or responsive to particular political ideologies, such as fascism and anti-immigration sentiment.<sup>53</sup>

Throughout the city, images and slogans communicate civic opposition to the growing threat of fanatical politics.

Finally, **revolt graffiti** is defined by its more militant content and production by activists along a radical political spectrum from leftists and anarchists.<sup>54</sup> These images represent the marginalised and oppressed with the aim of mobilising the populace, often employing slogans ('Poor people rise up in arms!'; 'Everybody out in the streets!') in areas of particular political or historic significance, such as Syntagma Square, a site of protest. There is often an international flavour to the content, drawing parallels to other revolutionary struggles worldwide or written in foreign languages.<sup>55</sup> In recent years, anarchists have allied themselves with the cause of the great numbers of refugees and migrants that have flooded the city, identifying with their shared experience of injustice and precarity, as well as with the necessity to emigrate for economic reasons.

### Methodology for Analysis: Graffiti as a Spatial Urban Tactic

Drawing upon sociological, ethnographic, political, urban, and visual studies, we now turn to a threefold conceptual framework for analysing graffiti. While the content of graffiti provides a means to define the many forms it takes, its socio-psychological and political effects flow from its specific constitution. Unlike the spoken word or a digital image, graffiti is distinctive in its spatial materiality and its use in the public setting of the street. Its existence as a form of communication depends upon its physical inscription on the walls and surfaces of the city, where it becomes an integral, but also shaping, part of the urban environment. Like the architecture of the city of which it is a part, graffiti is a marker of place and, to draw upon the theory of philosopher Henri Lefebvre, has the potential to actively produce the 'spaces' of society.<sup>56</sup>

To understand graffiti's potential as an aspect of strategic communications, we must first appreciate the particular characteristics of the physical media upon which it is inscribed. As anthropologists of the image such as Hans Belting remind us, images do not simply appear. They depend upon specific media for their visibility and transmission, as well as

53 Zaimakis, 'Welcome to the Civilization of Fear', pp. 388–92.

54 Ibid., pp. 385–87.

55 Ibid., pp. 386–87.

56 Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*, N. Donaldson-Smith, (trans.), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). See also Michel de Certeau's, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Univ. of Calif. Press, 2011), for the theory of space as 'practiced place', also relevant here. For graffiti within the framework of Lefebvre's theory, see Schacter, Rafael, 'An Ethnography of Iconoclasm: An investigation into the production, consumption, and destruction of street art in London', *Journal of Material Culture* 13 (2008): 50–51.

active realisation by their viewers. Images, like the persons who encounter them, are, in a sense, embodied, and stand in phenomenological relation to their viewers.<sup>57</sup> Beyond Marshall McLuhan's theory that the 'medium is the message', we should consider the significance of the specific media which allow these messages to appear. The physical media of graffiti—namely walls and façades—have an architectural and social function that bears meaning for what is materially produced upon them. They are borders between public and private domains, demarcations of property and ownership, or exclusion from property or ownership. They define territories and neighbourhoods and can be projections of power, control, and security, or the loss of the latter when threatened or destroyed. In this regard, the walls and façades of the urban environment jointly define spatial and societal relations.<sup>58</sup> Therefore the intentional marking of such borders by graffiti, and by extension of buildings or neighbourhoods, can serve to critique and even shift the boundaries of the existing social order. 'Graffiti bombing', for example, lacks the potential to actually destroy a structure, but it nonetheless attacks the idea of, or claim to, private ownership of the city.<sup>59</sup> A stencil with a Molotov cocktail deployed in the fashionable Kolonaki district ('Relax you trendy guys and enjoy your coffee, your car is burning.')60 makes evident the neighbourhood's proximity to Exarcheia, suddenly shifting the perception of social space and privacy. And as graffiti marks abandoned or ruined places—the enclaves of migrants and the poor overlooked by society—graffiti can create a new, visible significance for them. Several studies have mapped graffiti in Athens to reveal the way in which it parallels, and makes more visible, areas of protest and precarity, effectively creating an alternative geography to the official and tourist thoroughfares of the city.<sup>61</sup> In this way, graffiti overwrites the state's ordering of its borders.

Earlier we noted a shift towards the city as a site of conflict and contestation among groups of people. Here we can proceed deeper, to the dynamic structure of the city itself in its relation to these groups. The premise upon which our analysis of graffiti is founded is that the built environment of a city is more than a set of physical structures. It is also a complex and evolving order, one that has the potential to enhance, delimit, or negatively impact the thriving of its inhabitants.<sup>62</sup> The city, as Lefebvre once characterised it, is a

57 Belting proposes a theory of images or iconology according to a tripartite model in Belting, Hans, 'Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology', *Critical Inquiry*, No. 31, (2005): 302–319.

58 Avramidis, 'Live your Greece in Myths', pp. 14–15.

59 Iveson, Kurt, 'Graffiti, Street Art and the City' 14 (1–2) *City* 26, (2010): 130.

60 Stavrides, 'The December 2008 uprising's stencil images in Athens', p. 167 with photograph p. 168.

61 On graffiti and the 're-mapping' of Athens, see Tsilimpounidi and Walsh, 'Painting Human Rights'; Avramidis, 'Live your Greece in Myths', p. 13; Schacter, *A World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti*, (Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 350–52.

62 Kim et. al, 'The Brief on the Beautiful'.

‘projection of society on the ground’.<sup>63</sup> If we think of societal space as jointly produced by architectural structures and their active ordering by institutions and inhabitants, we can see that graffiti, in its appropriation and transformation of the urban fabric, holds the possibility to actively deconstruct and reconstruct the public spaces of the city.<sup>64</sup> Deployed in the absence of other forms of power, graffiti functions as a tactical spatial practice: a creative means of contesting and reclaiming the ‘right to the city’.<sup>65</sup> Lefebvre elaborates the potential benefits that flow from the recognition of this right for the urban dweller (*citadin* in Lefebvre). Such an affirmation not only opens the right graffiti-writers to make evident their ideas in the spatio-temporal realm of the urban setting. It also recovers the right of those who have been excluded to the privileged areas of the centre (however construed), and rejects their restriction to the margins or ‘ghettos’ traditionally used for the containment of immigrants and workers’.<sup>66</sup>

By questioning and reconfiguring the order of the city as structured by capitalism and politics, graffiti inscribed in public spaces can serve as a form of visual political action.<sup>67</sup> As David Harvey writes in his re-evaluation of Lefebvre’s theory: ‘The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.’<sup>68</sup>

### Recreating the Public Sphere: Graffiti as Public Dialogue and Discourse

With regard to architecture’s role in this critical, political expression—the aim of the type of graffiti under consideration—the insights of sociologist Richard Sennett are particularly relevant. In Sennett’s view, among the historic sites where Athenians exercised their political rights, the agora, by virtue of its spatial characteristics—its openness and adjacency to public buildings and functions—actively fostered the aims of participatory democracy.<sup>69</sup> In contrast to the Pnyx, or open-air theatre, whose structure focused attention on particular speakers, the agora was ‘absent of spatial hierarchies that would

63 Lefebvre, Henri, *Writings on cities*, (New York: Blackwell, 1996 [1968]), p. 109.

64 Schacter, in building a case for graffiti as a kind of order, emphasizes the power of the built environment to produce social as much as structural foundations; *Ornament and Order*, pp. 10–20.

65 Iveson, ‘Graffiti, Street Art and the City’, p. 115.

66 Lefebvre, *Writings on cities*, p. 34.

67 See discussion in Schacter, ‘An Ethnography of Iconoclasm’, pp. 50–53 and Shields, Rob, ‘Lefebvre and the Right to the Open City?’, *Space and Culture* 16 (3) (2013): 345–348.

68 Harvey, David, ‘The right to the city’, *New Left Review*, II, 53 (2008): 23–40.

69 Sennett, Richard, *The Spaces of Democracy*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, College of Architecture and Urban Planning, 1998), p. 20.

divide people into active or passive or ruling or ruled groups'.<sup>70</sup> As such, it offered a space that fostered discussion of differing and conflicting interests.<sup>71</sup> Taking the historic monuments of present-day Athens as exemplary, we can draw a contrast between the open, dialogic forum of the agora, and the 'exclusivity' of the more remote acropolis, which served a defensive and religious purpose and now a symbolic, touristic one, as the pinnacle of a mythic Greek culture. Recently Sennett has extended this thinking to conceptualise the form of cities that might foster democratic societies. These he characterizes as 'open' with 'porous borders' that allow for maximum contact among different populations and ideas, with architecture that is dynamic and even incomplete, encouraging civic engagement. This he juxtaposes to the 'closed' and determined forms in the tradition of the modernist city planning of Le Corbusier.<sup>72</sup> Graffiti—as a force in the process of transforming and opening new spaces in the city, shifting its borders—might be understood within this framework as it constructs the conditions for civic exchange at the foundation of democratic society.<sup>73</sup>

Graffiti writers in Athens also describe their work as a 'social diary' on display: a public record of otherwise hidden injustices and the increasingly bleak conditions of life in the city under crisis.<sup>74</sup> They emphasise its function to narrate stories and histories that have been silenced or lack public forums for expression in what is perceived as an increasingly repressive and politically dysfunctional milieu. Historically, the street has been recognised as a symbol of freedom,<sup>75</sup> its open and public facing walls an alternative to institutional or closed settings. In the words of Exarcheia's Street Artist 84, interviewed during an ethnographic survey: 'As the song goes "the street had its own story, someone painted it on the wall". That's how you understand what happened there. Basically, it is a story, a story that needed to be written, there was no alternative'.<sup>76</sup> In the absence of other public venue or recognition, graffiti serves to memorialise events and victims. Insofar as graffiti serves a memorialising function, its communicative power is amplified.

Remembering is an action, an active use of our mind to recall previous events, however truthful or accurate this recall may be.<sup>77</sup> There is therefore an inherent agential aspect to

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70 Ibid., p. 8.

71 Ibid., p. 17.

72 Sennett, 'The Open City', 2013 lecture, pp. 11–14, <https://www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/UploadedResources/The%20Open%20City.pdf>.

73 Schacter, 'An Ethnography of Iconoclasm', p. 59.

74 Bleeps.gr, 'A Visual Diary on Public Display'.

75 Avramidis, 'Reading an Instance of Contemporary Urban Iconoclasm', pp. 57–8.

76 Interview in Tsilimpounidi and Walsh, 'Painting human rights', p. 74.

77 Ricoeur, Paul, 'Memory and Forgetting', in Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (eds.), *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary debates in philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 5.

memory which further influences the structures around those who remember. Crucially, memory influences present understandings and shared meanings by presenting an interpreted narrative of the past, however recent that past is, and constructing from it a vision of the future. Through this construction of what Paul Ricoeur calls the ‘future of the past’,<sup>78</sup> anything with a memorializing function has an implicit call to action.

Elsewhere, the memorialising function of graffiti is further evidence of its communicative power. Inherent within the concept of memory is that of narrative, the concept of telling or representing a story of the past. Indeed, many consider memory not only a way of telling a story but the result of the ‘duty to tell’ a certain story.<sup>79</sup> ‘The duty to remember consists not only in having a deep concern for the past, but in transmitting the meaning of past events to the next generation.’<sup>80</sup> The process of transmitting this message takes many forms, of which imagery must be considered a major category. To quote Ricoeur a final time, ‘The reality of history is made “visible” again through images; and this makes memory a reproduction, a sort of second production.’<sup>81</sup> The imagery of graffiti, then, serves an important communicative function in making ‘visible’ again a narrative of historical reality which is not otherwise being told.

Lene Hansen’s important work on the theorisation of images offers a challenge to the notion of the visual as ‘deceptively persuasive in its immediacy and cutting short deliberative process in its mobilization of the populace, a perspective that has defined Security Studies in the past’.<sup>82</sup>

Graffiti makes visible not only places, narratives, and critical debate, but also marginalised people. As illustrated in Figure 6, in which a woman fenced by the barbed wire of a war zone or refugee camp appears to us as if through a window, the content of graffiti can make visible marginalised people who are otherwise invisible to or forgotten by society. It has long been understood that visual portraits have the capacity to metaphorically ‘make present’ the persons they represent.<sup>83</sup> In addition to their subjects, graffiti also records the presence and agency of its writers in a way distinct from other forms of art.<sup>84</sup> As an illicit activity, the production of graffiti implies risk and, when its aim is the greater societal good, a kind of ethical commitment. Within the context of the social

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78 Ibid, p. 14.

79 Ibid, p. 9.

80 Ibid, pp. 9–10.

81 Ibid, p. 16.

82 Hansen, ‘Theorizing the image for Security Studies’, p. 52.

83 On the dual status of the image as representation and presence, see especially Belting, ‘Image, Medium, Body’.

84 Schacter, ‘An Ethnography of Iconoclasm,’ pp. 37–42, on graffiti as a form of agency and its ritualistic, performative dimension.

and political consciousness graffiti attempts to foster, this commitment can register as a form of civic agency: an indication of the possibility of resistance to the prevailing state of affairs. It is for this reason that many artists are ambivalent to or reject attempts to appropriate their artwork, because it shifts the agency from non-state independence to collusion with the state, thereby calling into question the authenticity of the message.<sup>85</sup>

A premise of this article and its attempt to expand the field of strategic communications is that every form of communication has a distinctive ontology or constitution, which in turn determines operation and potential impact. We have considered the material ground of graffiti as it is mediated by and transforms the urban fabric, where it has a socio-spatial effect. Its discursive, dialogic structure is likewise important to its impact in creating public forums for exchange in the absence of institutional structures. As Hansen has argued in the context of political cartoons, ‘performative genres [...] gain their authority not from documenting an external reality, but through the productive force of the visual articulation itself; it does not transmit a situation, but acts on and into it’.<sup>86</sup>

Many of the images of Athens are dedicated to individuals who have lost their lives to police violence, or to the universal human being living under threat—whether refugee or Athenian citizen. As cultural geographer Edward Casey has articulated, public memory is closely tied to specific places, which in certain cases embody the memory itself. Beyond the recording of persons and events, graffiti also presents and provokes discussion of social and political realities that are otherwise suppressed in the mainstream media or lacking in public institutions, opening a much-needed space for dialogue.

Among the different kinds of spaces graffiti activates, central to graffiti’s political efficacy is a dialogic or discursive realm of civic participation: what has been called the public sphere. In certain respects, the function of this realm is analogous to Sennett’s idea of the town-square or agora. The concept is most fully developed in the political theory of Jürgen Habermas and what he calls ‘communicative action’.<sup>87</sup> The public sphere describes a realm of social life, accessible to all individuals, in which rational communication takes place and public opinion is formed, free from extraneous influence or pressure. As Nancy Fraser writes in a recent critique and development of the concept: ‘It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs,

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85 As graffiti has become recognised as an art form, its creators are placed in a bind between recognition and appropriation for aims at odds with its original intent and function. Arguably there is also a neutralizing effect in museumification as graffiti is enlisted as historical document.

86 Hansen, ‘Theorizing the image for Security Studies’, p. 60.

87 For Habermas’s later use of the category of the public sphere, see *The Theory of Communicative Action, vol 2, Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, (trans.) Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state. The public sphere in Habermas's sense is also conceptually distinct from the official economy; it is not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations.<sup>88</sup>

Habermas describes the historic emergence of a public sphere in Europe of the eighteenth century with the construction of physical sites such as public parks, meeting halls, and coffee houses, as well as institutions such as publishing houses and libraries. Such a sphere, which offered a space between the power of the state and private life, allowed for gatherings and discussion critical to the exercise of political activity at the heart of democracy, where civil society could blossom. Habermas charts the loss of this realm and its function with the rise of modernity, when money and power 'colonize the lifeworld', displacing more 'communicative forms of solidarity'.<sup>89</sup> Invoking Habermas's theory, cultural anthropologist Rafael Schacter has recently argued that graffiti, as it institutes a space for a particular kind of civic exchange, effectively serves to re-create this 'lost' sphere.<sup>90</sup> Athens artist Bleeps describes his work by invoking a similar claim: 'It is not just a reclamation of the public space but [...] more a reinstatement of the public sphere. The properties I choose to create are usually ramshackle, from the neoclassical period, the mid 19<sup>th</sup> early 20<sup>th</sup> century', he explains. 'Through my art I delicately borrow from the public sphere. I add a discreet depiction of my view on various topics, including politics. This type of art is not immaculate but [rather] associated with an idealism springing from the notion of the multitude.'<sup>91</sup>

While Schacter sees in certain types of graffiti the potential to mobilise rational dialogue and consensus-building around issues of critical social and political importance, he also recognises its more disruptive forms.<sup>92</sup> Combining wide-ranging ethnographic research with a sophisticated array of theory across disciplines, Schacter makes a compelling case for understanding graffiti as both ornament and order. In some cases, it is consensual and in others, dissensual or what he terms 'agonistic'. In other words, graffiti and its messages can flow within the rhythm of its urban environment or it can aim to destroy or deface it. Arguably, in both cases graffiti institutes a form of

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88 Fraser, Nancy, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, №. 25/26, (1990): 57.

89 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol 2, p. 336.

90 Schacter, *Ornament and Order*, pp. 55ff.

91 Online: <http://www.huckmagazine.com/art-and-culture/art-2/street-artist-responding-greeces-social-turmoil/>.

92 On graffiti as 'agonistic ornamentation' see Schacter, *Ornament and Order*, pp. 91–129.



public-facing address that encourages wider engagement.<sup>93</sup> In addition to a sphere of Habermasian rational consensus, then, we should consider graffiti's potential to produce multiple 'counterpublics' or oppositional networks of communication that are vital to the diversity of opinion that make up democratic exchange.<sup>94</sup> As a creative form, graffiti might be understood in the poetic, world-making capacity that Michael C. Warner describes: 'Public discourse [...] is poetic. By this I mean not just that it is self-organizing, a kind of entity created by its own discourse, nor even that this space of circulation is taken to be a social entity, but that in order for this to happen all discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts



Figure 6. [bleeps.gr](http://bleeps.gr), 'Homelands of the Deprived'. Keramikos district, Athens (public domain image).

<sup>93</sup> Avramidis examines the idea of graffiti as a form of public address, drawing upon Kurt Iveson who redefines the public sphere in terms of the spatial 'affordances' of the city. See Avramidis, 'Mapping the Geographical and Spatial Characteristics of Politicized Urban Art', pp. 186–88.

<sup>94</sup> Avramidis, 'Mapping the Geographical and Spatial Characteristics of Politicized Urban Art', pp. 189–91. See also Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', p. 67.

to circulate, and it must attempt to realize that world through address.<sup>95</sup> More recently, Fraser has extended this Habermasian concept further to consider the role of ‘subaltern counterpublics’ as ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests’—a description that seems particularly resonant in the realm of graffiti.<sup>96</sup>

The networks that produce graffiti are also forms of solidarity, which, communicated to a wider public, invite a broader participation in the activation of the civic realm. The purposeful inclusion of the suffering and vulnerable in society in these actions may provide a counter-argument to recent critique of Habermasian theory, on the point that its model of communication as a form of praxis fails to account for the ‘experiences and needs of corporeal, vulnerable human beings who are part of the material world.’<sup>97</sup> Here we might again invoke Fraser’s argument that the idea of the public sphere should be one that ‘provides the conceptual condition of possibility for the revisionist critique of its imperfect realization.’<sup>98</sup> In other words, conversation in the public sphere must allow not only for consensus building but also for recognition of diverse perspectives, self-criticism, and the maturation of ideas.

### **Re-Presenting the City: Graffiti, Agency, and Visibility**

In thinking about graffiti’s role in actively recreating a socially inclusive public sphere, we can draw upon the following insights by philosopher Judith Butler. The public sphere is ‘constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere by appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, as a way of establishing whose lives will be marked as lives, and whose lives will count as deaths.’<sup>99</sup> This appearance or perception of the public sphere is an example of a shared meaning which is open to interpretation and renegotiation by all actors—state and non-state—the result of which will have an impact on the reality of the public sphere.

The significance of graffiti’s performative dimension might be unfolded further. Insofar as its production entails risk, political graffiti carries with it not only a sense of commitment to something larger than oneself, it also communicates an internalisation of a specific lived experience or perception. In the words of Political Zoo: ‘We have an idea of a

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95 Warner, Michael C., ‘Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated)’, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 88, №. 4 (November 2002): 422.

96 Fraser, Nancy, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere’, p. 68.

97 Fluck, Matthew, ‘The best there is? Communication, objectivity and the future of International Relations Theory’, *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 20, issue 1 (2012): 56–79.

98 Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere’, note 15, p. 79.

99 Butler, Judith, *Precarious Life: The powers of mourning and violence*, (London: Verso, 2004), xx–xi.



Figure 7. Graffiti in the Exarcheia district. Athens, July 2016 (photo by the author).

different society, different power dynamics, and different human interactions. [We] don't like to give a name to that: it is not anarchy, not communism, it is what we imagine and paint on the wall.<sup>100</sup> This idea of a vision that cannot be articulated but is understood by the target audience demonstrates the power of shared meanings, reinforcing the sense of solidarity and community behind graffiti communication. Whether as critique of prevailing conditions or expression of solidarity, communication through graffiti is based on a vision of how society or civic life should be. In this regard, graffiti has a double effect: creating both a sense of engaged presence and a re-presentation of the city: an enlivened, image-rich, and imaginary city that stands opposed to the current condition. Arguably, the creation of such a milieu can have a positive, socio-psychological effect in areas under duress, fostering the conditions for civic participation and agency. As graffiti overwrites the city with images and messages that re-present the reality of its socio-political crisis to the public, paradoxically, it contributes to the restoration of the democratic image of Athens the city would like to preserve in the historic and mythic symbols it protects.

100 Interview in Tsilimpounidi and Walsh, 'Painting human rights', pp. 80–1.

## Conclusion

### Appropriation by the State: Graffiti as 'Soft Power'

Graffiti, as a 'horizontal' mode of expression, provides a significant example of a strategy that derives its authenticity and power from the people, but is increasingly promoted by institutions and states that recognise its positive effects in embattled or derelict areas. As a tacit acknowledgment of the power and centrality of graffiti, the Greek government and cultural institutions have responded both by allowing its production (within certain limits) and by appropriating graffiti as an 'art' for State use. The strategic importance of urban space, and the impact of graffiti within this space, is further evident from the state's attempted appropriation of graffiti in Athens. Increasingly, city authorities in Athens are commissioning public graffiti, with the Athens School of Fine Arts sponsoring classes on street painting.<sup>101</sup> Elsewhere, real estate developer Oliaros is consciously using mural art to gentrify areas of the city. The state appears to openly concede the symbolic and strategic importance of the graffiti in its commissioning of pieces. An adviser to the city mayor stated that, 'once graffiti becomes commissioned art, it is a signal of the beginning of the end of the financial or social crisis that a city has gone through'. Equally, the way an artist responds to the state's commissioning such art reveals his or her own intentions. Artists resent that their work is being 'whitewashed' and see it as an attempt to neutralise and control their messages.<sup>102</sup> This contest over the ownership of graffiti art is a reflection of the larger battle to control the meaning of the art, and therefore control the influence it has on those navigating the space it occupies.

In addition to a form of strategic communications in an urban context, graffiti, as a product of culture, might be understood as a form of soft power.<sup>103</sup> Recent scholarship has argued the importance of the affective dimension of this kind of influence as it gains strength from 'audiences' affective investments in the images of identity that it produces'.<sup>104</sup> While the problem of measurement of this influence is challenging, specifically in terms of the causal impact of images, it must be reconsidered in different terms if the field of strategic communications is to engage with images. Hansen has been at the forefront of providing compelling arguments in this regard, insisting that: 'the post-positivist epistemological ambition [...] is not one of testing, either against the empirical or other explanations, but to provide a set of theoretically derived arguments that lead to concepts and distinctions that can be used in empirical analysis.

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101 Alderman, 'Across Athens'.

102 Ibid.

103 A concept influential to International Relations theory, as formulated by Joseph S. Nye.

104 Solomon, Ty, 'The affective underpinnings of soft power', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20.3 (2014): 720.

The challenge is thus not to test the theory, but to engage it, both at the level of the soundness of its theoretical assumptions and through further empirical applications'.<sup>105</sup> Her proposal that the visual should be examined as an 'ontological-political condition' to be analyzed, rather than a 'variable to be measured' is also relevant here. The positive socio-psychological effects of graffiti, while difficult to measure, may be among its strongest features. In areas under crisis or siege, graffiti strategically communicates not only messages, but also active resistance to the established order and the hope of transformation. Promising lines of inquiry in this regard are those that extend Nye's original conception of soft power in terms of assets or capabilities to think more broadly about how influence works, particularly as it involves strategic narratives.<sup>106</sup>

Finally, we might consider the role graffiti might play in mitigating conflict. While it is at times continuous with protest that gives way to violence, it is also a non-violent means of expressing dissent. If the essence of democracy lies in 'displacing conflict and difference from the realm of violence to a more peaceable, deliberative realm', as Sennett has argued, then graffiti, like the cities it shapes, may play a significant role in fostering civic agency at the foundation of democratic process.<sup>107</sup>

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105 Hansen, 'Theorizing the image for Security Studies', p. 69.

106 Roselle, Laura and Alister Miskimmon, 'Strategic narrative: A new way to understand soft power', *Media, War & Conflict*, Vol. 7(1) (2014): 70–84.

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