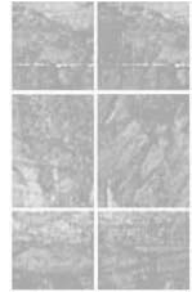


# 'Welcome to the civilization of fear': on political graffiti heterotopias in Greece in times of crisis



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## ABSTRACT

Drawing upon ethnographical research carried out in Greek cities, this article discusses the use of political graffiti as a creative, playful response to the economic depression, social upheavals and precariousness surrounding the writers and as an act of civil disobedience and political protest in the context of the Greek economic crisis. The graffiti creation releases a flood of cultural responses to the crisis and gives an insight into the lived experience endured by the Greek people faced with the gloomy conditions of a society in crisis. The analysis traces the ways in which activists and unaligned writers turn their attention to the creative and expressive potential of graffiti and articulate cultural heterotopias on the visual landscape of Greek cities. Spatial politics allow distinctive political voices to transform the material dimensions of urban life in meaningful visual expression. The act of doing graffiti in the dystopia of crisis shows the desire of grassroots artists and cultural activists to use their creative capacities to overcome the unfavourable material conditions of their existence and to build alternative counter-hegemonic spaces of representation in the urban landscapes, challenging austerity policies and the existing social order.

## KEYWORDS

Crisis • cultural wars • Greece • heterotopias • political graffiti • protest • resistance

## INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of protest graffiti on the walls has become a striking feature of the visual landscape of Greek cities during the period of economic crisis, constructing a space of symbolic exchange where artists, unnamed writers

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and political groups publicly expose their ideas and imageries. Political graffiti constitutes an alternative urban geography that stands in direct competition with the political narratives expounded by the mainstream mass media and the governments that implemented the strict austerity policies under the supervision of the so called Troika, a newly formed tripartite committee composed of the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund.

Drawing upon ethnographical research carried out in Greek cities, this article discusses the evolution of a distinctive kind of political graffiti, in the context of the Greek economic crisis. The graffiti creation releases a flood of cultural responses to the crisis and gives us insight into the lived experience of the Greek people faced with the issues of precariousness, impoverishment, social exclusion and unemployment. The analysis traces the ways in which the 'precariat', various political formations and graffiti art communities turn their attention to the creative and expressive potential of graffiti and articulate cultural heterotopias on the visual landscape so as to negotiate politically and aesthetically issues of the present crisis.

The ethnographic research was carried out from May 2010 to November 2013 in six Greek cities: Athens, Thessaloniki, Volos, Heraklion, Chania and Rethymnon, especially in areas of inner city and working class districts where the presence of political graffiti is evident. My attention focused on Athens, the capital of Greece, where the most distinctive locations of political graffiti exist. The corpus of research material consists of 1100 graffiti-related documents, including photographs taken by the author and visual examples found in graffiti community sites on the internet, field notes and five biographical interviews with graffiti writers in Athens. My observation and discussion with key informants opened space to gain a rapport with a variety of graffiti writers and their structures of meanings. Although systematic analysis of the biographical material is beyond the scope of this study, I took into consideration the voice of the writers, which, to some extent, is embedded in my interpretation.

The subject of political graffiti includes a tremendous spectrum of topics, ranging from the protest voices of outraged individuals to political comments and social criticism, and from obscene suggestions or vulgar expressions to utopian and existential quests. The analytical focus is on political graffiti directly related to the gloomy conditions of crisis and therefore existential graffiti dealing with affect, emotion and expressive individualism are not included in this analysis. The political graffiti of crisis falls into three main thematic categories.

The first category, *protest* graffiti, refers to the crisis, criticizing the harsh austerity measures, the country's patronage under the Troika, as well as the authoritarian governance of the country subverting dominant political discourses and inciting people to oppose the ever-mounting repressive policies. The second, *revolt* graffiti, are those highly anti-systemic graffiti that seek to mobilize people to acts of civil disobedience, inciting oppressed people to

trigger a mass uprising against neoliberal policies of austerity, and sometimes the capitalist system itself. The third category is the *conflict* graffiti that deal with issues of political strife and ideological conflict during the time of memoranda, articulating a space of dialogical communication on the urban surfaces among writers with different political views (e.g. fascist and antifascist conflicts, political juxtaposition regarding the migration issue, or disputes within the progressive camp).

Critical juxtaposition drawing from the international literature on political graffiti and a variety of ethnographic sources provides a basis for a sociological investigation of the political and aesthetic functions of the politicized graffiti in Greece. Using a thematic content analysis, this study examines from a cultural sociological perspective the visual palimpsest of the political graffiti that emerged during the Greek economic crisis and the role that they play, not only in expressing alternative or deviant political understandings, but also in mobilizing oppressed people to be involved in political action.

Writings on walls are closely linked to broader cultural, temporal and social contexts that impact on their uses and perceptions (Carrington, 2009: 411). Political graffiti deployed as a means of resistance are themselves developed within the specific space of repression and the constraints and possibilities that it entails (Pettet, 1996: 140). In this sense, the analysis pays attention to the specific context of the Greek financial and social crisis and its socio-psychological effects on society and investigates the social spaces in which graffiti writings are embedded: political conflicts, precarious living conditions, authoritarian policies, mass demonstrations, anti-systemic collectivities, political camps and art-graffiti communities.

## **POLITICAL GRAFFITI**

Political graffiti are unsanctioned texts written on a publicly accessible surface expressing political understanding, social commentary, criticism, protest, rejection or agreement with social changes. This type of writing can be seen as a political action by means of which a writer conveys political and social messages within the realm of public debates, marking ideological boundaries and politicizing urban landscapes. Making graffiti is a meaningful activity that reveals fights over the culture, cultural wars in which activists and politicized groups attempt to make a counter-hegemonic space into a landscape (Mitchell, 2000: 136). Giving voice to grassroots movements and marginalized groups to express their political pursuits as a counterpart to mainstream discourse, political graffiti can be seen, in Foucault's (1986) terms, as cultural heterotopias, counter-hegemonic spaces of alternative ordering that exist apart from the dominant spaces of social order (Hetherington, 1997: 21; Topinka, 2010: 59).

Political graffiti involve political actions ranging from big-P-Politics (party politics and career politics) and strategies, to small-scale sub-politics driven by issues of interests connected with the everyday life of citizens (Beck,

1999; Carrington, 2009; Ferrell, 2012). Graffiti space is a striking medium used by oppressed people and contingents to express their ideas and feelings about the unpleasant situations of precariousness, insecurity and existential anxiety. As Hanauer suggests, political graffiti is a form of micro-level political discourse in which people present their political understandings and compete with political statements from other discourses. In this sense, graffiti fulfil three functions: allowing the entry into public discourse of messages regarded as marginal by other media; providing the individual with the opportunity to express controversial contents publicly; and finally offering marginal groups the possibility of expressing themselves publicly (Hanauer, 2004: 29–30, 2011: 302, 305).

Political graffiti appeared in various visual forms, ranging from pro-saic or sophisticated slogans to elegant, colourful, artistic creations. In my sources, three discrete forms of graffiti can be found: slogans, stencils and murals. Slogans are declaratory in nature, expressing a view to an audience (Halsey and Young, 2002: 169) and consist of simple phrases or words carrying a political message. Their form is constructed so that they can be easily memorized, using rhymes, advertisement cues, catchy phrases and popular song lines. Usually, their subject matter addresses contemporary political issues, criticizing mainstream media and political discourse, expressing optimistic ideas of a better future world and providing an alternative reading of political themes.

Stencil is a visual discourse that alters the texture of street experience through inventive juxtapositions of mass-mediated and local imagery (Kane, 2009: 9). It reflects a new trend within street art – what some scholars called post-graffiti, or neo-graffiti (Dickens, 2008) – that combines representational and discursive features. The distinctive highly stylized stencil technique is an exemplar of a readable iconographic style of inscription that attempts to engage directly with urban audiences using critical, intriguing and often humorous graphics in order to challenge dominant understanding and appreciation of the city (p. 14). In so doing, stencil is often highly political, used by its writers as an effective medium to express political opinions in multifarious forms of protest art.

Murals, or graffiti ‘pieces’, combine political understanding with cultural innovation, placing emphasis on the artistic process. They use at least three colours and involve several visits to the location in order to complete the piece (Lynn and Lea, 2005: 41), while their creation requires all the hallmarks associated with spray-paint art and writing abilities. The political murals respond to both aesthetic and socio-political stimuli and employ pictorial and textual elements in artistic creations that tell brief stories with direct or latent political meanings.

Political graffiti is a type of communication and expression used by people living in turbulent times. For example, French graffiti created in May 1968 gained high popularity among student protesters and the ‘speech on the

walls' created a space of symbolic exchange based on 'immediate inscriptions' that, in Baudrillard's (1981: 176) terms, were 'given and return, spoken and answered, mobile in the same space and time, reciprocal and antagonistic', constructing 'the real revolutionary media' of the time. During the last few decades, graffiti writing became a type of politicized art as part of the repertoire of collective action taking place within the realm of social and civil right movements, attracting scholars' attention. The latter have investigated the role of graffiti as a potential way of experiencing political contest and socio-economic crises, producing symbolic types of political resistance and protest. For instance, scholars and practitioners have investigated the ideological functions of political murals in the Northern Ireland conflicts between Catholics and Protestants (Goalwin, 2013; Rolston, 1994), the role of intifada graffiti in Palestine towards affirming community and resistance among Palestinians (Pettet, 1996) and of the Abu Dis graffiti in sensitizing the public over self-determination and human rights issues in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Hanauer, 2011).

Other researchers have explored young people's graffiti in Israel as a response to the particularly traumatic national event of the assassination of the Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 (Klingman and Shalev, 2001; Luzzatto and Jakobson 2001) and the cathartic function of Serbian students' graffiti during the authoritarian rule of Milosevic (Dragičević-Šešić, 2001). In North America, researchers have examined the active role of stencil in the cultural and political performance of collective memory and social change in 2007 post-crisis Argentina (Kane, 2009) and the mural movement in Nicaragua of Sandinistas as a visual representation of the revolutionary spirit of the time (Kunzle, 1995).

## **READING IN CONTEXT: THE GREEK ECONOMIC CRISIS**

The flourishing of graffiti protest art is grounded in the context of the political struggles and social turmoil during the years of the ongoing unprecedented Greek economic crisis and recession. The sovereign debt crunch with the excessively high public deficit that emerged in 2009 undermined the credibility of the country and led to escalating borrowing cost bringing the economy near to bankruptcy (Petmesidou, 2003: 598). Since the outbreak of the Greek economic crisis, two memoranda were agreed between Greece and the Troika, dictating severe austerity packages and structural changes in economy and public administration aimed at covering the country's borrowing requirements and increasing competitiveness and productivity. The memoranda committed the Greek governments to endless drastic austerity measures including heavy horizontal cuts in salaries and pensions, sweeping cuts in public health and social services, privatization of basic services and infrastructures, harsh flexibilization of labour market, shrinking social rights of employees, and increases in direct and indirect tax.

Instead of achieving fiscal consolidation and reduction of the country's public deficit, the package of savage austerity measures led the economy into a protracted deep recession and skyrocketing unemployment. The effects of austerity packages weighed heavily on low and medium income households resulting in deep impoverishment of workers and the 'ruined' middle class, upward redistribution of wealth, closure of thousands of small business and a dramatic fall in living standards for the majority of people (Matsaganis and Leventi, 2014; Michael-Matsas, 2010, 2013; Petmesidou, 2013; Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos, 2013).

The multi-faceted crisis has caused major political changes. The decisions of domestic political authorities, subordinated by international political elites and market forces, were enacted under a typical state of emergency through executive suspended laws, exceptional austerity measures and repressive policies. The collapse of the corrupt and clientelist traditional political system has brought a massive realignment of the Greek electorate away from mainstream parties and gave rise to new political actors, such as the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), a small protest party that became the main opposition in the 2012 national election and came first in the 2004 Euro-elections with 26.5 per cent of votes, the Independent Greeks, a conservative Euroscepticist party and the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, one of the most hard-core extreme right political formations in Europe. The latter found in the crisis-hidden risk society fertile ground for promoting an openly nationalist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic and anti-communist agenda, launching brutal pogroms against immigrants, racial others, anarchists, leftists and homosexuals.

The austerity policies caused strong domestic reaction with numerous general strikes, local struggles, widespread social unrest, passionate protests, civil disobedience movements and massive public demonstrations, some of which were brutally counteracted by police using tear gas and noise bombs. Under these circumstances, new forms of political collectivities emerged, such as grassroots social and solidarity economy networks, the 'I won't pay' movement of civil disobedience that called people not to pay tolls on the country's highways and unjust taxes, and the Greek *Indignados* movement in central squares throughout the country.

The Greek *Indignados* consist of thousands of people from a wide spectrum of political views. During the gatherings in the squares, especially in the central square of Athens in Syntagma, two different political discourses with various nuances within each one emerged (Douzinas, 2011: 216–219; Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos, 2013: 9). On the one hand, there was the conservative camp, including various cells of nationalist groups, articulating a 'patriotic' discourse of complaints against the influx of immigrants and/or the foreign 'occupation' of Greece, using nationalist symbols and banners with populist slogans that express outrage against a discredited class of party politicians pushing the country close to bankruptcy. On the other hand, it was an

amalgam of various groups derived from what we might call the progressive political spectrum, more prone to alternative forms of politics, employing heavily rhetorical anti-capitalist language demanding a new direction of politics out of the vicious circles of austerity. Within this palimpsest of distinctive political voices, a rich repertory of collective action was developed, including graffiti, posters, stickers, banners, squatting and politicized music concerts.

To some extent, these forms of collective action were a continuation of the anti-authoritarian movement that emerged after the killing of 15-year-old Alexandros Grigoropoulos by a police officer in Athens, in December 2008. The revolt of Greek youth was a response to the authoritarian turn of the Greek conservative government after the December events to the 'zero tolerance' doctrine, reflected in increasingly repressive policies against protesters, undocumented migrants and politicized groups that are regarded as a threat to public security and safety. It was also a landmark in the evolution of political graffiti triggering the graffiti-making throughout the country. Soon after the dreadful event, Grigoropoulos became a symbol of youth rebellion and many stencils and murals with an anti-systemic spirit and the raw texture of youthful trauma appeared in the visual landscape of Greek cities. With the outbreak of Greek depression, graffiti-making became part of the grassroots movement action repertory against the neo-liberal management of the crisis and the state repression.

Usually the language of graffiti is Greek, but foreign languages such as English, French and Italian, are also used in creations that appeared in big cities around visible locales of central areas where migrants and foreigners live and many tourists visit. The writers use the international media interest in impressive political graffiti of the Greek crisis for their own political goals, presenting pieces of their politicized street art to an international audience.

## **PROTEST GRAFFITI IN SPECIFIC LOCALES OF URBAN SURFACES**

The opposition of Greek people to the dramatic deterioration in their living conditions has been expressed in multiple ways of reaction, ranging from confrontational attitudes and radical action to more individualized expressions of anger, despair, or loneliness. The implementation of the first package of austerity measures in March 2010 was a watershed moment in the story of political graffiti in Greece. It was followed by the proliferation of slogans in urban landscapes using a prosaic style and aggressive tones against austerity policies, authorities, and financial institutions (e.g. 'Eat the rich', 'Burn the banks').<sup>1</sup> Moreover, several stencils appeared satirizing the false promises of the governing party, Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (e.g. PASOK le\$\$ is more) and the Prime Minister Georgios Papandreou who had announced that 'there is money for redistribution' a few months before the passage of the first memorandum. Writers subverted the ephemeral success story of Papandreou,

depicting him in various stencils as a passive political figure subordinated by domestic and international market forces and political elites.

The creators of murals and stencils use a sophisticated and intriguing texture to express their protest. For example, the measure of increasing the retirement age for many categories of workers becomes the subject matter of a resourceful stencil. The creator deals playfully with the nationalistic assertion that Greeks have the exclusive right to use the name Macedonia, regarding themselves as the real descendants of ancient Macedonians and of Alexander the Great. The stencil presents a surrealist dialogue, taking place on the surface of two coffins. The first coffin caption says: 'It's certain that you will work until you die' with the second responding with a sarcastic comment: 'But you are going to be buried in Greek Macedonia'. The graffiti criticizes allusively the refusal of the Greek state to recognize the constitutional name of the neighboring Republic of Macedonia<sup>2</sup> – since the name Macedonia is used by Greeks to designate one of the country provinces – to strengthen the meaning of protest against neoliberal reforms in the field of labour relationships and to slate the nationalistic vanity.

Using statements taken from traditional culture, mass media and soap operas, advertisements and state-run publicity campaigns, graffiti writers handle inversion, metaphor and allegory to transform and subvert dominant meanings. In this vein, the well-known slogan 'Live your myth in Greece', which was used by the Ministry of Tourism during the advertising campaigns of the Olympic Games of Athens, was rewritten on the shutter of a department shop as 'Live your Greece in myth', satirizing the euphoric narratives of a strong modernized, de-balkanized nation that prevailed in the mainstream of Greek society in the pre-crisis era. It is an allusive sarcasm on the success story of Greek elites concerning the alleged booming economy of a country that managed to successfully organize the 2004 Olympic Games and to gain national victories in the 2004 Euro Cup and Eurovision in 2005 and, simultaneously, continued to waste public finance on the road to bankruptcy (Kompatsiaris, 2014).

Similarly, the microcosm of the popular reality show 'The next top model' seems to have inspired the creator (Bleeps) to produce a poignantly inventive icon of a woman in lingerie with an amputated leg reading: 'Greece next economic model' (see Figure 1). This imaginative juxtaposition of image and text was invented to subvert the depictions of beauty that pervaded the 'lifestyle' world of the mainstream media during the pre-crisis era and to give an imaginative representation of a country in an emergency situation. The message of the graffiti is related to a popular narrative arguing that Greece is playing a key role as a guinea-pig in the global crisis of capitalism, with its people being used in a kind of barbaric social 'experiment' (Michael-Matsas, 2010: 500).

Another familiar theme of protest graffiti is the climate of state authoritarianism and the brutal police violence used by the Greek governments under





**Figure 1.** A graffiti piece by Bleeps presents Greece as a top-model with an amputated leg.

a 'zero tolerance' policy. This was a temporal point in the spatial politics of graffiti artists who produce counter-spaces in central roads and squares associated with mass demonstrations commenting on the political climate of time. In inner city areas, the sense of fear and insecurity in the city is illustrated in several murals, presenting variations of images of police officers depicted as pigs holding truncheons (see Figure 2) or images of tear-gassed protesters wearing protective masks. Writers employ iconic figures to represent the gloomy conditions of a society in crisis and to express artistically their sense of fear, uncertainty and precariousness. One striking example of this type of street art is a piece by Sidron, an Athenian cultural activist, depicting a protester wearing a full-face gas mask accompanied by a slogan reading 'Welcome to the civilization of fear'. The graffiti is an intriguing reminder of the violent tensions, pollution, and risk of those who feel excluded from bearable urban social life (see Figure 3).



**Figure 2.** A mural, within a constellation of slogan and tags, depicts a riot police officer as a pig holding truncheons accompanied by the acronym ACAB (All cops are bastards).



**Figure 3.** A piece by Sidron depicts a protester wearing a gas mask associated with a social commentary on the climate of uncertainty, risk and pollution of everyday life in Athens.

In their attempt to convey meaningful political messages, protest graffiti writers utilize specific locales, drawing meaning from them and provoking the interest of their readers. Thus, a corner in the centre of Athens is chosen to illustrate an iconographic stencil depicting a shield-bearing member of the riot police, accompanied by a slogan reading, 'There are police in every corner'. Variations of similar anti-authoritarian graffiti are placed around the central roads of the Greek capital, criticizing the police viciousness. A slogan, inspired by an old popular political song, says 'The road has its own police squad [*dimoiria*]', paraphrasing the popular verse of poetess Kostoula Mitropoulou 'The road had its own history [*istoria*]'. Using a historical reference to the street art in the mid-1960s,<sup>3</sup> the graffiti becomes a visual sign and an indexing element of historical display (Chmielewska, 2007: 146) and calls to mind the fighting spirit of the progressive movement of the past to raise the spirit of the contemporary revolts.

Mural artists have made their own contribution to the scene of political graffiti. A piece by the painter Costas Pliatsikas covering the whole wall of an old building represents a great political struggle between oppressed Greek people and a repressive government ruled by domestic and international leaders. At the centre of the wall the mural represents the alleged architects and the 'gendarmes' of people's wretchedness: four eminent international leaders (Merkel, Sarkozy, Berlusconi, Obama) and three heads of domestic parties of the time (Papandreou, Karamanlis, Papariga). The unexpected presence of the communist leader Papariga seems to be a visual transmission of the common criticism of leftist and anarchist circles against the political separatism of the communist party that refuses to get involved in a united front against memoranda policies organizing separate protest marches. On the right side looms an oversized, naked figure of a 'primitive'-looking woman holding a broken chain, an iconic figure that visually transforms the texture of street experience of unprivileged, poor people and their desire to break the bonds of the savage austerity. At the bottom left-hand of the piece there are two groups of protesting people in battle order opposite the riot police with a slogan on the bottom left-hand to galvanize people towards a decisive political struggle: 'Since they burnt the last breath of a country, now they demand what's left: Death [to them]'. In the bottom right-hand corner, another slogan reading 'Whoever fights the injustice must be careful not to be unjust' reminds protesters of the importance of fair political fights (see Figure 4).

The fighting spirit, which pervades the combined pictorial and textual elements of the graffiti, evidences the performative role of political graffiti in strengthening the spirit of the unprivileged people's resistance to mainstream narratives and austerity policies. Moreover, its specific location in a central road of Exarchia – the meeting point of artists, intellectuals, anarchist, communist and antifascist groups in Athens – shows the strategic significance of the appropriate spatial location in the act of creating political graffiti. The combined linguistic and pictorial element of the mural in its specific



**Figure 4.** A mural by Costas Pliatsikas pictures a political struggle between oppressed people and the mechanisms of state repression, containing two political commentaries on people resistance to neoliberal policies of crisis management and on fair social fights.

politicized space reveals the spatial politics of the graffiti artists signifying both the involvement of the actors, coming from leftist and anarchist camps, in a vivid dialogue with the voices of other writers and passers-by and their spatial conquest of the landscape.

Protest graffiti by artistic communities also use iconic figures of eminent politicians to assign meaning to visual signs and to present their political views to the wider public. In this vein, an inventive stencil by *Political Zoo*, a community of politicized stencilers, employs iconic figures of the leaders in post-Junta Greece to comment on the emergency situation of exceptional austerity measures and state authoritarianism. On the left side of the graffiti are juxtaposed successively all the prime ministers of the post-junta democracy, getting gradually shorter as we reach the last one at the time of the first memorandum. The first two figures on the left side of the stencil depicts the moderate conservative Constantinos Karamanlis the leader of the post-war right who was recalled from exile to consolidate a new institutional framework in the post-dictatorship era and the first socialist prime minister of Greece Andreas Papandreou, who followed an expansionary fiscal policy for the benefit of unprivileged people based on state spending and internal and external debt. Between the two dead leaders there is a coffin.

The next leaders are Constantinos Mitsotakis who implemented strict neoliberal reforms and Costas Simitis, a modernizer politician who led the country into the eurozone with a fast growth economy boosted by a debt-based





**Figure 5.** A stencil by Political Zoo crew portrays the spirit of state authoritarianism and the crisis of post-dictatorship leadership in modern Greece.

consumerism. It follows the figure of Costas Karamanlis (nephew of the former) who ran the country before the first memorandum era, leading it close to bankruptcy. He rests his hand on the right knee of the dictator Georgios Papadopoulos of the Junta of Colonels (1967–1974). The latter clasps a truncheon and holds under his left arm in a stranglehold the head of Georgios Papandreou, the prime minister of Greece who led the country to the vicious circles of memoranda. Under the feet of the dictator are stepping-stones where the letters Z-O-O are formed, referring to the *Political Zoo Crew* (see Figure 5).

This imaginative graffiti can be seen as a metonymic lens through which various political meanings are exposed. It is a visual representation, evident in the triumphant stare of the dictator at the democracy leaders, of a widespread political view concerning the failure of the post-dictatorship political system, the death of democracy and the restoration of state authoritarianism during the memoranda era. It is also a criticism of the country leaders, regarding them as lacking in political stature and responsible for the contemporary Greek tragedy.

## **REVOLT GRAFFITI: PLACE, HISTORY AND COUNTER-SPACES**

While popular resistance to austerity measures and state authoritarianism is the content of protest graffiti, the idea of a desirable, oncoming revolution that

challenges the existing social order seems to be the source of inspiration for militant political graffiti of revolt. Writers produce various levels of differential spaces of resistance, inciting general strikes, protest marches and mass uprisings against the authoritarian governing practices and the policies of austerity. Drawing on political motives and faith in the alleged oncoming revolt, the graffiti artists use global revolutionary evidence to incite people to the politics of resistance.

This is the case of a popular slogan chanted by Greek *Indignados* during their occupation of Syntagma Square on June 2011 that then became a stencil placed in inner city areas reading 'One magic night, like in the case of Argentina, we will see which one [of the leaders] will get on the helicopter first'. The slogan is inspired by the revolt in Argentina in 2001 when rebels forced the head of state Fernando de la Rúa to abandon the country in a helicopter, celebrating the spirit of organized resistance towards a desirable social transformation that would bring the catharsis that ousted the corrupt rulers from the country.

In the gatherings of Greek *Indignandos* in Syntagma, graffiti of revolts in English, along with raised flags and banners adorned with revolutionary symbols of southern Europe and Latin America countries, displayed the spirit of a revolutionary internationalism. Variations of stencils (e.g. 'I was born in Tunisia, I grew up in Egypt, I fought in Yemen, now I'm sacrificing myself in Libya, my name is Freedom'). Similarly, striking slogans in highly politicized spaces incite people to acts of civil disobedience and rebellion: 'Wake up, rise up', 'Wake up, fight now'.

Slogans signed by anarchist groups employ highly aggressive expression and strong anti-systemic rhetoric (e.g. 'Poor people rise up in arms', 'Everybody out in the streets', 'Death to the bosses') and sometimes more poetic language, directing the interest of the people towards a militant art: 'Art is born in the barricades', 'Action replaces tears'. Despite the limited influence of anarchists in front-stage Greek politics, they have massive presence in, sometimes violent, protest marches and occupy a prominent position in graffiti scenes of revolt, functioning as the vanguard of a missionary uprising against the protracted austerity measures and, more generally, the domestic and international systemic forces of capitalism and the state system.

The technique of stencil offers an opportunity for graffiti writers to create unpredictable and provocative pictures. In this sense, Garfield, the famous cartoon cat figure, is presented as a terrorist (or a rebel in the graffiti writers' voices) with the logo 'Burn Athens' written on its body so as to incite people to get involved in violent political actions. Similarly, the figure of Karagiozis, a popular satiric hero of traditional Greek and Turkish shadow theatre, is depicted as a bomber wearing a mask and holding a Molotov cocktail in his long hand. The rebellious version of Karagiozis has evidently been inspired by an invented cultural tradition of revolt that, according to the Marxist sociologist Damianakos, can be traced back to the cultural creations (e.g. *rebetika*, *cleftika*, brigands' songs, and the shadow theatre) of the underprivileged classes, thus offering graffiti writers a chance to claim continuity



**Figure 6.** A graffiti depicting an unusual monstrous figure underlines the importance of effective political struggle beyond the limitation of ordinary society.

with earlier traditions of rebellions, mobilizing support for their political goals (Damianakos, 1987; Zaimakis, 2010: 12). In the same vein, in Exarchia a mural depicts a cartoon character holding a small Molotov cocktail with a caption inciting people to rebellion: 'Ready to act' (see Figure 6). These forms of graffiti seem to follow an international visual discourse concerning figures of rebels, evident for example in the widespread stencil of a masked Zapatista rebel and in the figure of Sandino, a rebel hero in the 1920s and 1930s, in the murals of Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

Revolt-graffiti writers bring into play history, place and public ceremonies to make the outrage of their art attractive and provocative, employing elements of a nostalgic tradition of revolt in Greek society to empower the spirit of resistance in contemporary contexts. A striking example was a slogan placed on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Liberty Square in the town of Heraklion the night before the 2012 annual celebration of the Polytechnic revolt, reading: 'It is Occupation, it is a Junta and it is November'. Connecting the memory of the two great historical events in modern Greece (the resistance against the German Occupation and the Polytechnic student uprising in November 1973 against the Junta of the Colonels) with the contemporary political struggles, it incites people to resist austerity policies, saturating the action of resistance with a heroic spirit. In the same way, a well-known slogan chanted in protest marches that has been inscribed on walls repeats the most famous slogan of the Polytechnic uprising against the Colonels' dictatorship ('Bread, education, liberty'), adding the line 'The junta did not end in 1973'.

The graffiti of revolt seems to be embedded in the context of the grass-roots movements' repertory of action that seeks to incite a spirit of resistance and acts of disobedience during the Greek economic crisis. They are, in Lynn and Lea's (2005: 43) terms, utterances in a tangible form, visible records of a temporal event and intervention in the social conditions. Graffiti has a performative function in the effort of political activists to subvert mainstream political narratives and to create their own spaces of representations that have the potential to disrupt existing power relations. Under the sign of protest-revolt graffiti, there is a spatial politics of a visualized city. Political activists mainly from radical left and anarchist camps employ iconic political figures, indexes of historical events and symbols, specific locales in the appropriate current time associated with contemporary political struggles to assign meanings to their creations and to provoke the interest of their readers.

### **CONFLICT GRAFFITI: CULTURAL WAR ON THE WALLS**

The economic crisis and recession have made the Greek political system fluid and changeable, while several political conflicts have occurred, including fierce confrontations between Euro-federalists and Euro-sceptics, memorandum supporters and the anti-memoranda camp, modernizers and populists, internationalist and nationalists, fascists and anti-fascists. Conflicts have also appeared in the interior of both left and right traditional political camps, concerning ideological disputes and current political affairs. All these conflicts pervade political graffiti that constitute an important cultural terrain which codifies larger political struggles and ideological tensions and illustrates a cultural war over political questions at a time of crisis (Mitchell, 2000).

A remarkable issue that has attracted the interest of graffiti communities is the deep-seated struggle between the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and groups of anarchists and the extra-parliamentary left, concerning the political hegemony of the anti-capitalist camp and the prospect of transcending capitalist domination. During mass demonstrations on 11 October 2011, this political strife was set off in the context of the fierce clashes between the protesters of the All-Workers' Militant Front (PAME), which leans towards the KKE, and groups of hooded anarchists and supporters of the 'I won't pay' movement, when the latter tried to occupy the Greek Parliament, removing a fence put up by the police. Although the Communist Party has virulently opposed austerity policies and country control by an EU of 'monopolists', it was against violent and spontaneous uprisings. The choice of KKE to 'protect the parliament', as this event is being referred to, excited the political imagination of some anarchist writers, provoking widespread stencils and slogans criticizing the alleged suspicious role of the communist party. A noteworthy example is a sexist subverting stencil depicting the leader of KKE, Aleka Pappariga, as a sexy, provocative caricature in showy red clothes and black underpants that are stamped with the communist symbols of the hammer and sickle. A caption saying 'They tell



us a lot of lies' complements the subversive message of the graffiti. This is a remarkable example of contradictory messages that often appeared in the scenes of revolutionary graffiti, where violent or sexist elements can be blended with anti-capitalist rhetoric or the advocacy of human rights.

During the years of economic crisis, the rise of Golden Dawn was followed by a new type of graffiti with nationalist and xenophobic content. Following the spatial tactics of Golden Dawn to disseminate their symbols and political views in working-class and deprived urban areas, where many of their supporters and activists live, fascist writers use prosaic, racist and stereotypical slogans ('Greece belongs to Greeks', 'Politicians are tramps and traitors', 'Work for Greek workers, not immigrants') accompanied by fascist, nationalist, and Nazi symbols). Moreover, they recall historical evidence and symbols from the bloody Greek civil war to create graffiti with anti-communist content strengthening the patriotic morale of their public.

The presence of fascist graffiti on the walls incites strong reactions from art-graffiti communities, anti-fascist, leftist and anarchist collectivities. The anti-fascist spirit is evident in a mural depicting an unusual monstrous figure saying 'When fascism rises up ordinary life has to blow up'. The graffiti offers an allusive criticism against 'ordinary' society that is unable to tackle the fascist threat reminding viewers of the importance of effective political struggle against the racist and xenophobic activity of extreme-right groups (see Figure 7).

Within the iconosphere of Greek cities, a cultural war has been taking place through a fierce confrontational dialogue on the walls. During my ethnographic research, I noted some incidents worth mentioning. A slogan inscribed outside the old town border of Rethymnon saying 'Out with the fascists from the neighbourhoods' was re-written by members of the so-called Nationalist Organization of Rethymno as 'The Fascists in the neighbourhoods' some days later. Similarly, in a central street of the same town, the slogan 'Fascism never again' was modified as 'Fascism again' and on a wall of the local university a slogan inspired by the militant poetry of Volf Birman reading 'One way or another the earth will turn red and black' incited the prompt answer by a neo-Nazi writer who inscribed, next to the previous slogan, the catchphrase 'Nothing like it' accompanied by a Golden Dawn nationalist symbol (see Figure 8).

In the same vein, in the working-class area of Korydallos in Piraeus, a humorous stencil depicts the figure of Yosemite Sam, an American animated cartoon character, saying 'Fascist hunting allowed all year round' while a few blocks down a fascist slogan employs racist vocabulary warning: 'Gallows for the *unwashed*'.<sup>4</sup> In the Moschato suburb of Piraeus, a racist slogan stresses a familiar catchphrase in nationalist discourse: 'You are born a Greek, you cannot become one', while a more sophisticated slogan, inscribed a few metres away, answers back: 'Contrary to the fascist threat, classes are not measured by colour and race'. The entry of Golden Dawn in the visual confrontations of the graffiti scene reveals the strategy of fascist and neo-Nazi formations to



**Figure 7.** A mural incites people to make a determined stand against fascism.



**Figure 8.** A slogan inspired by left-wing, revolutionary poetry and right next to it a negative verbal response accompanied by the symbol of Golden Dawn.

infiltrate everyday life, extending their ideological influence into the spatial environment and challenging the longstanding cultural hegemony of leftist or anarchist political graffiti in the urban landscapes.

The migration issue and the increasing social control of migrants by the state apparatuses is another political struggle that inspires the imagination of conflict graffiti. The nationalist writers present political views through populist ethnocentric slogans: 'We need work, not immigration,' 'Out with the foreigners.' Left-wing activists respond, employing general philosophical musings and heavily rhetorical metaphors informed by international anti-racist literature. This is the case of a slogan saying 'Migrants are the wretched of the earth' that is obviously inspired by the well-known psychiatrist Franz Fanon's book with the same title.

The sympathy of leftist and antifascist writers with migrants, who are similar victims of the intensification of repressive governance, is also expressed in various slogans. For instance, the deployment of minefields and the construction by the Greek state of a barrier wall on the Greek-Turkish border along the Evros river in order to prevent the entry of undocumented migrants into the country, inspired the poignant slogan reading: 'The security of every European citizen has been built at the Evros minefields and at the bottom of the Aegean Sea.' It is a caustic commentary on a policy that led to scores of deaths by drowning as migrants tried to cross the border by sea.

In the context of striking political events, graffiti action provides an opportunity for the actors to communicate immediately with their audience, carrying their visual narratives. The assassination of anti-fascist rapper Pavlos Fyssas, also known as Killan P, by a member of Golden Dawn on 18 September 2013 sparked antifascist protests and demonstrations all over the country. The tragic event triggered widespread graffiti-making including memorial slogans (e.g. 'Pavlos, we know that you will keep singing for us from up above') and murals adorned with artistic images of Fyssas, expressing ordinary people's, and the rap and artistic communities' feeling of loss. Moreover, antifascist groups portrayed many slogans connecting the regrettable incident with current political debates: 'If you'd have reacted to immigrant murders, Pavlos may be alive,' 'Rip Killan-P, smash fascism.'

The Fyssas assassination was followed by a revenge attack from a previously unknown terrorist organization, the so-called 'Military People's Revolutionary Forces', on 29 October. The victims were two young men (Manolis Kapelonis and Giorgos Fountoulis), members of Golden Dawn, who were shot at close range outside its local office in a suburb of Athens by two men of the extreme left organization. Among the direct reactions of far right-wingers was the inscription of various slogans in the memory of the victims, exposing menacing messages ('Manos and Giorgos are heroes, the nemesis will crush you'). In many cases, the cultural wars on the walls act as a catalyst in the performance of collective memory and the expression of political goals on both sides of the conflict.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS: SPATIAL POLITICS AND GRAFFITI HETEROTOPIAS

As Stephanie Kane (2009: 24) notes, the reading of writing on the walls is an approach towards capturing what Raymond Williams (1977: 132) calls 'structures of feeling', namely meanings and values as they are actually lived and felt. The political graffiti have been constructed within the socio-political environment of a society reeling from neoliberal austerity measures and the constraints and possibilities that they entail. In this space of repression, multiple reactions of Greeks towards crisis emerged, ranging from a passive adjustment to the neoliberal discourse of austerity and political apathy to radical activism and acts of disobedience. Crisis signifies a vicious circle of austerity, deep recession, uncertainty and precariousness, and simultaneously opens a window to imaginative expression by graffiti activists to use the walls as a medium for creative resistance to the unfavorable modifications of surrounding environments caused by neoliberal policies.

In so doing, they formulate, in Foucault's (1986: 25–26) terms, their own heterotopias of (various level) deviations, namely, counter-sites where individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm place their cultural creations that unlike ordinary cultural places are 'on the other side of the glass'. The space of political graffiti seems to function 'as expressive and constitutive of disruptive discourses' (Wesselman, 2013: 22) that establish alternative conventions and orders challenging dominant spaces and mainstream political narratives, often claiming a revolutionary urban landscape.

In the era of austerity, political graffiti create multifarious heterotopian counter-sites on urban landscapes, utilizing, as Don Mitchell (2004: 54) points out, the social power that they entail and the potential to negotiate issues of larger material struggles. Eurosceptic voices construct visual heterotopias against the market-driven economy of EU, the draconian austerity measures and even the reformist agenda of the aficionados of a possible euro-communist utopia. Fascist and neo-Nazi writers project illusions of national grandeur in an imagined paradise of a Greek community. Extra parliamentary and anarchist writers celebrate the spirit of revolt, criticize capitalist authoritarian bio power in a state of emergency and subvert the reformist agenda of the rising left-wing parties.

Research findings show the existence of three categories of graffiti writers. The first category is graffiti communities consisting of public-minded muralists and stencillers who embody political issues in their artist creations. The majority of them are occasionally involved in political affairs and a few are members of political collectivities. They employ linguistic, iconic, aesthetic and artistic elements exhibiting unconventional readings of the crisis in sophisticated creations.

The second category comprises political activists, derived from the edges of the spectrum of political views, namely anarchists, the

extra-parliamentary left, radical or orthodox communists, anti-fascists, fascists and nationalists. They use the walls as a public *agora*, a political forum by means of which political views are exchanged and interaction among political groups takes place. SYRIZA writers exhibit customary political slogans expressing anti-memoranda theses, while activists leaning towards the party's more radical leftist factions write more polemic slogans against the European elites and the eurozone, thus challenging the official thesis of the party. Members of the extra-parliamentary left portray a clear anti-capitalist agenda, mobilizing the masses in an everyday struggle against austerity policies and towards a possible communist utopia. Anarchists voice their criticism of power, social injustice and state surveillance so as to create a playful celebratory enactment of alternative spatial community oriented to a living example of genuine direct democracy (Ferrell, 2012: 1690). Leftist and anarchist graffiti are concentrated in urban spaces of political importance where anti-memoranda political activity signifies the spatial conquest of counter-spaces in inner city areas. The graffiti artists employ slogans and stencils which range from highly aggressive messages to more playful and allusive criticism. Fascist writers choose deprived working-class areas and use aggressive slogans employing an openly xenophobic, racist, sexist and fascist discourse.

Unaligned, often marginalized or precariat people, who transform the texture of the devastating experience of fear, poverty and constant insecurity in visual signs, belong to the third category. This kind of graffiti appears in various locations of the city (central squares, neighbourhoods, central roads, parks, subways) where a dialogical communication between graffiti writers takes place. Usually, they use slogans and less often stencils and include themes associated with poverty, precarious existence, unemployment, misery and insecurity. These graffiti reflect a more emotional and individualistic response to the crisis.

Graffiti writing reveals the collapse of a corrupted political system. The few pre-crisis political slogans of the dominant political parties have faded or been deleted without being replaced by new ones and moderate political formations have no expression on the contemporary political graffiti stage. For the supporters of the reformist agenda of the bipartisan conservative government, graffiti is an unsanctioned text incompatible with the civilized status of respectable society. On the other hand, graffiti writers negotiate the walls as an alternative political geography that portrays political accounts and questions that stand in direct competition with mainstream discourse, which ignores or denies their understandings.

Spatial politics allows distinctive political voices to transform the material dimensions of urban life in meaningful visual expression. Writers employ various tactics to represent their experience of the crisis, constructing differential spaces in specific urban surfaces where alternative narratives, visual imagination and political questioning undermine the narrative of the neoliberal management of crisis. Graffiti writers use prominent political figures, popular heroes, historical events and symbols, narratives of

contemporary struggles, revolutionary vocabulary and common political slogans to assign meaning to visual narratives in order to achieve political message passing effectively across different types of publics. The art of timing in political graffiti is important. Writers make their creations during times of political tensions and thus political murders, mass demonstrations, general strikes, the passage of anti-labour legislation and of memoranda laws trigger widespread political graffiti-making.

In a country where no solution is provided other than austerity (Michael-Matsas, 2013), the heterotopian sites of the political graffiti can be seen as a multidimensional mirror of a society in crisis, reflecting the agony of grassroots artists and cultural activists living precariously for an unknown future. It shows the desire of the writers to use their creative capacities to overcome the unfavourable material conditions of their existence, building their own counter-hegemonic sites of alternative representations in the urban landscapes. Graffiti-writing is an action of real or imagined resistance to the deadlocks of neoliberal austerity policies and a meaningful social practice that has much to tell us about the structure of feeling of Greek society during the time of memoranda.

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## **NOTES**

1. As expected, the literal translations fail to capture the word play, invention and imagination that characterize the inscriptions and slogans included here.
2. Greece does not recognize the name 'Republic of Macedonia' of its neighbouring country and at the international level employs the name FYROM, namely the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia that is also used by the United Nations Organization.
3. The poem of Mitropoulou was set to music by Manos Loizos, a well-known left-wing composer.
4. Extreme-right groups ironically use the word 'unwashed' to mock the slovenly appearance of anarchist and Leftist groups.

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