

# Writing the History of Political Graffiti

## Graphic rebellion and the appropriation of public space (19<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> c.)

“We erase them (it’s not easy), we arrest graffiti artists and put them in prison, we ban the sale of markers or spray cans – nothing will do, they make their own and start again every night.”<sup>1</sup>

Graffiti – understood as a hand-written message inscribed on an exposed wall, in a place that is accessible to a public<sup>2</sup> – is the subject of growing interest among the social sciences. Anthropologists, sociologists, art historians and some historians have highlighted the specific issues of this form of communication, expressed through an original medium that has for long remained marginalized.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, graffiti is still only occasionally studied by historians, often on the fringes of studies devoted to social or political movements. Despite their ephemeral nature, for the effect of time is often accelerated by hasty attempts to remove them, it is still possible to capture graffiti via historical sources (police archives, media). Therefore, one of the first methodological challenges here is to interrogate the rationale behind these collections, as well as the very act of collecting graffiti, alongside the biased reading of police authorities, research and artist collectives. One can notably think of Brassai and the Surrealists who chased the scripts of the street well before the advent of *street art*. Graffiti therefore constitutes a specific object whose methodological challenges still need to be clarified through a collective and comparative reflection, to which we aim to contribute. The recent dynamic of “heritagization” of graffiti – put in the spotlight by a number of exhibitions, and by the recent campaign of the *Centre des monuments nationaux* in 2018<sup>4</sup> – invites us to take graffiti seriously, since this object of study has gone, within a few years, from being viewed as an act of delinquency, to an infrapolitical act, a sign of dissent, in fact a legitimate artistic expression.

This conference is therefore intended as a forum for reflection, prior to the publication of a thematic journal issue dedicated to political graffiti and its relation to public space.

Through graffiti, one can first investigate the essentially *shared nature* of public space. It indeed seems necessary to take into account the reality of graffiti by embracing a wider vision focusing on “exposed writing,” a fundamental notion coined by Italian historian Armando Petrucci. This concept refers to “Any type of writing designed to be used in open spaces – but also in confined spaces – to

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<sup>1</sup> Jean BAUDRILLARD, “Kool Killer, ou l’insurrection par les signes,” *L’échange symbolique et la mort*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> We therefore also include prison graffiti, and those that covered and often still cover the walls of intimate places, such as toilets – for they are, under certain conditions, publicly available spaces. On the *latrinalia* of public urinals, see notably the recent exhibition of Marc Martin, “Les Tasses – Toilettes publiques, affaires privées.” *Point Éphémère*, Nov-Dec. 2019.

<sup>3</sup> We refer the reader to the indicative bibliography. A number of recent academic events highlight the growing interest of the social sciences in graffiti. See especially the recent interdisciplinary symposium “Écritures urbaines, écritures exposées,” held in Paris and Marseille on 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> October 2019, and also the forthcoming Scripta workshop, “Écritures exposées : la fabrique des espaces ‘publics’,” 19-20 May 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Laure PRESSAC (ed.), *Sur les murs. Histoire(s) de graffitis*, Paris, Éditions du Patrimoine, 2018. See also the conference, “Le graffiti : un nouvel objet patrimonial ?” organised by Emmanuel Fureix at the University of Paris-Est Créteil.

allow group or mass readings and at a distance, the text in question being written on an exposed surface.”<sup>5</sup>

Graffiti is part of a publicly exposed and historically situated writing scheme. And if we consider that public space is defined as being *open and accessible*,<sup>6</sup> a space that is outside the sphere of appropriation, graffiti – and, more broadly, exposed writing – is able to reveal its incomplete and contested nature. Whether it be the Third Republic in France or the monumental fascist project in Italy, it is about imposing a single writing within public space, exclusive of any other form of writing, that then becomes dubious and contested.<sup>7</sup> We will therefore question graffiti as an indicator of the power relations that penetrate the urban space. Graffiti, which has been likened to “poaching on State lands,”<sup>8</sup> is to be understood in its dialectic relationship to political power – whose ostensibly exclusive appropriation of public space can indeed be contested.

To refine our analysis of the relation between graffiti and the uses of public space, the organic connection that bonds graffiti and the space in which it is inscribed must be sharpened. In this vein, graffiti often materializes efforts towards territorial control. Graffiti therefore stands at the crossroads of political action and territorial marking, leaving public space with an imprint whose multiple meanings needs to be deciphered.

One of the most interesting perspectives offered by the study of graffiti is the fact that they can be considered not only as traces, but also as actions.<sup>9</sup> In the case of protest graffiti, while it remains a clandestine act accomplished secretly, it is intended to leave a visible sign. The uncertainty about the author and the political force he or she is serving – a single person, a small group, the silent majority? – condition the reception of the message, which necessarily varies depending on actors. We will therefore carefully look into the question of the multiple, sometimes opposed, readings of graffiti and into the methodological issues that result from them.

In addition, we will study the very action of inscribing graffiti, graffiti authors, as well as their methods. Reflecting upon the materiality of graffiti thus seems essential – the spots, the surface chosen, and the tools used (chalk, pen, marker, spray-paint can...) evidence a number of dynamics that need to be explored. Furthermore, the dialogic function of graffiti – to which one can respond or that can be crossed out, whether spontaneously or in a more articulate manner (just like the German Social Democratic Party’s Three-Arrows symbol meant to counter the swastika) – highlights the competing territorial rationales at play.

Finally, the various motives of authors must also be investigated. We will therefore study the fate of political slogans that sometimes originate from wall-chalking – e.g. “Here, we drown Algerians”<sup>10</sup> – or are borrowed by other authors. If protest, under this specific form of graphic rebellion, appears as the most obvious motive, it is probably not the only one. Does graffiti constitute a message to one’s peers in order to found or consolidate a community? Is it a challenge addressed to authorities? Is it aimed at deconsecrating space, or at drawing attention to a political thinking up to then ignored? Or

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<sup>5</sup> Armando PETRUCCI, *Jeux de lettres. Formes et usages de l’inscription en Italie, XI<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris, Ed. EHESS, 1993, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques LEVY, “Espace public,” in Jacques LEVY and Michel LUSSAULT (ed.), *Dictionnaire de la géographie*, Paris, Belin, 2003, p. 336.

<sup>7</sup> Philippe ARTIERES, *La police de l’écriture : l’invention de la délinquance graphique, 1852-1945*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Céline BRACONNIER, “Braconnages sur les terres d’État. Les inscriptions politiques séditieuses dans le Paris de l’après-Commune, 1872-1885,” *Genèses*, 1999, n° 35, pp. 107-130.

<sup>9</sup> Béatrice FRAENKEL, “Actes d’écriture : quand écrire c’est faire,” *Langage & Société*, 2007, 121-122, pp. 101-112.

<sup>10</sup> Vincent LEMIRE and Yann POTIN, « « Ici on noie les Algériens » Fabriques documentaires, avatars politiques et mémoires partagées d’une icône militante (1961-2001) », *Genèses*, 2002, n°49, pp. 140-162.

might it be simply a way to let off steam, so much so that we should avoid overinterpreting its meaning? The multiplicity of political functions of graffiti is echoed through their diverse tones – humoristic, sometimes cryptic or, on the contrary, stereotyped (the rallying slogan), sometimes personalized (threats, celebration), often claiming (through the significance of the deconsecrating gesture, the written form and size, the choice of words) the capacity to convey strong emotions that are not represented by and in traditional media. It is only through a social and plural history of graffiti – one that will take into account its spatial and material configurations, that we will be able to outline a number of answers.

We wish to investigate those issues further, without any geographical limitation and from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward. If the practice of graffiti is probably as old as writing itself, European urban spaces have been marked by the increasing presence of public signage from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on, a period which also corresponds with an increasingly sensitive politicisation of public space.<sup>11</sup> The contemporary period has therefore witnessed a growing production of graffiti, whose diversity is precisely the object of our study.

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#### Organizing Committee

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#### Submission guidelines

This conference is organised as a workshop open to the public, with the aim of writing a special issue of a journal. It will take place on Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2020 at the Université de Paris. The language of the conference will be French, but English papers are welcome.

In order to encourage exchanges, each participant will be invited to discuss another paper. **For that reason, papers should be submitted by September 1<sup>st</sup>.**

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Laurent CUVÉLIER, *La ville captivée. Affichage et économie de l’attention à Paris au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Doctoral thesis, Institut d’études politiques, 2019.

Paper proposals (max. 2000 characters) and a short bibliography should be sent to the three following email addresses by May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020:

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Organisers will respond to proposals by late May 2020.

This conference is organised in partnership with the Institut d'histoire du temps présent (Paris 8-CNRS), the Université de Paris, LARCA UMR 8225 and the Iris Scripta-PSL program, "Histoire et pratiques de l'écrit."



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