Reading Revolution on the Walls: Cairo Graffiti as an Emerging Public Sphere

Abstract

The revolutionary and post-revolutionary period in Egypt created emerging and vivid public spheres that became communication milieus for various strata of society. Therein, new ideas and concepts were confronting old and established perceptions. Hereby, a genre of political graffiti in Cairo was formed, and within a comparatively short lapse of time it became an integral part of the revolution itself. Shortly graffiti started to be seen with glorified and romanticised connotations and graffiti artists were perceived as resistance fighters: primarily against the regime, thereafter against security forces and eventually against the Muslim Brotherhood. Their works were seen as tributes to revolution and its illustration.

Although approaching graffiti as the dominated’s resistance against the dominator indeed explains a wide realm of this societal conduct, it nevertheless regards graffiti only as a pro or counter statement. Therefore quite often, significant side-meanings and social perceptions on various issues are omitted.

This paper explores Cairo graffiti not only as revolutionary narrative, but also as a prevailing public sphere where debate takes place. Analysing the “side-messages” that are drawn on the walls, helps to address social attitudes and public opinions on a variety of revolutionary and non-revolutionary issues. It employs various social sciences and approaches and looks at how the Cairo graffiti scene follows patterns of the notion defined as the ‘public sphere’.

Introduction

For many in Egypt, the 18 days of the January 25 revolution was something what Turner would call a liminal moment – when everything is possible, but nothing yet is replaced. Tahrir square became a symbol of hope, unity and power. And to a great extent that power, either real or implicit, was gained through people freeing their voices of expression. This freedom of expression per se and what it represented: self empowerment, pursuit of justice, expectancy of equality, etc. was one of the precious values and means of participation among revolutionaries. Speaking up and expressing one’s mind became crucial, and different people found different ways to embody this objective.

Thus, the revolution created many genres of participation: sit-in protests in Tahrir, marches and clashes with security forces, and tweeting or writing blogs and articles.

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in various media outlets. The public sphere and vocal self-expression within it, became
inbuilt elements of the revolution.

Eventually Tahrir square and its surrounding streets became a symbol of revolution, both
day and night being filled with people. In addition to their mere presence, people
started using the walls and streets surrounding the square, as another means of
expression. Hereby, a genre of political graffiti in Cairo was formed and over time
lapse it became an integral part of the revolution itself. Although graffiti in Egypt
was present before the revolution, it was still a rather rare phenomenon and was
mostly used by football fans or for ‘advertising’ purposes, and thus January 25 put
graffiti on a completely different scale.

In no time graffiti pieces mushroomed all over the city and became more and
more sophisticated. Graffiti artists and drawings themselves were acknowledged by
journalists, bloggers and activists and gained a widespread recognition as a different
means of communication, whereby they exceeded their otherwise relatively short-
lived existence on the streets. The political graffiti in Cairo created an entire market
around itself: numerous catalogues compiling graffiti drawings were published1;
articles and reports on the topic appeared and were given coverage by all kinds of
media starting with local newspapers2 before spiralling upwards to the BBC3 and Al
Jazeera4; many bloggers and so-called “graffiti hunters” captured their favourite pieces
and spread them through social media, trying to ensure that the graffiti messages
were permanently etched in the public consciousness even after they were erased
from the street walls. And once the graffiti reached the realms of social media, it
started its life all over again, becoming a message, declaration, symbol and illustration
that was shared, commented on and admired by people. Graffiti producers (particularly
those who did not favour anonymity, but created pseudonyms which were left as a
‘tag’) not only became wellknown figures in the activists scene, but were also
recognized as artists exhibiting internationally.5

The majority of these reports presented the graffiti with glorified and romanticised
connotations. Graffiti artists were regarded as resistance fighters primarily against
the regime6, thereafter against security forces and eventually against the Muslim
Brotherhood, and their works were seen as tributes to revolution, its illustration7 and

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6 Villamizar, ‘Egypt’s Youth Vocal…’.
narratives\textsuperscript{8} and as a social barometer\textsuperscript{9}. Numerous articles were published praising and portraying those responsible as artists’, or as hero-like figures putting themselves in danger\textsuperscript{10} for the sake of a common good, while the government’s attempts to whiten graffiti-scarred walls, were portrayed in a damning manner and were bestowed with the epithet of “professional whiteners” who were accomplishing a “barbaric task”\textsuperscript{11} to “silence the nation”.

From a general perspective, the graffiti became seen as some kind of constructed, unanimous memorial space for the revolution and as a ‘freedom of expression’ struggle against changing regimes.

However, after a long and rather investigative walk through the Cairo streets, a fairly different and rather contradicting impression about this unanimous struggle becomes apparent. Undoubtedly, a political critique of those in power and recollections of the revolution’s martyrs are the predominant topics of the graffiti in question. But in juxtaposition to this, a whole range of other topics were introduced through the graffiti: a critique of social injustice, topics of international politics, roles of religion, the status of women, different aspects of human rights, societal values, sexual harassment, nationalistic symbols, visions of future or pursued justice, portraits of national and international figures, Quran verses, quotes from literature and a lot more. Besides, none of these topics followed one prevailing discourse line. They have been debated and addressed from different angles just like they are debated and addressed in other different communication spheres – from those regarded as ‘conventional’ right through to the latest social media and friends’ gatherings, and they clearly differ in the kind of ideology, political, religious and value-system beliefs they represent.

Furthermore the manner as to how this debate on the walls of Cairo has taken place, is in itself of great interest. Drawings or inscriptions are adjusted, added, corrected, filled with cross outs or additions, some are blackened, erased or drawn on top of others, in some places you can see responses by different authors added to the original work. In the end one starts to see the graffiti as a dynamic, vivid and extensive dialogue rather than a static, declarative manifesto – more as a noisy public sphere and less as a conservative museum.

Deliberating the Arab public sphere: From the early days until the present

The concept of ‘civil society’ became a common criterion analysing democratic, political movements and changes. The common sense of civil society today is

\textsuperscript{10} Suzeeinthecity: \url{http://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/} (accessed 16.02 2014).
comprehended by a prevalence of non-governmental organisations, human rights and apparently honest elections. This encouraged many contemporary scholars to use European institutions as the comparative basis against which to measure social and cultural institutions elsewhere. Such an approach eventually led to a certain Eurocentrism in social theory, and this is when many sociologists, anthropologists and historians researching non-Western societies, started questioning the notion of ‘civil society’ itself as a proper and revealing tool researching various social and political processes, and as applicable in general to societies outside the realms of the West. As Kamali states, “Although there is no consensus about the definition of civil society, there are some factors, such as individualism and democratic institutions, that are taken for granted as necessary conditions”. Nevertheless, he also notes that individualism and democratic institutions are not necessary for a civil society to exist. One of the preconditions for civil society however, is the “existence of a relatively independent public sphere” in which debate, that influences political decision-making, takes place.

The public sphere, on the other hand, is not limited to ‘modern’ societies. As Eickelman and Salvatore note “it is the site where contests take place over the definition of the ‘common good’, and also of the virtues, obligations and rights that members of society require for the common good to be realized. This emergent sense of public goes hand-in-hand with the sharing of norms that define ideas of community and the responsibilities of those who belong to it. The idea of the public sphere is thus a wider notion than that of civil society”.

Following this definition we can trace the existence of a specific public sphere in the Arab or Muslim-majority world, even a few centuries ago. One of the frequently quoted examples is the oath of allegiance to the ruler (bay’a) in pre-colonial Morocco, when political belonging was not based on unquestionable belief, but rather on a continuing process of contest and reaffirmation. Since the fifteenth century Moroccan monarchs circulated almost continuously throughout their domains embodying their personal authority in constantly shifting locales.

Bettina Dennerlein depicts an episode, when in October 1873 the artisans of Fez insisted on making the bay’a contingent upon the abolition of certain non-Islamic taxes. Local ‘ulamas’, notables and military leaders agreed to this provision, however, a few days later the taxes were reinstated. As a result, the tanners of Fez and their followers attacked and plundered the residence of the tax administrator. A month later Sultan Mawlay al-Hasan announced an amnesty for those involved; nonetheless

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he ordered the taxes of issue to be restored. Again conflict erupted and royal army besieged the rebellious quarters until people once again accepted the demanded taxes.\(^{15}\)

The *Bay‘as* themselves symbolized a collective identity, political belonging, social status and locality. *Bay‘a* documents were read aloud in public in every town in which they were prepared, generally in mosques. Some represented collectives, others prominent notables, and the texts of various *bay‘as* were circulated throughout the monarchy.\(^{16}\) They were discussed and debated in this pre-modern public sphere, and sometimes, as the example shows, became the reasons for inflicting political participation within it.

Such a notion of the public sphere and its apparent overlapping with ‘street’ society is deep-rooted throughout the region and became a place where various forms of political or social participation took place over a period of a few centuries.

**Multiple public spheres in the Egyptian Arab Spring**

The latest and widely resounding political participation in the public sphere, dubbed the ‘Arab Spring’, was also centralized around the notion of ‘street’. “Thousands of Egyptians flooded the Cairo streets in order to reclaim power” – became a viral perception committed to explain and define what was ‘actually’ happening in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world. The epicentre of this political participation, which evolved into a fully-grown revolution, once again stemmed from ‘street’ society, or to be precise Tahrir square, where the major protests took place, and where the whole revolution is perceived to ‘have happened’.

And yet, many researchers, analysts and also journalists acknowledge the crucial role of alternative public spheres in organizing the people during the Arab Spring revolutions. A widespread and intense usage of social media and blogging by many researchers and observers is recognized as an important player in creating communication networks and mobilizing people. The phenomenon of the ‘Facebook’ exploitation as a political tool gave the Arab Spring the title of “Facebook Revolution”, just as the spread of ‘Twitter’ christened the 2009 protests in Iran as the “Twitter Revolution”. Eventually, some observers went as far as referring to social media sources as a *key mover* in the Arab Spring, without apparent risk of overestimating their impact.

Nonetheless, such praise lavished upon social media sources did not elapse without critique. Greg Burris perceived this type of interpretation as an overexcitement of western commentators and dubbed it the new coming of “Lawrence of E-rabia”.\(^{17}\) While the Oxford educated British archaeologist, poet and army officer T. E. Lawrence,


\(^{16}\) Ibid., pp. 287–310.

became a key character in explaining the Western public of the abrupt nature of the “Great Arab Revolt” against alleged Ottoman despotism during World War I, now the celebrations of the omnipotent role of new media sources in denouncing the abuses of authoritarian rule and mobilizing wide sectors of North African and Middle Eastern populations, apparently denies social movements and protesting crowds, an autonomous collective agency and political subjectivity. According Burris, such interpretations are nothing more than a Western celebration of its own invented technology providing modernity to the Middle East from external sources. Only this time, Lawrence “came armed not with a camel and a keffiyeh, but with Facebook friend requests”.

Ratta and Valeriani in their research on revolutionary events in Tunisia and Egypt note, that the networks that mattered most during the revolutionary period were neither Facebook nor Twitter but more traditional, ‘offline’ ones: including universities, mosques and trade unions. Satellite TV stations like Al-Jazeera seemingly played the most important role amongst all the media sources at work. They argue however, that during the weeks of social mobilization and upheaval, the web 2.0 had a profound impact on how all the networks and media functioned, not just singularly but also in terms of their mutual relations. This intended impact was already in place circulating pre-revolutionary content throughout social media sources several years before actual events unfolded.

Indeed, social media provided the central public sphere where many of the most notable revolutionary and pre-revolutionary events were regularly debated. On March 2008 Esraa Abdel Fattah, an Egyptian activist, decided to launch a Facebook group in order to support a strike in a textile factory. It rapidly gained tens of thousands followers mobilizing them under a common political banner. Eventually, a broad coalition of oppositional groups and parties cutting through the leftist-secular/Islamist divide jumped on the bandwagon and on the key day of April 6, 2008, they declared their support for the initiative. In the context of far surpassing its original intent, the mobilization and now the whole movement targeted the corruption of the regime and the deteriorating economic conditions of the vast majority of the Egyptian population. Later, the April 6 movement became a crucial, symbolic rallying point of all oppositional initiatives during the 2011 revolution.

Another story, that of Khaled Said, is also worth mentioning here due to its ‘virality’ in the web and the massive mobilization of the crowd that occurred after his murder.

19 Burris, ‘Lawrence of E-Rabia…’.
21 Ibidem.
Khaled was beaten to death on June 6, 2010 at a cybercafé in Alexandria by two members of the Egyptian security forces after an alleged resistance against arrest. Posthumous pictures of his face, badly distorted when his body was knocked against the stairs, were widely shared throughout social media sources, provoking public outrage. The official autopsy report claimed that Khaled died after he tried to swallow a packet of hashish, for which he had been arrested. This ‘cover up’ version infuriated people even more and unprecedented protests on a massive scale took place. Khaled Said became the best known shahid in Egypt with posters, graffiti pictures and placards being produced as tributes to his martyrdom. Khaled’s story marks a momentum when the public spheres of web and ‘street’ started to meet ‘head on’ and interact.\textsuperscript{22} As a result the outrage, which initially was voiced via the internet, quickly became more visible and was transformed to the streets. Public events and gatherings were organized in various Egyptian cities, where long processions of young men and women, standing several meters apart (so as not to constitute a ‘gathering’ under the Egyptian emergency law), lined up along the banks of the Nile or the Mediterranean, in order to remember Khaled and his brutal murder, by simply taking with them and reading a book of their choice.

After the assassination of Khaled Said, Wael Ghonim, a thirty year old computer engineer and head of the marketing division for Google Middle East and North Africa, launched a blog and a twin Facebook page, each with a double name: El Shaheed (the martyr), and We are all Khaled Said/Kulluna Khaled Saeed. This page gathered evidence about assassinations and other acts of violence perpetrated by the Security Forces. During and after the revolution, the page transformed itself into serving as a mouthpiece for revolutionaries talking about various human rights and other issues. In his many interviews Wael dubbed the Egyptian revolution as ‘Revolution 2.0’, claiming that neither this nor any other similar revolution could be attributed to individual heroes.

The Arab revolutions signify a moment when different public spheres interacted and developed a mutual synergy. They became mutually influential and reflective and moreover this synergy began mobilizing a broad variety of different actors. Armando Salvatore in his article on public spheres before and after the Arab Spring reflects on his experience in Cairo a couple years before the Egyptian Revolution, when his fellow Arab colleagues refused to accept social media sources as influential in terms of public spheres, or even more – as political tools. At that time it was regarded as mere ‘‘chatting’ connecting powerless private rooms’, and its tangible merit was perceived as very doubtful especially when considering that “the public space par excellence – ‘the street’ – is inaccessible for political protest”.\textsuperscript{23} And yet, just a couple of years later this public sphere of internet communication not only managed to synergize with the ‘real’ public sphere – ‘the street’, but it also continued to exist in the streets even after the initial driving forces, the people and the protest, had

\textsuperscript{22} A. Salvatore, ‘Before (and after) the ‘Arab Spring’: From Connectedness to Mobilization in the Public Sphere’, \textit{Oriente Moderne}, Vol. 91, 2011.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 10.
dissipated. Two spheres had seemingly merged together and created a third one. Pictures and posters that were once in circulation throughout the internet started appearing on the walls of the streets. Together with the massive protest graffiti scene that emerged in Cairo, it became a kind of extension of the protests and a continuum of the revolution. It serves as a constant reminder of what is happening in the country even when the streets are empty, and of the public sphere itself where many issues are debated, the regime is denounced, and different narratives are promoted and immediately contested.

**Graffiti during revolutions**

While researching graffiti during periods of unrest and turmoil, anthropologists tend to interpret it through a theory of resistance tactics to intervene in relations of domination, while their main focus is the effects of graffiti on differentially empowered and positioned readers (See for example Rolston 1987; Sluka 1992).  

Julie Peteet in her anthropological research ‘The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada’, conducted during the first Palestinian intifada in 1990 on the West Bank, she considers graffiti to be “silent narratives accompanying acts of resistance and being acts of resistance themselves”. She claims that graffiti encouraged resistance, cajoled, demanded, critiqued and provided a running political commentary on the progression of the uprising. At the same time, they were an act of civil disobedience directed against Israel and their “mere appearance gave rise to arenas of contest in which they served as a vehicle or agent of power”.

A similar approach was taken by Mona Abaza who analysed graffiti in post-revolution Egypt. In her research ‘Walls Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Mohammed Mahmud Street Graffiti’, she uses a term of new public culture of protest to explain the practice of graffiti on the military built walls and barricades in Cairo. What is called the tactics of zoning – creating “war zones” in downtown Cairo by isolating specific quarters with walls which have emerged where many clashed – is being challenged by artists’ initiative to create alternative purposes of these very same walls by daubing them with graffiti.

Although this approach to researching graffiti ‘action’ as a form of the dominated’s resistance against the dominator is very valid and legitimate, and indeed explains a wide realm of this societal conduct, it nevertheless ignores the graffiti that does not have a revolutionary discourse. Furthermore, this approach treats graffiti as a pro or

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26 Ibidem.

counter statement, and normally does not pay attention to its social origin, parallel meanings, linguistic motives, and societal perceptions on various subjects that are represented through the medium of graffiti.

Therefore, my approach to analysing graffiti in Cairo derives from a comprehension of graffiti as a means to observe societal attitudes and patterns. I employ theoretical approaches from throughout of the public sphere, a vernacular discourse and vocabularies of motives, concepts discussed respectively by Jurgen Habermas, Gerard Hauser and C. Wright Mills; and mainly focus on how discussion takes place rather than how it is used as a political tool.

**Graffiti as a milieu of societal attitudes**

Numerous projects researching graffiti have been conducted as an approach to study issues of social importance. Stocker, Dutcher, Hargrove and Cook in their study ‘Social Analysis of Graffiti’ in public bathrooms of three universities in United States claim that “graffiti as an aspect of culture can be used as an unobtrusive measure to reveal patterns and attitudes of society and observing graffiti will reveal changes in those customs and attitudes”. 28

Gonos, Mulkern and Poushinsky in study ‘Anonymous Expression: A Structural View of Graffiti’ on the same topic, push the notion of graffiti as a mirror of social attitudes even further. They claim that so called “expressive graffiti may not be a direct reflection of the dominant community value-system at all, but a manifestation of that content which is proscribed, restricted or taboo in the graffitists’ ordinary circle of social life. The anonymity afforded the graffitists allows the opportunity to use language, and present beliefs and sentiments, which are not acceptable in ordinary life, and that anonymity provides graffitists a niche of freedom even within a public space”. 29 Thus they approach a milieu of graffiti as a kind of purified public sphere which is not subjected to any social or public political correctness, politeness or censorship.

Graffiti in Cairo, that has become a place of personal freedom and escape from political correctness, and has a great quantity of messages with a derogatory as well as a glorifying manner, can be looked as a space with pronounced societal attitudes. As many journalists and bloggers have already observed, graffiti stencils and murals on the walls around Tahrir and Muhammad Mahmood street are reflective in their communicative nature. This even gave the graffiti the status of ‘revolutionary barometer’, adding weight to the idea that one can look around in the street to know what other media channels are debating. Such an idea is largely true since the content of newly emerging graffiti is strongly reactionary to what is actually happening in the country’s political life.

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When it started emerging on the walls around Tahrir during the 18 days of revolution, most of the graffiti stencils and murals were attributed to mocking and denouncing Mubarak’s regime. Ironic depictions denouncing Mubarak, together with graffiti pieces calling for thaura (revolution) symbolically mark the beginning of the revolutionary graffiti. However, the graffiti seemingly evolved together with the revolution. Shortly after the overthrow of Mubarak, one of the most famous graffiti works of the time – “the fall of the king” – appeared near Tahrir. It was made by the Egyptian graffiti artist El Teneen and depicted a chess board with a black King lying on its side.

As the post-revolutionary period continued, so did the revolutionary graffiti on the walls which persisted in reflecting societal attitudes towards events. During one year of rule by the SCAF (Central Security Army Forces) many of the graffiti works were attributed to the condemnation of army and police violence and a commemoration of martyrs. Here a wide variety of graffiti works emerged with messages that ranged from depicting police or army figures as pigs or ‘loose women’, with a widespread use of a condemnatory English abbreviation ‘ACAP’ (all cops are pigs); to the depictions of real events: for example a mural portraying the beating of “a blue bra girl” – a famous episode when during one of the protests a woman was dragged and beaten by soldiers until her blue bra was exposed through her ripped clothes.

The subject matter and content of the graffiti quickly changed after Mohamed Morsi was victorious in the presidential elections. Many of the graffiti works began to depict Morsi in a derogatory manner and began comparing him with the former regime – with one mural depicting Morsi looking at a mirror which gives a reflection of the face of Mubarak – being particularly famous. The level of criticism in the public domain, as well as the emergence of new graffiti, intensified after November 22, when president Morsi released a new decree that strongly extended presidential powers. Reactionary graffiti critical of this decree appeared almost instantly and stencils depicting Morsi with a Pharaoh’s crown started appearing on the walls.

Rapid changes and significant events in Egypt’s political life still remain the main source of graffiti subject matter and content. These, as well as images discussing and debating international affairs and various cultural categories and issues, constitute the majority of graffiti works in Egypt. By reflecting various political and social issues within the context of differing opinions about them, the graffiti ‘scene’ in Egypt can be considered as a significant voice in the public sphere – a physical milieu where social attitudes and public opinion can be expressed.

Graffiti as a public sphere

On one of the early days of the revolution in 2011 a big picture of a tank was sprayed under a bridge in Zamalek (an elite neighbourhood in Cairo close to Tahrir, also a place where many graffiti images are created). A boy riding a bicycle and transporting a huge tray full of goods balanced on his head (a common sight in everyday life in Cairo) was drawn facing the tank. This big stencil, while initially intending to portray the mightiness of an army in combat with and confronting
unarmed civilians, became one of the best examples of the evolution of graffiti with
a social message within the public sphere.

Shortly afterwards, another graffiti artist added further details to the portrayal of
the boy on the bicycle with the addition of a line of people raising their hands as in a
position of protest. Four male figures were drawn next to the tank, depicting two
men being crushed by the tank and the other two trying to pull them out and free
them. A caterpillar track sprayed with red paint imitating a pool of blood was a
further embellishment.

However, this version of the “tank” was not destined to last long either. A few
days later the four male figures and the pool of blood were erased by white paint.
The features of the line of protesting people and the boy on the bicycle – were made
dimmer and less pronounced and Egyptian flags were placed in their hands. Now the
tank, which was not subject to further alterations, seemed to be the subject of
congratulations and cheering by people demonstrating nationalistic sentiment and
fervour. Some time later, in yet another demonstration of the rapidly changing nature
of Cairo street ‘art’, the line of cheering people with flags was removed and was
replaced by a giant man with a monstrous face wearing an army uniform. In his
teeth he was holding a dead woman and a liberal splashing of red, to imitate bloody
carnage, completed the image.

A few days later, the man’s face, as well as the dead woman, was blackened out
and obliterated. Dozens of Arabic symbols for “no” (la) with different postscripts
(for example: “‘no’ for female humiliation”, “‘no’ for killing religious men”, etc. – all
referring to some previous event) were sprayed throughout the area under the bridge.
The image of the tank has already been subjected to many alterations and
amendments and will most probably undergo more changes in the future, each time
representing different opinions, positions and sentiments. It also represents one of
the best examples of how the general public’s understanding of the revolutionary
events is seen from differing perspectives with an acquisition of different images
and portrayals, and how the graffiti becomes a public sphere where these images,
portrayals and opinions compete.

The notion of the public sphere was defined as “the site where contests take place
over the definition of the ‘common good’, and also of the virtues, obligations and
rights that members of society require for the common good to be realized”.
This definition, encapsulating many different forms and types of communication, is
presumably the most suitable description when attempting to explore the graffiti
‘scene’ as a sort of public sphere. However, the broadness and generality of the
formulation also brings some difficulties limiting the criteria through which a public
sphere might be analysed.

Therefore the description of a public sphere, the way it was defined and analyzed
by Jurgen Habermas, a pioneer of the notion in the field of social sciences, still
remains relevant even today. In his study, ‘The structural transformation of the

30 Eickelman, Salvatore, ‘The Public Sphere and…’. 
public sphere. An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society’, he develops an idea and a concept of the public sphere, that was formed in the 17th and 18th century. Habermas’s public sphere is centralized in salons and coffee houses, which became centres of discussion and debate – initially in literary terms, then also becoming politicised – and took place between aristocratic and bourgeois intellectuals, who sought to maintain a sense of educational parity. A bourgeois public sphere was created when opinion in the salon was no longer in the service of the patron, and became emancipated from the bonds of economic dependence, making it directly connected with an emergence of a freedom of expression.

Habermas defines the public sphere as, “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private citizens assemble to form a public body.” The public sphere for Habermas is ideally an intermediate space in which ideas are presented on their own merits rather than as emanating from such authorities as preachers, judges and rulers. Authority is vested in the public sphere itself. In it, all participants have in principle an equal opportunity to persuade others.

Today the majority of scholars agree that Habermas’s model of the public sphere remains unfulfilled in any given historical situation. Nevertheless it does not lose its importance, since it serves as a template against which actually existing discursive conditions and practices may be measured and assessed in terms of the structural and ideological distortions that define any given, actually existing public sphere.

For Habermas each public sphere has three major criteria, which defines it as such. There is a are presumed equality between communicators, their independence from state controlled discourse and an inclusive nature allowing participation for all:

1) A preservation of a kind of social intercourse, that is far from presupposing the equality status altogether (status is disregarded; it’s not even part of analysis by default). The tendency replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals.

2) Discussion within such a public presupposed the problematizing of areas that until then had not been questioned. A breakthrough of state monopoly in terms of public discourse.

3) The same process that converted culture into a commodity established the public as in principle as inclusive. However exclusive the public might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique, for it always understood and found itself immersed within a more inclusive public of all private people.

**Equality**, as an essential principle for any public sphere, is also quite easily traceable in the Cairo graffiti scene. Graffiti in principle, can be considered as a discussion

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32 Ibid., p. 33.
between anonymous agents. Although there are some exceptions, since a few graffiti artists choose pseudonyms and sign their works, the vast majority of graffiti works are made by anonymous authors. Some graffiti artists due to the artistic or political appeal of their work have become known publicly since they have given interviews to media outlets and blogs. But generally speaking it is still maintained as an action of an anonymous agent that enters a public sphere free of any pre-conceptions regarding their previous practices or notions of status. The position of the graffiti artist also holds a peculiar status. Whether acting anonymously or under an alias the graffiti artist becomes an individual agent of collective attitude. His perceived ‘anonymity’ serves to recognize the content of the graffiti as an expression of a ‘collective’ attitude rather than as an individual opinion.

A similar status is afforded to the graffiti works themselves. Any graffiti may be removed, erased or painted over. None of them come with any exceptional predetermined status of admiration or preservation. Graffiti works cannot be considered as established opinions, and are debatable, can be changed or removed. They enter the public sphere on equal terms and in principle have a sense of equality between them.

**Polarization.** The public sphere can be defined not only through localization, as in what spatial discourse is happening, but also in terms of more specific types of discourse. The domain of the public sphere is normally regarded as a “common concern”, and topics discussed in this public sphere can be considered as subjects of public matter versus private. Quite often however, especially in places with limited freedom of expression, the notion of ‘public’ appears simply as that sector of public opinion that happens to be opposed to the authorities. This is why an opposing discourse to the one of the state is required in order to create a sense of inclusive deliberation.

Despite the high levels of censorship under the strict, Mubarak led regime, the state did not engender a total monopoly on discourse, and in terms of traditional media coverage Egypt was regarded as a “partly free” country. Specific structures of TV and radio systems were made almost impossible by established independent media outlets, and many state owned newspapers and state controlled journalist syndicates, ensured that any journalists outside these hallowed realms were made to feel particularly vulnerable in a seemingly overbearing atmosphere of limited public discourse pluralism. Libel or blasphemy charges for writers, film directors and artists were a rather common phenomenon, signifying and illustrating the existence

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34 Habermas, The Structural...


of state censorship. In this context it is easy to see how one of the axis of revolution became a communal desire for self expression, which became voiced by many means of communicative media, including street art.

Furthermore during the revolution and the period just after it, the concept of information (exchange) in terms of value and effecting change was reconsidered and re-evaluated. When crucial political changes were taking effect, this sought after information served not only as a tool to follow events, but also as a signifier of occurring changes. In this context the dispersion of information symbolized the possibility for change itself and the liberating nature of it became a means for revolution. Information became an empowering tool and also a pre-occupation of revolutionaries, who by tweeting, facebooking or spraying graffiti on walls participated in revolution. A veritable wealth of information exchange takes place when this sense of empowerment prevails.

**Inclusivity**, as well as equality, represents another rather obvious element that is found within the graffiti laden public sphere. Graffiti is seemingly designed as a form of mass communication hoping to reach everyone who find themselves physically present at that place. It can also be practised by everyone, the only requirement being the ability to “read” images or rather to understand their vernacular meanings. An average level of literacy is not even needed, since inscriptions can be read and retold by people in the vicinity. Graffiti has a high inclusive value because it is difficult to avoid and ignore if one comes across it. Even though only a few choose to respond to graffiti messages that they encounter in one form or another, the messages illustrated will still be read and understood by most passers-by. For graffiti artists it is also provides a medium that facilitates communication outside their own social circles, and this auditorium is enlarged further still when graffiti works are transferred to various forms of social media, where they are adapted and relayed for further discussion.

Moreover graffiti seems to merge and interact with traditional public spaces (surroundings), since it becomes an “exhibition” place for Egyptian spectators and tourists alike who take pictures of the graffiti and pose next to them. This revolutionary discourse creates a kind of ‘market’ around the walls which could be said to become a symbol of everlasting political forums and a natural place to gather. As a result improvised versions of cafes and kiosks have been established. While shifting one’s position from receiver to producer in this form of social interaction, the graffiti still keeps its position and maintains its principle as an inclusive form of media – since no one is restricted from entering. But participation from all levels of societal strata in terms of the graffiti sender’s role does not seem to be entirely, proportionally representative. Not only can physical restrictions (geographical restraints, financial costs, etc) be seen as filters of participation. But in general terms it seems to be strongly connected with forming, keeping and promoting a personal image and establishing the status of “doing politics without being politician”. On one hand this might provide safe escape route from troublesome issues in that conceivably “it’s just art” rather than political action, but it also may serve to maintain one’s position,
since the ‘graffitist’ is being presented primarily as artist, but at the same time he demonstrates an awareness of the ‘social cause’.

As the text has previously addressed, it seems that the whole, general nature of the graffiti genre and in particular the case study of Cairo, make the milieu of graffiti a valid example of the public sphere. Retaining anonymity and equality as a form of communication, and by remaining inclusive, pluralistic and dynamic, it becomes a place which facilitates debate and allows for the deliberation of the common good.

**Vernacular language**

One of the strongest and widely acknowledged critics of Habermas is the German social scientist Gerard A. Hauser. His critique derives from the point that rhetoric and vernacular particularities, rather than reason and purely logical deliberations, determine the strength of the argument and are the real mediums of the public sphere. He claimed that we belong to a community insofar as we are able to participate in its conversations, and we must acquire its vernacular language in order to share rhetorically salient meanings.37 Discursive qualities rather than institutional guarantees determine whether deliberations are open or distorted.38

When graffiti first started appearing in Egypt it was instantly regarded as proof of western expansionism and was regarded as something foreign and non indigenous. Since the graffiti was strongly associated with the revolution it served as a popular discourse for old regime supporters, that the whole revolution was orchestrated by western powers.39

However, the style and content of the graffiti gives a notion of how strongly this communication medium is localized and adapted to a social and cultural context. Not only are the vast majority of graffiti works written in Arabic, but the use of language ambiguities, quibbles, calligraphic quiddities that turn inscriptions into images seem to show a great level of allocation and allow the whole ‘transaction’ to be seen as society’s communication to society. Images and portraits of national and regional activists, intellectuals and celebrities from the past, as well as murals and stencils portraying the revolution’s activists, seem to highlight the notion that graffiti is produced to communicate with inner social circles and niches, and in order to read its silent and tacit meanings, not only should local language skills be acquired but also that a great extent of vernacular as well as historical and cultural knowledge should be obtained.

For Hauser the ability of the actor to use and engage the vernacular language is important not just because of his possibility to participate in public deliberation. He argues that controlling the language in which issues are discussed determines how they are expressed, with the relevance of experience and expertise in adjudicating

38 Ibidem.
the issues they raise. Thus establishing a meaning to an existing word, or associating a desirable denomination to a propagated action becomes one of the goals of conversational conduct. Language wars are contests for authority since language conveys status on its literate users as sources of knowledge and power. The language that dominates an ‘arena’ of discourse seems to exist as an index of symbolic resources, that contain the norms and values of groups and classes, their knowledge of their past, and their commitments to the future.  

Numerous graffiti stencils with the Arabic word for revolution – *thaura* – proliferated in January 2011, when protest on a massive scale become more evident, as if trying to establish the name for what was happening and also to stimulate development. This apparent contest for a vocabulary setting is also present in graffiti images which address women’s rights. This dispute to establish a dominant discourse in terms of vocabulary is particularly visible in facilitating the use such terms as sexual harassment, sexist, feminism, etc., that seek moral accounts, by labelling various epithets to these terms and allow them to be challenged. The Arabic term *taharrush al ginsi* (sexual harassment), despite widespread use and even a partial social acceptance of this phenomenon, has strong negative connotations. Most of the time those being accused of harassment declare themselves as merely flirting (*mu’aksa*), and thus, many acts are attributed to the domain of romance, providing social legitimacy. Many graffiti images denouncing the act, primarily promote the establishment of a ‘correct’ wording for it, by establishing associations to the word, and encouraging reactionary responses.

Hauser just like Habermas defines the public sphere by its kind of discourse since the issues it considers are primarily of a public nature. Civil judgment presupposes that these issues are irresolvable in an enclave of like-minded persons. It gains weight as issues are exposed to a host of diverse observers who, despite their unique perspectives, collectively assert a prevailing tendency of belief and action. The borders of these spheres are alive with tension between openness and control to the possibilities and the realities of a discursive space in which social actors meet to discover their common world. Tahrir square, the military barricades surrounding it, and Mustafa Mahmud street with graffiti images on the wall become materialized places through which these shared realities are acquired.

The public sphere of active societies, like the one in post-revolution Egypt, contain a high level of engagement through diverse viewpoints and interests that intersect on common problems and that interact in creating policies and evaluating deeds. An active society hears and speaks to manifold interests that converge on any issue. When individuals talk to the same enclave, they become powerless to effect change. Therefore reaching wider audiences and speaking to others outside of one’s social circle is one of the distinctive elements that put graffiti in the category of the active public sphere.

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40 Hauser, *Vernacular Voices* ...

41 Ibidem.
Vocabularies of motives and performative actions

Most of the graffiti images produced in this turbulent period of the Egyptian revolution should be interpreted not only as arguments in the debate occurring on the walls, but also as adversaries of actions they are calling to. Graffiti, as well as other forms of communication starting from social media sources such as facebook and twitter, are seemingly full of motives that are meant to influence social behaviour and opinion.

While studying the modern use of language, sociologist C.W. Mills suggests that linguistic behaviour should be studied, not by referring it to private states of individuals, but by observing its social function of coordinating diverse actions. Rather than expressing something which is pre-conceived and personal, language should be taken by other persons as an indicator of future actions or intensions. Thus, a category of linguistic motives is needed to help to explain linguistic behaviour.

For Mills, motives may be considered as typical vocabularies having ascertainable functions in delimited societal situations. Rather than fixed elements “in” an individual, motives are the terms with which interpretation of behaviour by social actors proceeds. In other words, Mills suggest that while analysing one’s discourse, we should not take the indicated reason of an actor by its literal meaning, since the differing reasons people give for their actions are not themselves without reasons. Conversations may be concerned with the factual features of a situation as they are seen or believed to be, or on the contrary, it may seek to integrate and promote a set of diverse social actions with reference to the situation and its normative pattern of expectations – this is when persuasive or dissuasive speech and vocabulary arise. And institutionally different situations have different vocabularies of motive to appropriate their behaviour.

Furthermore, motives and actions very often originate not from within but from the situation in which individuals find themselves. It transfers the focus of analyses from the question “how” into the question “why” that is answerable in terms of a situation and its typical vocabulary of motives. A satisfactory or adequate motive is one that satisfies the questioners of an act or program, whether it is the other’s or the actor’s. Therefore, a stable motive is an ultimate in justificatory conversation, which can be used to vindicate present, future or past actions.

When they appeal to others involved in one’s act, motives become strategies of action. In many social actions, others must agree, tacitly or explicitly. Thus, acts are often abandoned if no reason can be found that others will accept.

While studying women’s rights, women’s empowerment or narratives challenging them, one cannot disassociate from this interpretation of linguistic behaviour. Since rhetoric articulated in the form of words or images shall not be only be understood

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43 Ibidem.
44 Ibidem.
as an expression of personal or communal opinions, but also as an intention, motive or call for action. This vocabulary of motives, full of vernacular meanings, is being operated towards an implementation of actions. The use of a linguistic behaviour theory can be used for analysing women’s empowerment and engagement actions, justificatory vocabularies for misbehaviour, and the use of women’s representations for persuasive or dissuasive motives in other social contexts.

One of the best examples of such graffiti usage is the project “Women on Walls” (WOW), with clearly articulated an agenda to promote women’s rights. At that time when the project started in the beginning of 2013, the graffiti already had great popularity as an attractive revolutionary phenomenon, and thus a group of concerned activists and graffiti artists decided to use it as a means to promote women’s rights and empowerment. This initiative was organized by a female European journalist. After years spent in the Middle East, publishing books with collections of graffiti works from Gaza and the Egyptian revolution, she became an active advocate of women’s rights in Egypt, publishing books and organizing events on the topic. The “Women on Walls” (WOW) project, funded by international donors, organized a programme that allowed many established Egyptian graffiti artists to create graffiti works in four major Egyptian cities. The whole course of the project had a clear deliberate agenda to promote women’s empowerment that included monetary remunerations – and thus illustrated significant deviations from the conventional understanding of graffiti that is both free and not structured.

The graffiti works created under the ‘WOW‘ umbrella normally included rather artistic images of famous Egyptian women or mythical figures that were meant to symbolize the strength of female emancipation. Apart from this, the project’s organizers exercised a decisive and scrupulous, rhetorical critique towards salafist and islamist movements (their implicit adversaries on the women’s rights cause). After the damage and apparent vandalism of one of the WOW graffiti works in Alexandria, this act was condemned by the WOW facebook page as an “Islamist attack on women rights”. On another occasion, under the image of an unfinished graffiti work in Luxor, a comment was added declaring the picture to be: “Unfinished because a mob – led by a drug addict – made a lot of noise about this wall concerning the strength of women acting ‘against Islam’”. These and other comments on official WOW means of communication created an impression of a project fighting for women’s rights against Islamists, that were called “vandals” and “drug addicts” and their actions of ‘entering the graffiti sphere’ were criticized and understood as immoral and illegitimate. This was in contrast to ‘graffitists’ that were always referred to as artists pushing for the “right values” and their work therefore, had to be preserved and protected within this dynamic environment.