

## City Walls to city streets: utopias of dissent

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Lewis Mumford makes the case that the first (western) utopia was a City, and that the first (western) City was a utopia, and David Harvey similarly iterates that “[t]he figures of ‘the city’ and of ‘Utopia’ have long been intertwined”. The fates of these two constructs are thus seemingly indissolubly linked. Regrettably, this initial construct, the City as utopia / utopia as the City, very shortly mutated into the originary dystopia, inaugurating the conception of the City as a place of suffering and social ills. This inherent dystopian aspect of the early City can be traced to the impulse to control and exclude, a phenomenon not limited to the Cities and utopias of antiquity, but concretely constitutive of the spatial and social geographies of a critical mass of contemporary global cities. This article interprets the works of street artists Banksy, Mustafa Hulusi, Invader and Ben Wilson as exemplary of the production of an alternative utopia which seeks to undermine the dystopian elements of the City. Their work is based on criticality and dissent generated in the city street. This reading is done from a Marxist perspective, based largely on the writings of David Harvey, and interprets the praxis of the artists discussed as the visual embodiment of the explicit or implicit critique of the contemporary deep structure of the dystopian City.

**Keywords:** City, Utopia, David Harvey, Marxism, Graffiti, Street Art, Globalisation

### **Stadsmure na stedelike strate: utopias van verset**

Lewis Mumford redeneer dat die Stad die eerste (westerse) utopia was en dat die eerste (westerse) Stad ’n utopia was. David Harvey beaam Mumford se stelling, en bevestig die vroeë ineenstrengeling van utopia en die Stad. Die Stad en utopia deel dus skynbaar ’n onlosmaaklike geskiedenis. Ongelukkig het hierdie vroeë konstruk, naamlik die Stad as utopia / utopia as die Stad, spoedig ontaard in die oorspronklike distopia, en sodoende aanleiding gegee tot die wyd aanvaarde idee van die Stad as ’n plek waar menslike lyding en sosiale ongewensdhede hooggety vier. Die wortel van hierdie inherente distopiese aspek van die vroeë Stad kan herlei word na die menslike impuls om te beheer en uit te sluit, en spreek dus nie slegs tot Stede en utopias uit die antieke era nie, maar verwesenskaplik die konkrete ruimtelike en sosiale geografie van die meerderheid van hedendaagse wereldstede. Hierdie artikel interpreteer die werke van straatkunstenaars Banksy, Mustafa Hulusi, Invader en Ben Wilson as verteenwoordigend van die skepping van ’n alternatiewe utopia wat die distopiese elemente van die Stad ondermyn, en wat gebaseer is op ’n kritiese verset wat voortspruit uit die alledaagse kultuur van die stedelike straat. Die werke word bespreek vanuit ’n Marxistiese perspektief soos gebaseer op die werk van David Harvey. Verder word die praktyk van die gekose kunstenaars geïnterpreteer as die visuele konkretisering van implisiete sowel as eksplisiete verset teen die huidige diep struktuur van die distopiese Stad.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Stad, Utopia, David Harvey, Marxisme, Graffiti, Straatkuns, Globalisering

**L**ewis Mumford (1965) makes the case that the first (western) utopia was a City, and that the first (western) City was a utopia, and David Harvey (2000: 156) similarly iterates that “[t]he figures of ‘the city’ and of ‘Utopia’ have long been intertwined”.<sup>1</sup> The fates of these two constructs are thus seemingly indissolubly linked. Limiting his focus to western conceptions of utopia, Mumford (1965: 271) notes that “utopias from Plato to Bellamy<sup>2</sup> have been visualized largely in terms of the city ... the first utopias we know were fabricated in Greece [and] the Greeks were never able to conceive of a human commonwealth except in the concrete form of a city”. Regrettably, this initial construct, the City as utopia / utopia as the City, very shortly mutated into the originary dystopia, inaugurating the conception of the City as a place of suffering and social ills. Mumford (1965: 271) describes this utopia almost instantly derailed

as the outcome of the impulse to control and exclude elements considered to be undesirable or threatening to social order and hierarchy. This is for Mumford the key to understanding the authoritarian aspect of utopias, in general. Whilst the fascist undertone of the vast majority of (pre-World War II) utopias is undeniable, this article seeks to explore alternative conceptions of utopia which consciously undermine authoritarianism and systemic brutality, and which do so within the context of the lived urban experience, or, the city. This alternative utopia is explored in terms of the prototypically urban art forms of graffiti and street art. In order to understand the nature and scope of the alternative conception of urban life embodied in these creative urban interventions, it is necessary to describe the orderly (fascist) utopia in more detail.

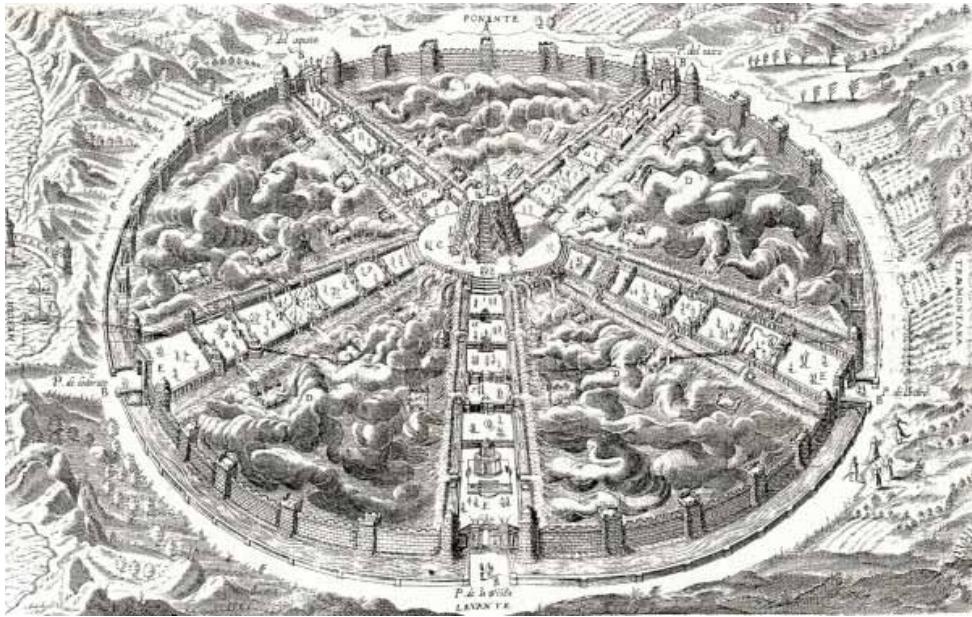
### **The utopia of the wall**

Mumford (1965: 272) finds himself confronted by the totalitarianism of Plato's *Republic* and notes that "far from being a desirable model [the *Republic*] was the prototype of the fascist state, even though neither Hitler nor Mussolini nor yet Stalin exactly qualified for the title of Philosopher-King". The social arrangement envisaged by Plato contrasted with that of earlier agrarian dispensations, where groups of people congregated in villages and practiced subsistence farming. The City needed to be self-contained and independent (thus able to defend itself as well as attack other Cities), and to be constituted of necessarily separate classes, namely 'husbandmen' and craftsmen, military protectors, and "a special caste of 'guardians'" (Mumford 1965: 273). The breakdown of society into producers and consumers, those who 'regulate' the system, by force if needs be, and those in charge, is thus demarcated and extolled. (As an aside, it would be difficult to imagine Plato envisioning himself as a craftsman – given his antagonism towards art, generally – or a guardian, and one is left to speculate that Plato probably saw himself in the role of the king). This utopian vision necessitates a society constituted of individuals who never question their class or their role in it, who mind their own business, take orders and don't retort (Mumford 1965: 273). Mumford (1965: 273-274) fleshes out this lurid vision:

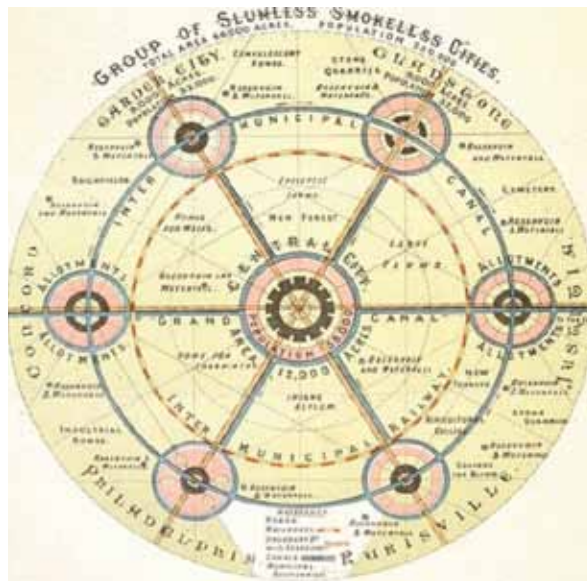
To make sure of perfect obedience, no 'dangerous thoughts' or disturbing emotions must be permitted: hence a strict censorship that extends even to music. To ensure docility, the guardians do not hesitate to feed the community with lies: they form, in fact, an archetypal Central Intelligence Agency within a Platonic Pentagon.

Mumford regrets what for him remains a severely restricted vision witnessed in other early Greek thinkers as well, none of whom were able to imagine a multi-national, poly-cultured polis (to say nothing of a polis amenable to constructive gender interaction), nor the abolition of class hierarchies, or war. In fact, Mumford (1965: 274) concludes, Plato's utopian City is a construct with one aim in mind, namely the optimisation of the capacity to make war, for the reason that "only in war is such stringent authority and coercion temporarily tolerable".

To summarise, the City as utopia, and utopia as the City, was established as a construct to impose and regulate "cosmic order" (Mumford 1965: 281), in social and spatial terms. Thus the notion of order in utopia, and in the City, is central. The City Wall, which holds chaos at bay, becomes the leitmotif of the utopia of order (see figures 1 and 2). Figure 2 shows a group of symmetrically arranged cities, described as 'slumless' and 'smokeless', around a *Central City* as conceived by Sir Ebenezer Howard. Howard's urban vision was inspired by Bellamy's *Looking backward* (Harvey 2000: 165). In Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* not only the City but society as a whole is corralled (see figure 3). More substitutes the excluding Wall with a man-made moat that severs the island from the mainland, but the notion of segregation is no less embodied.



**Figure 1**  
 Artist unknown, engraving of the *City of Truth* as conceived by Bartolomeo Del Bene, 1609  
 (source: *Utopias illustrated S.a.*).



**Figure 2**  
 Sir Ebenezer Howard, illustration of a group of cities around a *Central City*,  
 inspired by Bellamy's *Looking backward*, 1898  
 (source: Bliss 2011).

Echoing Mumford, Northrop Frey (1965: 325) observes that “utopia is primarily a vision of the orderly city, with its abstract pattern of streets and buildings”. Interpreting the impulse to create orderly utopias from a Lacanian perspective, Joshua Nichols (2008: 460) argues that the act of exclusion foregrounds precisely what the utopian City lacks. The City is built upon a desire

to embody order, stability and rationality, but it is arguably the inescapable presence of the opposite of these ideals that compels the City to identify *carriers* of these undesirable iniquities, and then exclude them. The City itself becomes a Wall, or barrier, and exists as “an ideal field of containment or *cordon sanitaire*<sup>3</sup> ... [which] diagnoses and prescribes in an attempt to spatially contain, control, and if possible expel that which it judges to be pathological” (Nichols 2008: 460). This execrable aspect of the City which is constantly yet unsuccessfully in the process of being expelled coalesces as an “urban artefact that is both estranged from the city and at the heart of it” (Nichols 2008: 468), or, the Lacanian extimate – that which is simultaneously exterior and intimate, an internal shadow.



Figure 3  
 Artist unknown, illustration of Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*.  
 (source: Two men enter 2012).

The City thus ontologically houses its own other, the urban abject. Karl Marx (in Nichols 2008: 469) lists this motley (revolting) assembly as “vagabonds, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *macquereaus*, brothel-keepers, porters, *literati*, organ-grinders, ragpickers, knife-grinders, tinkers, beggars, in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass thrown hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème*”. This constitutes Marx’s description of the odious *lumpenproletariat* and neatly encapsulates a simultaneous distaste in chaos, rampant sexuality, indolence, criminality and

foreignness. One of the most discomfiting twentieth century visions of the cleansed and orderly City remains le Corbusier's *Ville Contemporaine* (Contemporary City), where the underclasses have been excised on an heroic scale (see figure 4). Thus the City, despite its Walls and order, is home to the unhomely, a situation which elicits Nichols's (2008: 471) pronouncement that "Architecture begins with shame". It is this architecture, "driven by the neurotic desire for utopia" – thus, the City – that has been, "up to this point, a misadventure" (Nichols 2008: 472).

Nor is the foreboding City solely an ancient phenomenon. Geographer David Harvey (2000) describes what has become of the utopian City (already somewhat of a behemoth), under neoliberal capitalism. He details several 'utopias' simultaneously vying for dominance in his home city, Baltimore. There is developer's utopia, as seen in the renewal of Baltimore's Inner Harbour, closely aligned with yuppie utopia which reflects the gentrification and renewal of the city's Canton District, and several suburban privatopias, or urban gated communities. These are the city's "ghettoes of affluence", 'bourgeois utopias' that "undermine concepts of citizenship, social belonging, and mutual support ... constructed on exclusionary lines ... of segregation (primarily of class but also with a powerful racial thread)" (Harvey 2000: 149-150). Saskia Sassen (2011: 221) similarly refers to "the growing ghettoization of the poor and rich" in the contemporary City. Baltimore's utopias of affluence have developed as an integral part of the increased disparity between the rich and poor which Harvey emphasises is the urban reality of every nation state that has adopted neoliberal capitalism as its model of development and progress, that has given itself over "energetically to the utopianism of the market" (Harvey 2000: 177). Exemplary of the phenomenon of critical disparity that is the hall mark of the neoliberal late modern City, Harvey (2000: 136-137) cites the shocking discrepancy between the world class facilities of the Johns Hopkins hospital, "among the best in the world", and life expectancy in its immediate surrounds which is "among the lowest in the nation and comparable to many of the poorer countries in the world".



**Figure 4**  
**Le Corbusier, aerial view of *La Ville Contemporaine***  
(source: Wolfe 2011).

All of the development driven utopias in Baltimore, and every global City, coalesce in the meta-construct described by Harvey as degenerate utopia. Degenerate utopias (a term formulated by

Louis Marin), “perpetuate the fetish of commodity culture”, and Marin pinpoints Disneyland as a representative example (Harvey 2000: 167). Harvey (2000: 167) explains:

Disneyland eliminates the troubles of actual travel by assembling the rest of the world, properly sanitized and mythologized, into one place of pure fantasy ... stability and harmony are secured through intense surveillance and control ... hierarchal forms of authority preclude conflict or deviation from a social norm ... All of this is degenerate ... because it offers no critique of the existing state of affairs on the outside.

In short, Disneyland, or degenerate utopia, is as fascist as anything Plato could formulate, but with previously unimaginable totalised surveillance and control enabled by technology and set within the neoliberal dream of boundless consumption.

### **Wall Street utopia**

How did the City, originally conceived as a utopia, become such a seemingly permanently ossified dystopia? One answer lies in the nature of utopia itself as explained by Mumford – utopia is born from the need for permanence and power. In the ancient City, this power was centred (as visualised in depictions of the literary and architectural utopias above), and its sphere of influence contained. The late modern City has not managed to evade this dystopian deep structure, but has merely become the concrete node of a much broader, more abstract and more ubiquitous system linked by global flows of people, goods, ideas, and, primarily, money. The dominant class, currently instrumental in the accumulation of a critical amount of wealth, determines the nature of the current utopia, shapes it to its needs, regardless of the “terrible trajectory that daily life [consequently] assumes” (Harvey 2000: 155).

The City, in the terms identified by Mumford and iterated by Harvey, has become the microcosm of the macrocosm that is global capitalist exchange, or, in Harvey’s (2000: 156) terminology, “raw money power”. Harvey (2000: 175) refers to the market driven aspect of capitalism as the utopianism of process, “by far the most powerful utopianism ... throughout the history of capitalism”. The perceived benefits of the free market were articulated by Adam Smith in the late eighteenth century, who argued that the free market economy was a system “in which individual desires, avarice, greed, drives, creativity, and the like could be mobilized through the hidden hand of the perfected market to the social benefit of all” (Harvey 2000: 175). In order to free the market, state intervention ostensibly needed to be minimised. An inherent irony of the ideology of *laissez-faire* capitalism however, is that it does in fact need to be regulated, often in ways that clash with notions of human rights and social justice. Harvey (2000: 178) states: “The free market, if it is to work, requires a bundle of institutional arrangements and rules that can be guaranteed only by something akin to state power. The freedom of the market has to be guaranteed by law, authority, force, and, *in extremis*, by violence” (original emphasis). This conception of ostensibly free *laissez-faire* trade became the principal trope of nineteenth century economists, and is the “ideology that has become so dominant in certain of the advanced capitalist countries [over] the last twenty years ... the system to which we are again and again told, ‘there is no alternative’” (Harvey 2000: 175).

Relating the forces unleashed by the global adoption (or, alternatively, enforcement) of capitalist ideologies, currently utopia as the City is predicated less on a stabilised, ordered *form* than on anarchic processes, more specifically, the processes generated by capitalist exchange and the (un)free market (Harvey 2000: 173). This utopia is not constituted of wholly disembodied

dynamism however, and shapes the urban environment in specific, material ways. Harvey (2000: 178) notes that “free-market capital accumulation plays across a variegated geographical terrain of resource endowments, cultural histories, communications possibilities, labor quantities and qualities”, and that this interplay of forces “produces an intensification of uneven geographical development in standards of living and life prospects”. An ostensibly democratising and equalising system thus acts as the engine to systemically inherent and intensifying inequality, which gives the utopian City of late modernity its particular form: pockets of dizzying affluence interspersed with ghettos and slums. This City is not regulated by a tangible boundary wall, but by the market forces emanating from Wall Street, which are every bit as exclusionary and regulatory as the ordering structures of the most rigid form-based utopias from antiquity onwards. Wall Street City has its own other: the blue collar worker, the migrant worker, the homeless, the unemployed, the refugee, the foreigner, the dissident: all members of the disenfranchised or excluded mass of humanity that seethes beneath the surface of the civilised City. The regulating capitalist Wall is selectively permeable (when for instance migrant workers are required to get the work done), but places a strangle hold on the actual opportunities and mobility of the new *lumpenproletariat*, and endangers the very odds of their physical survival. It is a less physically tangible wall, but more dangerously insidious, and cordons off whole generations and classes from reaching the safe, happy island of the mobile middle classes and the bourgeois autonomies and privileges that are, systemically, their allotment.

The mapped physical and ideological landscapes of the walled City as utopia and Wall Street utopia are gloomy. Mumford (1965: 278) feels that utopias of order, from antiquity to the twentieth century, lack “the cooperative and generative functions of life – feeling, emotion, playfulness, exuberance, free fantasy ... the liberating sources of unpredictable and uncontrollable creativity” without which “every utopia is a sterile desert, unfit for human occupation”. Besides stifling urban life, the latter (Wall Street utopia), is regarded by some as an actual impediment to survival. Martin Albrow (2011: 242) problematises the modern State’s “monopoly of legitimate violence” whereby global wars are justified in the name of democracy and development. Sassen (2011: 225) similarly highlights the danger posed to the modern City and its inhabitants by economically motivated global wars, noting that “[t]he disarticulation between national security and human security is becoming increasingly visible”. These ‘asymmetric’ conflicts also manifest as a war on the environment, and Sassen regards the erosion of human security and environmental integrity as an agenda for change.

Despite its many ominous facets, Harvey (2000) argues that utopia should not be abolished altogether, but reimagined, and calls for dialectical utopianism, where imaginative play and open experimentation form part of utopian endeavour. Rejecting the idea that there is no alternative to the neoliberal monoverse and the hold that it has on the modern urban landscape would permit “the exploration of a wide range of human potentialities (different modes of collective living, of gender relations, of production-consumption styles ...) [and would be a] means to explore alternative and emancipatory strategies” (Harvey 2000: 182). Michel Foucault challenged the spatial grid of late modern cities and the disciplining system that underlies it, by introducing the concept of heterotopia, identified as a space in which “difference, alterity, and the ‘other’ might flourish or ... actually be constructed” (Harvey 2000: 184). Of primary importance to the concept of an alternative utopia is the notion of agency, which foregrounds the reality that the social order has been constructed, and can therefore be deconstructed. Rather than exclude and regulate, altertopia takes cognisance of simultaneity, choice, diversity and difference, and, for Harvey (2000: 184):

enables us to look upon the multiple forms of deviant and transgressive behaviours and politics that occur in urban spaces ... as valid and potentially meaningful reassertions to some kind of right to shape parts of the city in a different image. It forces us to recognize how important it is to have spaces ... within which life is experienced differently [evincing] radically different social processes [that] disrupt the homogeneity to which society ... typically clings.

In this, the creative dissident plays a pivotal role, and Roberto M. Unger (in Harvey 2000: 187) argues that the “rigid grid of functional allocations ... deserve[s] to be smashed up at the micro-level of cultural-revolutionary defiance and incongruity”, a demolition on the scale of the street that nevertheless potentiates a broad, lived alternative reality.

And just as the City of stabilised form (unwillingly but by necessity) houses its abject other, the degenerate, anarchic utopia of the free market carries the anarchic seed of its own possible deconstruction within itself. Despite the repressive pervasiveness of the monoverse of neoliberal capitalist ideology and its global reach, the excluded are sensitised to the fact that there are indeed alternative ways of envisioning civil sociality and of practicing such alternatives. These alternative utopias are undermining, subversive, dangerous, funny, creative, playful, and poignant, and they are concretised in the streets of the late modern polis.

### **The utopia of the street**

The utopias of deconstruction, which Harvey refers to as dialectical utopias, are envisaged here to be embodied in the praxis of subversive street artists in the late modern metropolis. The emphasis in this utopia of the street falls on agency and alterity, and the following section reads examples of street art as the manifestation of the will to dissent and to give artistic form to urban and systemic alienation. The utopia of the street does not seek to replace the given system with a new, overarching system, but to humanise the barrenness and hostility of Wall Street utopia and to turn the City into a city, with its potentially messy multivalency intact. In this sense, street art and the praxis of creating graffiti are interpreted as part of an ethical project.

Humour and the foregrounding of absurdity play a role in the utopia of the street, and can be deeply subversive. Georges Bataille (2001: 176) describes laughter as “the explosive and sudden revelation of the presence of being [which] casts a glance ... into the void of life”. Bringing the absurdities of the City to light is interpreted here as the production of difference, and is argued to be the core aspect of subversivity in general, and of the subversive street art discussed here, in particular. The work of London based graffiti artist Banksy is arguably exemplary of subversive, humorous street art, or, at the very least, can be described as of the best known street art globally. His praxis has earned him the accolade of representing “the cunning voice of dissent” (Lewisohn 2008: 117).

The graffiti in figure 5 is a twist on anarchist Emma Goldman’s pronouncement that ‘If voting changed anything they’d make it illegal’ (Lovely 2011). Banksy is thus reflecting on the iniquities of a system that pacifies the populace with the illusion that their vote has an effect on the system. Technically, the surface of the system can be seen to alter with the change of candidates and sometimes even of political parties at the helm, but the measurable effect of voting behaviour on the deep system is moot. Banksy is furthermore reflecting on his praxis – which he describes as Existencilism (Peiter 2009: 28) – by comparing its regulation (criminalisation) with what he regards to be the real crime of consumerist society. In response to the criminalisation of graffiti, Banksy concedes that vandalism is indeed the order of the day: he positions himself as a political vandal with an “anti-capitalist and anti-establishment message depict[ing] ... the vulnerable



and disadvantaged” (Peiter 2009: 26). However, whilst his ‘brandalism’ makes the authorities queasy, Banksy (in Peiter 2009: 28) observes that the billboards depicting Donna Karan and Ralph Lauren represent the *real* vandalism of the City, and comments that you “still sprain your ankle on a broken pavement in front of such a billboard, because the money doesn’t go back to the street itself ... real vandals come with smiles and suits and a great new winter line at knock-down prices”. Thus images generated in order to sustain and stimulate consumer culture colonise the street and suggest options in terms of which product to consume next, but don’t provide options that could enhance real emancipatory social mobility for the majority of those subjected to the images. Lastly, of course, Banksy is implying that graffiti can indeed change the system, and can do so by challenging it, and by making the invisible visible. Whybrow (2010: 197) contextualises the illegality of graffiti against the system it proscribes, stating:

It must be sanctioned, if you will, as transgressive by those ... considered to be within the law. It has to be *disapproved*. As writing [graffiti] it *hurts*: it is the outlaw’s expression of the pain of exclusion and dispossession, and it wounds what is ‘in law’. Ultimately the act is, as John Berger says of the misunderstood terrorist ... ‘a way of making sense of, and thus transcending despair’” (original emphasis).



**Figure 5**  
**Banksy, *If graffiti changed anything it would be illegal*, London,**  
**corner of Clipstone and Cleveland streets, 2011**  
**(source: Unurth Street Art S.a.).**

Another dissident of the City of London, Mustafa Hulusi, doesn’t practice graffiti but creates street installations that “test the bounds of legality” (Lewisohn 2008: 113). Hulusi re-appropriates the offensive (but legal) billboard that Banksy refers to in an act of culture jamming, or subvertising. Lewisohn (2008: 115) describes culture jamming (or culture hacking), as the act of “speaking back to the media, back to governments and back to corporations,” and traces the roots of culture hacking back to the actions of the mid-twentieth century Situationists.<sup>4</sup> Hulusi’s billboard message *London is a shit-hole* (see figure 6), was created directly after the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005, and with it Hulusi creates maximum disparity between the positioning of London as a world class, diverse city resilient to the onslaught represented by the bombings (as encapsulated by the slogan ‘We are Lon-ONE-rs’ popularised after the bombings),

and the inescapable daily experience of exclusion, discrimination and oppression borne by the City's 'other'. Hulusi could be accused of cynicism and even viciousness, but, as is the case with Banksy's graffiti, his work is meant to make hyper-visible the cynicism and viciousness of the neoliberal dispensation whose message, that "We're all one big happy family and there are no problems and there's social equality and everyone's got freedom of speech, and *tourists, please don't flee*" (Hulusi in Lewisohn 2008: 113), he is trying to expose in all its commercial vacuity (emphasis added). Clearly the togetherness implied by the 'we' that is 'London', does not address his lived, alienated experience of the city, and he is all too aware that the 'togetherness' referred to only speaks to the inclusion of those actively buoying the modes of production (by means of their consumption), and who never raise a voice of dissent against the Wall. In the end it is investor confidence that shapes the map of the City and which determines who does and who does not 'belong'. The work was so disturbing that Hulusi's message was removed in record time, along with the entire billboard it was on.



**Figure 6**  
**Mustafa Hulusi, *London is a shit-hole*, billboard 'subvertisement',**  
**London, 2005**  
**(source: Lewisohn 2008: 114).**

Some utopic praxis is less politically forthright and more playful. Paris based artist Invader, who refers to his works as *Space Invaders*, cements plaques constructed from mosaic tiles onto walls in cities across the world. His images derive from archaic computer games, including the original 1970s Space Invaders, and the mosaic tiles perfectly simulate the pixilation of the early digital icons (see figure 7). The artist has methodically mapped out his 'invasions' in every city, and his official website<sup>5</sup> shows a map of the world with the pin-pointed invasions. Some of the invaded sites have slow, cumbersome navigation that emphasises the arcade game context of his work. Invader wants to effect a counter-takeover of the world with his irreverent and often beautiful works, and he keeps a meticulous record of the re-conquest by numbering, photographing and indexing his installations. He explains his method as follows: "For every city I invade, I make a note of where each Invader is on a map. After certain invasions, I've drawn up an 'invasion map'

which is a kind of record of how the invasion happened ... So far I've produced 15 'invasion maps' (out of 35 invaded cities)" (Space Invaders 2008). (The French version of this site gives a number of 16 maps and 38 cities).

The figure of 38 invaded cities represents the artist's 2008 count, and a 2012 site tallies an estimated 77 cities with more than 3000 artworks (Street-artist de la semaine 2012). Invader's latest wave seems to have taken place in Hong Kong and a February 2014 entry on the *Cheers from Space* site reads: "I'm just back from Hong Kong where I have installed 48 new pieces in the city. Total score: 74 Pieces / 2180 Points" (Cheers from Space 2014). The score for a 'wave' (a series of sites invaded in a city in one trip), is tallied by adding the score for each invasion, which ranges from 10 to 50, depending on the size and nature of the image, as well as logistical difficulties encountered. In 2009 his Paris invasions stood at more than four hundred (Peiter 2009: 32), and in 2011, one thousand (Space Invaders 2011). It is hard to keep track however, as the artist says he has seen photographs of 'his' work from cities he has never been to (Space Invaders 2008). This emulation doesn't overly perturb him though, as it increases the 'viral' aspect of his praxis. The artist regards himself as a space hacker, which calls to mind the playful aspect of digital transgression: that often (non-malicious) hackers hack simply because they can.



**Figure 7**  
**Invader, *Space Invader*, cemented mosaic, location unknown**  
(source: Street Art Utopia 2011).

The works are fragile in the sense that they cannot be removed without breaking them, and therefore cannot be privately owned or consumed. They cannot be commoditised. This aspect of

the work most directly addresses the artist's political intent, in that they are attractive, but resist assimilation into the money system. Whereas even Banksy's work, as outspoken as the artist is against capitalism, is physically hewn from walls to become private property, Invader deftly evades the insatiable capacity of commerce to assimilate and commoditise all, including that which is most antithetical to it. For street art to be political, and to constitute the utopic praxis addressed here, it needs to resist assimilation into main stream art business, and any 'street artist' who is complicit in sustaining such commerce cannot be counted here as a co-creator of the utopia of the street, the utopia of the *city* of the outsider inhabitant. 'Commissioned graffiti', for instance, is an oxymoronic concept, turning street art praxis into ordinary art praxis: the fact that art is *in* the street doesn't inevitably designate it as street art, and certainly not as utopic praxis.

The illegality of Invader's work also plainly politicises his activity and it is essential to recognise that street artists do not merely 'tolerate' the fact that their activity is illegal, but that the transgressive nature of their art constitutes for them the core of its significance. Invader's mosaics are aesthetically attractive, and Lewisohn (2008: 133) notes that this may make it "appear totally apolitical" but that "it is in fact the contrast of the nostalgic, utopian imagery [the artist] places on the street and the often grim reality of the context that provides the work with a sense of political poignancy". Lastly, although the artist highlights the rigours of his activity by declaring (in Lewisohn 2008: 133) "[y]ou work at night, you're afraid of being caught by the cops, you become very paranoid", he also regards this aspect of his work as part of the game of his invasion. When asked whether he has had trouble with the law he answers: "Sometimes, but that's part of the game. Then it's a case of 'go to jail and miss three turns'" (Space Invader 2008).

The work of Central London based outsider artist Ben Wilson is the least apparently political of the examples discussed here. However, his status as an outsider makes his art eminently relevant to the production of street utopics as a subtly incendiary praxis. Wilson started his career by studying art at Middlesex University, but found the approach in formal art education too rigid (Wallflower Dispatches 2010) and dropped out. His approach to art making is one that emphasises the environment, whether he is creating assembled installation pieces from found wood, or painting on small discs of chewing gum stuck to the urban concrete – his main focus and passion (see figure 8). That it occurred to Wilson to paint on the otherwise utterly invisible and disregarded detritus of city life at all, attests to the close relationship he has to the environment he happens to find himself in. As part of his daily work he notices what he refers to as 'urban tumbleweed' (Wallflower Dispatches 2010), or the hair, glass and effluent that the urban denizens shed or leave behind by dwelling in the city.

Wilson is involved in various creative projects to sustain himself financially, but his focus is on the pavement works which he makes for his own enjoyment. His technique, of heating the gum with a blow torch in order to create a more durable artefact, evolved only after it became clear to him that bystanders wanted the artworks to last (Wallflower Dispatches 2010). Like Invader's work, the chewing gum images resist commodification, and in fact speak directly to (and transmogrify as by magic) the culture of consuming and waste central to western and westernised societies. Wilson paints whatever he fancies, and also interacts with bystanders and depicts stories recounted to him. The works become "small signs of personal connection, a humanising of an anonymous environment" (Whybrow 2010: 198). This de-brutalising act can indeed be seen as the artist's primary utopic contribution to the non-space of the inner city. He is adamant that he does not take commissions for his pavement art: "I call it requests ... I didn't ask to do pictures of people, people ask me. That's very important ... People can give me money if they want" (Wallflower Dispatches 2010).

As innocuous as Wilson's contribution to city life seems, he has not escaped the oppressive weight of a system that insists that its inhabitants consume in an orderly fashion or suffer the consequences, as meted out by police who regulate the polis.<sup>6</sup> Reflecting on Wilson's travails with the law, Bunting (2010: 214) regrets "what little space is left for spontaneity, or even the gentlest subversion, on our streets". Wilson has been arrested for the offense of criminal damage (which was found to be an invalid charge, and dropped), and beat severely enough to prevent him from working for a number of months. A sample of his DNA was forcefully attained, and now sits in a national database and will do so until he dies, or reaches his hundredth birthday (Bunting 2010: 215). Beside this worst incident, he has been harassed and stop-searched by the police while quietly going about his painting, on several hundred occasions over the last few years (Wallflower Dispatches 2010). Thus, paradoxically, while littering *is* a public offence, painting *on* litter does not constitute damage to property, and therefore does not constitute a crime. The littering population is furthermore never harassed to the same extent (unless under pretext), and this is perhaps because their conduct can be seen to conform more closely to what is considered 'normal' consuming behaviour.



Figure 8  
Ben Wilson, *Miniature city scene*, acrylic on chewing gum, 2006, London  
(source: Wallflower Dispatches 2010).

Wilson is puzzled by what he, like Banksy, regards as the real vandalism of the street: the advertising media, and its message, that encroaches on urban consciousness with or without the consent of the urban dweller. Wilson is antagonistic to the invasiveness of commerce which he finds to be a spatial as well as psychological menace:

I do see some patterns, which I find abhorrent. One of them is how things are becoming homogenised; chain stores, uniformity ... Advertising and public spaces are very controlled. Really, advertisers have a monopoly over public space (and the public mind) ... Advertising is getting more and more into people's faces all the time and then I am painting a piece of chewing gum and I am getting all this mayhem (Wallflower Dispatches 2010).

The last example discussed here as utopic praxis throws light on a globally proscribed shadow, proscribed, that is, accept for the stakeholders who keep it in place (World and nation 2003). Banksy's artwork is a non-violent response to a violent and violating phenomenon (Olberg 2013: 6), the West Bank Wall, part of a projected 708 km<sup>7</sup> barrier that encloses the West Bank area on three sides (the fourth side being comprised of the River Jordan to the East which is the border between Palestine and Jordan in this region). The Wall separates Palestinian and Israeli territory more or less along the Green Line (as established in 1949, and challenged by Israel in 1967), with deviations from the Line into the West Bank territory where there is fertile land and water on that side of the divide (B'Tselem 2006; Barrier Monitoring Unit 2011). The West Bank Wall is the improbable contemporary embodiment of the most anti-social forms of exclusion conceived in the worst of the many utopias of order in the history of utopias, beginning with Plato.

Banksy's work on the Wall is interpreted here as exemplary of destabilising, political, utopic agency as practiced by the street artist, the artist of the city. Banksy attacks the exclusionary Wall of the utopia of control by making its conceivable destruction visible, giving its non-existence form. There are several examples of Banksy's works on the Wall in which the concrete has been dematerialised, smashed, crashed through, perforated, marked for 'cutting', and vaporised, allowing the sky to be seen 'through' its menacing bulk. The work in figure 10 shows a man pulling a section of an eight by three meter concrete slab as if it were a drape and expressly foregrounds agency, as human intervention with the barrier is what causes its nullification here. This is in contrast with other works by Banksy in which the 'hole' in the Wall is calmly surveyed, like a scenic view through a window, or where a scene depicts the Wall at some point 'after' its pulverisation. Here, the Wall is in the process of being dematerialised. Kifah Fanni, a resident and artist in Ramallah, observes (in Parsberg 2006) of graffiti on the Wall and of this work in particular: "I don't believe the painting is institutionalizing the wall; I don't see it as acceptance of the wall. Especially the painting where the wall is removed like a curtain showing a view behind ... It's a virtual view; the Israelis can limit our sight, but they can't limit our imagination".

Banksy, by targeting the Wall as a site for his art, highlights a very foul contemporary curtailing of movement and co-existence, and there can scarcely be a greater contrast than that between the grim fascism embodied by the Wall, and the idyllic island scene exposed by the efforts of the art work's protagonist. Banksy shows the viewer the diametric opposite of what there is in the world: instead of a crushing barrier, a flimsy screen. He simultaneously intensifies awareness of its grim existence and purpose by depicting the island paradise from the bleak reality of an open air prison, an obscene inversion of More's island whose inhabitants voluntarily severed ties with their mainland.

In this, the artist demonstrates his superb understanding, and application, of the effect of making the shadow visible in a place selected to create maximal political dissonance. His installation of an effigy of a life sized Guantanamo Bay prisoner inside the boundary of a rollercoaster ride in Disneyland, California (2006), admirably demonstrates this strategy. Banksy's Disneyland installation de-sanitises the degenerate utopia that is Disneyland, brings a representative of the current global other (the Arab 'terrorist') into the core of consumer culture, whose inhabitants

would otherwise be blissfully unaware of the malpractices perpetrated on the ‘other’ side of the world in the name of state security. In an article on dissident art on the West Bank Wall, Parsberg (2006) notes Giorgio Agamben’s observations in *State of exception* (2005): “To show law in its non-relation to life and life in its non-relation to law means to open a space between them for human action, which once claimed for itself the name of ‘politics’”. The deed of showing the effects of a utopia of order on the lived experience of those not sanctioned by its system, is a political act which opens up a space of contestation. The act draws aside the veil of illusion regarding the level of (un)commonality in a commonwealth, the lack of actually manifested democracy in a neoliberal world order. In the words of Dan Frodsham (2012: 88), Banksy is rehabilitating utopia, “harness[ing] [utopia’s] potential as a dynamic mechanism for radical social transformation”. Banksy’s artistic practice “relocates the ‘no-place’ of utopia in the midst of the here and now ... thus creating incongruity within the same space”, and in doing so, instigates “a critical dialectic between *virtual* and real” Frodsham (2012: 88), or, with reference to the praxis described here, between the utopia of the City, and that of the city.



**Figure 10**  
**Banksy. West bank Wall, Ramallah, Palestine**  
(source: The Real Sasha 2011).

## **Conclusion**

The production of the utopia of the city, or, the utopia of the inclusive urban populace, whose democratic options in dwelling in the metropolis have not been whittled down to choosing between products, constitutes the praxis of the street artists discussed here. It is interpreted as “a form of dissent and self-affirmation ... a political act” (Lewisohn 2008: 100), particularly within the framework of capitalism and its effect on urban (as well as global) geographies. This aspect of the subversive utopia of the street aligns with Louis Marin’s description of utopia as a critique of the dominant society, a re-assessment that creates a discourse of alterity outside

of the ideological parameters of such a society (Frodsham 2012: 91). Street art which makes the alternative to modern urban existence visible, and thereby conceptually tangible, is, to use Marin's words, "a powerful, radical tool that creates the 'historical conditions of possibility'" (Marin in Frodsham 2012: 91), and a discursive device that "wedges itself between reality and its other" (Marin 1984: 197).

The space of the street is where "new forms of the social and the political can be *made*" (Sassen 2011: 574) (original emphasis), and in the framework of the utopic production of street art, can be, and is, made by the dissident artist. This article has briefly analysed the works of Banksy, Mustafa Hulusi, Invader and Ben Wilson within a Marxist framework as explicated by David Harvey, and interprets the praxis of the artists discussed as explicit or implicit critique of the oppressive aspects of capitalism. These oppressive aspects of the deep structure of contemporary capitalist-democratic western societies have been read as the late modern manifestations of the dystopic early utopias of order and control. Thus the modern City and its global Wall constitute the sites of contemporary dystopic utopia. The *city*, on the other hand – an urban environment that coexists with / within that of the City – is infected by the tactics of its Lacanian extimate, its 'other', including the street artist, and has become the heterotopic site from where 'positive epidemics' (Sassen's term) of alterity can 'ooze'.

Echoing Sassen and Harvey, Kostovicova and Glasius (2011: 4) draw attention to the importance of not 'giving in' to the structural determinism of neoliberalism, and of internalising the fact that (market driven) globalisation is made, and can be unmade and remade, made differently, and that in this the role of agency is critical. They furthermore argue against a simplistic conception of powerlessness which positions the disenfranchised as the contemporary "wretched of the earth" (Kostovicova & Glasius 2011: 5), and champion a "bottom-up approach to globalization" that "gives voice to those denied agency, [or rather] excluded agents". In this way exclusion is not an ontologically fixed designation, not an either / or subject position, but takes various forms on a sliding scale of inclusion / exclusion. It is important to note that exclusion can also be voluntary in the case of the political dissident. The artists discussed here represent excluded agents who have taken up the task of making the contestability of globalisation explicitly visible. They articulate the indispensable 'small voice of history' contributed by the 'uneminent' (Rothschild 2011: 229). If street art is "an irritant, an unwanted autograph or tattoo anonymously etched on the body of official urban culture", it is perceived as such because it gives visible expression to the City's shadow, to the fact that in the City, "all is *not* well" (Whybrow 2010: 197) (original emphasis). Street art is at war with modernism itself, and, more particularly, with the modes of urban existence that have been shaped by the forces of late capitalism. Lewisohn (2008: 87) accurately observes that if street art (perceived as vandalism), seems uncouth and barbaric, it is so because it reflects the barbarism of the world in which it exists. Yet far from perpetuating the barbarism of the City, street art produces, gives form to, potentially activates, the alternate reality that is, or could be, the utopia of the city, and the street.

## Notes

1 In this article the capitalisation of the word 'City' indicates a specific construct, namely the notion of the city as an authoritarian utopia of control. Similarly, the capitalised form of the word 'Wall' is used to indicate a system of control rather than a tangible barricade.

2 Mumford is referring to Edward Bellamy's *Looking backward, 2000-1887*, published in 1888. In it, Bellamy envisages American urban life in the year 2000.



- 3 *Cordon sanitaire* is a French term indicating a barrier intended to prevent the spread of infectious disease (Treffry 1998: 535).
- 4 Situationist International consisted of members of the political-cultural Marxist avant-garde in Europe, and artistic influences included Dada, or anti-art. Formed in 1957, its members were addressing the problematic aspects of urbanism which were becoming clear after the War.
- 5 See <http://www.space-invaders.com/som.html>.
- 6 Harvey (2000: 157) notes that the word 'police' "derives from the Greek 'polis' which means 'city'".
- 7 Construction on the Wall began on April 14 2002, and its projected length is given as between 700 and 708 km, the latter being the projection in 2011. By 2006 51% of this estimated final length had been constructed (B'Tselem 2006) and by July 2012, approximately 62% had been completed (Barrier Monitoring Unit 2011). The Wall costs Israel an average of \$260 million in maintenance annually (Zonszein 2014).

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