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New York City’s moral panic over graffiti

Normalizing neoliberal penalty and paving the way for growth machines

Ronald Kramer

Introduction

For the last forty years or so, political elites in New York City have been creating an image of graffiti writing (and street art) as a monolithic destructive force, one that invariably wreaks havoc upon the city’s cultural, economic, political, and social wellbeing. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, insofar as graffiti was overwhelmingly produced in an illegal manner, it is perhaps not surprising that this perspective gained currency. However, since the 1990s, a period in which graffiti writing culture increasingly sought legal avenues of expression and social acceptance, such an image is radically losing (or at least should be) whatever plausibility it was able to take for granted in the past. That the official discourse concerning graffiti is so out of step with historical trends suggests that political leaders are not interested in understanding writing culture, but in continuing to fuel a moral panic.

Stanley Cohen (1972) initially traced the idea of moral panic through an analysis of how powerful social actors, such as the mass media and agencies of social control, reacted to the “mods” and the “rockers,” two British subcultures of the 1960s. Subsequently, Hall et al. (1978; 1976) and Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) offered accounts that were pitched at a more abstract, theoretical level. Despite their differences, these approaches all seem to agree that moral panics consist of discursive practices that profoundly misrepresent some kind of behavior, and that such negative portrayals pave the way for disproportionate responses. As is implied by these remarks, moral panics are usually steered by relatively powerful groups and are directed against those who occupy marginalized social locations.

Although there may be agreement on how to recognize a panic when it occurs, there is less agreement on what motivates powerful social groups to over-react to relatively inconsequential behaviors. According to Erikson (1966), for example, panics are motivated by the need to maintain social solidarity, but for Hall et al. (1978), panics are driven by the need to divert attention away from the crises of capitalism. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) argue that various social groups may fan panics for a wide array of reasons.
In this chapter, I demonstrate that the official reaction to graffiti in New York City throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century is best understood as a moral panic. Following this, I suggest that particular economic and political interests currently drive powerful elites to over-react to graffiti. To explore these themes, I rely on an analysis of approximately 3,000 pages of documents consisting of newspaper articles from the *New York Times* and *Daily News*, and press releases, political memos, and archived material from the administrations of Mayor Giuliani and Mayor Bloomberg.

As neoliberalism ushered in growing economic inequalities, problems such as homelessness, unemployment, and underemployment became entrenched. In the United States and elsewhere, the state has responded to those who are more or less excluded from the economy in an extremely punitive manner (Wacquant 2009; Pratt & Eriksson 2013). In this context, I believe that graffiti operated as “gateway penalty.” That is, it provided an easy target that political elites could isolate and disparage in order to normalize punitive responses to the social problems that accompany neoliberal governance.

I also argue that, at the urban level, anti-graffiti rhetoric and practice currently serves the interests of landed capitalists, or what Logan and Molotch (1987) refer to as “growth machines.” At the expense of using land to satisfy basic needs, growth machines ultimately seek to extract the maximum profit possible from how space is put to use. Particular strategies here include enticing corporations to locate their headquarters in the city, gentrifying neighborhoods and transforming the urban environment into a hospitable tourist destination for privileged social classes. As their discourse makes clear, political elites understand graffiti as a practice that threatens such interests and, as such, must be eradicated from the city.

**“Folk devils” caught in a “spiral of signification”**

According to Cohen (1972) and Hall *et al.* (1978), an essential ingredient of any moral panic is extremely negative portrayals of certain behaviors or events. Cohen conveyed this idea through his concept of “folk devils,” which are created by the mass media through metaphor and symbolization. Similarly, Hall *et al.* (1978) developed the notion of convergence, a process in which benign behaviors and social groups are conflated with more threatening forms of social behavior. Convergences essentially push relatively harmless behaviors beyond societal thresholds of tolerance, thereby allowing room to rationalize draconian responses.

Anti-graffiti rhetoric has consistently painted graffiti writers as folk devils and, through various convergences, construed the practice as capable of bringing western civilization to its knees. While separating graffiti writers from humanity often involves portraying them as animals and psychologically defective individuals (Kramer 2009), the most common trope used to push graffiti into the realm of the “socially intolerable” involves drawing erroneous links between writing culture and violent forms of criminality.

One such image suggests that despite the disparity between misdemeanors and felonies, the proclivity to commit either type of offence will be found within the same “soul.” The notion of a soul that harbors a broad spectrum of criminality is often conveyed allegorically. In an article looking at a series of crimes committed in one particular neighborhood in New York City, for example, we are first told about several incidents of violent crime including the “savage” beating of a transit police officer; the beating of an immigrant “to death with boards and pipes”; the “pummeling” of several navy officers; and a stabbing “outside a bar.” We are also told about an act of arson in which a park building was burnt “to the ground.” These crimes are then attributed to several youth groups within the neighborhood who, when a little less preoccupied with beating people to death, “seem to be mostly interested in drinking beer, occasional smoking
of marijuana,” and “scribbling graffiti.” Despite the lack of evidence, park authorities assure us that the torching of the park building was committed by a group of teenagers angered by the fact that “the graffiti they inscribed on the park house was repeatedly being blotted out” (Kleinfield 1994).

When allegory and speculation are not used, inaccurate language will be favored. Generally speaking, the convergence most commonly used to make it seem as though there is no difference between graffiti writing and criminal activity of a more menacing nature works by erasing the distinction between writing culture and gangs.

This usually involves a failure to acknowledge the differences between “gangs” and “crews.” In one article, for instance, we are told about “the elaborate designs of (-) gangs – which are also called posses and crews” (Brenner 1993). This seemingly simple and straightforward statement is false in more ways than one. First, to the extent that the notion of “elaborate designs” evokes what is known among graffiti writers as a “piece,” it must be noted that “gangs” do not generally produce “pieces.” Thus, what the first part of this statement does is take a practice from graffiti writing culture – “piecing” – and labels it as something produced by “gangs.” Second, although some gangs may refer to themselves as “posses,” they do not refer to themselves as “crews.” The obverse of this is just as true: Graffiti writing “crews” do not refer to themselves as “gangs.” The two cultural groupings each possess a unique historical lineage, pursue different activities, and engage in different practices. As such, they are distinct entities.

Some reports drop the subtleties altogether and simply claim that graffiti writers are becoming more “gang-like” and that one of the signs of this is a supposedly new inclination to act in a violent manner. We may be told about “ego-driven graffiti scribblers” who have “turned to violence” and now refer to themselves as “tag bangers” (Drummond Ayres Jr. 1994). Or about young graffiti writers who “carry a spray can in one hand [and] a gun in the other” (Terry 2000). “Tag bangers” may be young, or even “little tiny kids,” but we must not be deceived about the threat they present. As one transit officer informs us: “I always loosen the holster strap on my gun before I move in [to arrest graffiti writers]. You never know what is going to happen these days” (Drummond Ayres Jr. 1994).

Much of this emotive rhetoric finds its “intellectual” counterpart in the broken windows thesis, which asserts that minor forms of disorder, if left unchecked, will invite serious forms of crime and that this will lead to a spiral of urban decline (Wilson & Kelling 1982). Since its rise to prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the broken windows theory has utilized graffiti as one of the central indicators for its concept of disorder. As such, the theory provides much of the epistemic foundation for the anti-graffiti efforts orchestrated by officials in New York City. However, despite all the political faith in broken windows, the thesis remains surrounded by uncertainty.

Aside from the many contradictions within political rhetoric that suggest broken windows amounts to less than an accurate reflection of empirical conditions (Kramer 2010), social scientists working from within a variety of perspectives have also undermined the thesis. Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) emphasize the importance of “collective efficacy” for reducing crime. With the concept of collective efficacy, they suggest that to the extent a community works together to solve problems, they develop a sense of cohesiveness, and it is this that provides a defense against criminal activity. Harcourt and Ludwig (2006) have provided compelling statistical analyses that suggest different variables, such as fluctuations in crack markets and broader economic trends, are better able to account for the changes in rates of serious crime that many major U.S. cities saw throughout the 1990s. Other empirical studies find, at best, very limited support for the thesis (Taylor 2001; Corman & Mocan 2005; Worral 2006; St. Jean 2007; Snyder 2009).
Regardless of its known limitations, the broken windows thesis is cited approvingly by political elites and within the mass print media ad nauseam. On occasion, government publications have simply assumed the empirical validity of broken windows (e.g. Russell et al. 2002).

Exterminating graffiti: technology fetishism, prison, limits to private property

As theory on moral panics would lead us to expect, these overly emotive portrayals and pseudo-intellectual understandings of graffiti push it into a zone of criminality that rationalizes disproportionate responses from the state. According to Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994: 38) the concept of moral panic rests on disproportionality and can be demonstrated in a number of ways. Given that the official reaction to graffiti is based on ideas concerning its social and economic ramifications, disproportionality can be said to exist when the (official) response to an activity is excessive in light of available empirical evidence concerning the objective harm caused by that activity.

Aside from the millions of dollars spent each year to combat graffiti, the excessive response to the phenomenon is evident in new policing strategies, the growing intensity of punishment for graffiti writing, and the sustained attempt to eradicate graffiti as an aesthetic category, even if this means clamping down on private property owners. This multi-pronged attack occurs even though there is little empirical support for the notion that graffiti will lead to serious crime and urban decline.

Reflecting the longstanding and seemingly unshakable faith in the power of technology to address “problems,” catching graffiti writers took a “high-tech” turn during the 1990s. Inventors and scientists have worked, and continue doing so, to produce a variety of graffiti removal solutions and preventative coatings. Some of these efforts seem reasonable; others verge on the slightly absurd. For example, in 1996 city authorities considered the possibility of using a laser beam to remove graffiti. The laser beam in question was initially developed by the military for the purpose of shooting down enemy missiles (Browne 1996). In 1997, the MTA consulted NASA for advice on developing a “weapon” that would conceal scratches made in glass (Rutenberg 1997). Although the laser beam, at a cost of about $250,000, was a little beyond the budget allocated for graffiti removal, the NYPD do make use of technologies developed by the military to catch writers. These include night vision goggles and telescopes (Bennet 1992; James 1992; Hernandez 1993); long-range video and audio equipment (Krauss 1996); and infra-red/thermal imaging cameras (Donohue 2001; Rutenberg 2005).

As the NYPD’s vandal squad, which consists of seventy-six police officers (Kelly 2005), continues to arrest writers, New York City’s public officials have increasingly come to perceive imprisonment as an appropriate punishment for graffiti. To be sure, the idea of sentencing graffiti writers to prison dates back to the early 1980s when Mayor Koch recommended that a person convicted three times for writing graffiti be sentenced to five days in prison (Silver & Chalfant 1983). However, only recently has this idea entered the realm of practice as judges have come under growing pressure from political elites and community groups to sentence graffiti writers to prison.

When COST was arrested for graffiti vandalism and made to appear in court in 1995, at least one councilperson wrote the judge hearing the case a two-page letter urging that he be sentenced to prison. When the case was being heard, local council members and members of community groups attended wearing badges denouncing graffiti. Although COST escaped the sixty day jail sentence recommended by the prosecutor, he was sentenced to three years’ probation,
$2,180 in fines, psychological counseling and, finally, 200 days of community service, which was to be spent removing graffiti (Belluck 1995).

DESA, arrested several years before COST, was not so lucky. When word got out that he would be appearing in court, a “court watchers” group quickly formed. Consisting of approximately thirty members from a variety of civic associations, the group attended every one of his court proceedings and had every intention of flooding the courtroom on his day of sentencing (Onishi 1994). Dubbed the “$1 million vandal” by law enforcement officials, DESA was sentenced to one to three years in prison (Kocieniewski 1996; Donohue 2002). After serving four months in prison and eight months in a work-release program, he was paroled towards the end of 1995 (Donohue et al. 1996).

Upon hearing of KIKO’s arrest, a City Councilperson, known for his dislike of graffiti, went to the print media and not only denounced him as a “punk,” but labeled him one of the “most wanted graffiti vandals.” Applying such a label to KIKO was very peculiar. While the name DESA did appear with enough frequency in the public spaces of New York City to warrant inclusion in the Vandal Squad’s “most wanted” list of “graffiti vandals,” the name KIKO did not. For example, Steve Mona, a now retired lieutenant who spent the last decade of his career as the head of the Vandal Squad Task Force, when asked about KIKO, replied by saying that he had “never heard of him” (Gardiner 2007). Despite KIKO being, at best, a minor player within graffiti writing culture, after the aforementioned city council member pressured the district attorney handling the case to push for a prison sentence, and after he insisted – despite the judges objections – upon reading a victim impact statement before the court on sentencing day, KIKO was sent to Rikers Island for six months, put on probation for five years, and fined $25,000 (Gardiner 2007).

Taking on a life of its own, disproportionate reactions to graffiti have extended well beyond those who paint without permission. Since the early 1990s, the city has embarked on a quest to eradicate graffiti as an aesthetic category. Alongside the condemnation of legal graffiti, the city opposes commercial uses of the “graffiti look.” Moreover, public officials have begun to explore avenues for penalizing those who can be held responsible for the presence of graffiti, or those who refuse to adopt the city’s hostile anti-graffiti standpoint. Political elites, for instance, have openly criticized places such as “5 Pointz,” which was one of the few places in New York City where graffiti writers could paint with permission. It was a relatively large warehouse building located in Long Island City, a neighborhood of Queens, but was white-washed and shut down in late 2013 as the neighborhood continues to undergo gentrification (Buckley & Santora 2013).

Instead of seeing it as a place where individuals could express themselves freely and legally, or as a place that provides an outlet for those who might otherwise write graffiti in an illegal manner, one public official condemned “5 Pointz” as a place that feeds the “addictions of young ‘graffiti vandals’” (Weir 1998) and suggested that allowing people to paint with permission is the equivalent of “sending candy thieves to work in a candy factory” (Ruiz 1998).

Similarly, public officials have expressed strong opposition to commercial uses of graffiti (e.g. hiring graffiti writers to paint store billboards; using graffiti-style aesthetics in advertising). Such opposition is usually based on the idea that turning graffiti into a legitimate enterprise somehow promotes illegal graffiti. As one police officer has said of “graffiti for hire”: “We discourage it . . . if graffiti, even done with permission, is tolerated in one place, it tends to spread to other places where it is unwelcome. If people want to do some advertising, let them get a billboard” (police officer quoted in Marriott 1993).
Alongside this kind of condemnation, the city has also turned to penalizing owners of private property who fail, or refuse, to remove graffiti from their buildings. The logic underpinning the aesthetic control of private property seems to be that property owners should be punished for failing to support the city in its mission to deny anyone and everyone the possibility of encountering graffiti within the urban environment. In December of 2005, Bloomberg announced the passing of a new law in a press release:

Commercial property owners and owners of residential properties . . . will face a fine of up to $300 for failure to remove graffiti. These property owners will not face any penalty if they inform the City – through 311 – of the graffiti on their property and sign a waiver allowing the city to clean it.

(Bloomberg 2005b)

Somewhat paradoxically, exercising the kind of power in question is, at least in part, legitimated by the abstract notion that private property is not to be “touched” or interfered with – as if it were somehow sacred. As Bloomberg once put it, “You do not have the right to go up to somebody’s private property who doesn’t want you there and exercise some mythical right of self-expression” (Bloomberg quoted in Saul 2002).

However, by the time the sacred nature of property is inscribed into law, as this piece of legislation makes unmistakably clear, some people do end up in possession of the practical right to walk up to somebody else’s property and exercise that “mythical right of self-expression.” Initially postulated as something that non-owners are not to interfere with, private property is reconceived as state property under this law. Rather than being protected from graffiti, it is exposed to the kinds of defacement preferred by those in authority.

Graffiti as “gateway penality” to neoliberal punitiveness

Two previous studies have assumed that the moral panic concept could be meaningfully applied in analyzing responses to graffiti writing. The first, conducted by Ferrell (1996), was based on graffiti writing in Denver, Colorado and argued that city opposition to the practice was grounded in the need to reinforce public acceptance of the rights of the state to exercise authority over its subjects. The second was conducted by Austin (2001) and was based on graffiti writing in New York City throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Austin argued that official opposition to graffiti occurred in order to deflect attention and criticism away from capitalism during a period of crisis. These studies have the virtue of linking official reactions to graffiti to broader structural forces.

Following Ferrell and Austin, the state and economic trends are important for understanding responses to graffiti. Much recent scholarship characterizes the latter part of the twentieth century as one marked by the rise and entrenchment of neoliberalism. According to Wacquant (2009), neoliberalism can be understood as a new state formation that involves the further promotion of commodification, controlling the social body through public policy and prisons, and ideologies of personal responsibility. The consequences of neoliberalism include extreme social inequalities, high rates of underemployment, and the withdrawal of robust social welfare programs.

As this conceptualization intimates, instead of addressing poverty and inequality through public assistance, the neoliberal state has overwhelmingly supported punitive responses to deviance
and those who fail to display docility. This is often rationalized by claiming that individuals are responsible for maintaining continuous employment and avoiding poverty, and by a culture that valorizes political elites who promise to be “tough on crime.” In this context, I would argue that graffiti writing culture has many attributes that make it an ideal candidate to exploit for the sake of legitimizing the punitive tendencies of neoliberalism.

Graffiti writers appear to engage in a youthful activity that is governed by the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment. Yet they are relatively powerless, lack access to communication channels that could explain their behavior, and operate within a long discursive and material history that denounces graffiti. As an inherently public act, society’s members are often compelled to encounter the best and worst works of graffiti, which can foster resentment among middle classes and property owners, especially in a context where they are encouraged to perceive graffiti as a problematic practice.

Given these characteristics, it is no accident that graffiti remains a political issue and can be regarded as what I would refer to as a “gateway penalty.” That is, a mode of behavior that appears to many as non-utilitarian, or lacking any social necessity; that is easily stigmatized due to the relative marginality of its participants, and therefore difficult to defend or portray in a manner that is sympathetic and compelling. Situated as such, it becomes a site where one can introduce and exercise the extremely punitive measures that are required to regulate the social problems that accompany exclusionary social orders (Pratt & Eriksson 2013) with relative impunity. Once such measures become normalized and routine, they can extend to other “objectionable” behaviors as they emerge.

The urban dynamics to panic: growth machines and the ideology of privatism

At the urban level, the response to graffiti is further fueled by growth machines. According to Logan and Molotch (1987), growth machines are loose coalitions that form between local political elites, landowners, corporate developers, and speculators (i.e. landed capitalists). What unites these actors is an interest in extracting the maximum profit possible from how land is put to use as opposed to using land for the satisfaction of relatively modest needs.

The growth machine relies on the ideology of privatism to ensure its smooth functioning. Privatism is an interrelated set of statements that seek to consecrate the following notions: When the public sector facilitates the flow of private capital by offering businesses tax incentives and providing them with necessary infrastructure, a better economic climate is created. This climate is good because it invites businesses to the city, which creates jobs and increases the tax base. With a greater pool of wealth, material gains will eventually “trickle-down” and all of the city’s residents will benefit (cf. Logan & Molotch 1987; Squires 1996).

Thus, according to privatism, public-private partnerships can be considered an independent variable whereas the presence of stable business communities and better living conditions for city residents figure as dependent variables. Like privatism, anti-graffiti rhetoric claims that business communities and living conditions are dependent variables. However, instead of emphasizing public-private partnerships, anti-graffiti rhetoric claims that where graffiti is present, business and “quality of life” are adversely affected:

[Graffiti] hurts business because it turns the street into a frightening place.

(Probation Commissioner Raul Russi quoted in Bertrand 1997)
The consequences of graffiti include businesses relocating to other cities or states and tourists foregoing trips to NYC. When this occurs, New Yorkers lose jobs and economic opportunities, and the city loses revenue.

(Giuliani 1996)

The graffiti affects everyone’s quality of life. It’s ugly and it brings down property values.

(Coordinator of the 106th precinct Sal Petrozzino quoted in Lemire 2002)

Consistent with this logic, officials also claim that the absence of graffiti fosters stable business communities and creates an environment from which all of the city’s residents benefit:

Last July, we launched a citywide campaign to clean up graffiti . . . Not only does that keep New Yorkers safe; it also helps sustain neighborhoods where people want to live and businesses want to locate and invest.

(Bloomberg 2003c)

. . . graffiti hurts neighborhoods both aesthetically and economically. To boost New York City’s economy and create jobs, it’s critical to create neighborhoods where people want to live and businesses want to locate and invest.

(Economic Development Corporation president Andrew Alper, see Bloomberg 2003b)

Not only are we cleaning graffiti, we also send a message to people around the city that our neighborhood is a great place to live and raise a family.

(City Council member Eric Gioia quoted in Yaniv 2005)

These [anti-graffiti] initiatives not only improve the quality of life for New Yorkers, but show visitors that New York is a clean, responsible, vibrant city.

(Giuliani 1995b)

The similarities between anti-graffiti rhetoric and the ideology of privatism are obvious such that further comment is hardly necessary. It is, however, worth noting that statements like the ones (re)presented above are repeated by public officials with such a degree of regularity that it would be more than fair to say that what we see in anti-graffiti discourse is a constant redeployment of a few major “sound bites.”

As noted, privatism’s main role is to facilitate the functioning of growth machines (Logan & Molotch 1987). Previous research indicates that in cities where growth machines work towards the over-development of land, thereby inflating property values, those who are most disadvantaged include small property owners and renters (Zukin 1991); small business owners (Logan & Molotch 1987); low-income households (Massey & Denton 1993); and those who live around or below the poverty line (Smith 1996).

Building upon this kind of analysis, Neil Smith (1996) and Mike Davis (1990, 2002) have suggested that as over-development generates areas of concentrated privilege, the need to defend such enclaves also arises. This often translates into an over-policing of certain neighborhoods, the militarization of public space, and draconian uses of the law (See also Castells 1983; Parenti 1999). This suggests that where the economic strategies of growth machines meet their limitations, public officials will resort to the use of force.
That the Giuliani and Bloomberg administrations, like most city level political administrations, have often allowed the private sector to more or less determine how urban spaces will be put to use is no secret. However, in accordance with the critical analyses of urban sociologists, it becomes very difficult to accept the notion that “all New Yorkers benefit” (Giuliani 1995a; Bloomberg 2003a) from the arrangement between growth-machines and the state’s punitive forces when, almost within the same breath, Bloomberg can state with some exuberance that residential property values have appreciated by more than 80 percent over the last four years.

(Bloomberg 2005a)

And,

the percentage of [misdemeanor] defendants receiving jail sentences has increased 48 percent, with sentences of more than 30 days increasing 74 percent.

(Bloomberg 2004)

Within less than a year of the previous communiqué, the progress being made concerning higher rates of imprisonment was noted:

. . . the percentage of cases resulting in jail time has increased from 45 percent to 67 percent.

(Bloomberg 2005a)

This would seem to suggest that when growth machines dominate the decision making process that ultimately determines how urban land will be utilized, not all New Yorkers benefit. As urban environments are re-created through these processes, from which some do stand to gain, many are displaced or, even worse, become entangled with the city’s carceral complex. For anybody who is familiar with New York City, or has witnessed the changing social composition of neighborhoods such as Williamsburg, Brooklyn, over the last twenty or so years, the way in which space can be rapidly created anew will seem fairly obvious.

What may be less obvious are the mechanisms that make such changes possible. I have suggested that there is no relationship between graffiti and “disorder,” or the economic and social vitality of a city. Instead of emphasizing visual factors, I suggested that a city’s fundamental social and economic structures are more likely to be determined by growth machines, which seek public approval and legitimacy through ideological means.

Seen in this light, many aspects of the moral panic over graffiti writing in New York City can be read as a variation on the ideology of privatism (Squires 1996) that ultimately serves the interests of growth machines. Anti-graffiti rhetoric, however, is a much more palatable version of privatism because it links efforts at crime reduction to the economic and social order of things. This rhetorical trope operates on the assumption, arguably correct, that people are more likely to support anti-crime initiatives than what may appear to be the public subsidization of private (or “big”) business.

Conclusion

By focusing on representational practices and disproportionate responses, I have tried to demonstrate that the official reaction to graffiti in New York City constitutes a moral panic. I have also suggested that the rise of neoliberalism and the dynamics associated with urban growth machines can be understood as major driving forces of such a response.
My emphasis on neoliberalism is not necessarily at odds with the work of Ferrell and Austin, who have also explored the macro social forces behind official reactions to graffiti. Nils Christie once said of crime that it is a “limitless natural resource” that we can exploit as much, or as little, as we need (Christie quoted in Worrall 2002). I think something similar could be said of graffiti writing: It is a practice that can be exploited at different times, in different spaces, and for various reasons by powerful groups. This is because it opens up possibilities for an anti-graffiti rhetoric that, due to its malleability, is compatible with numerous political and economic climates.

Given the relative powerlessness of graffiti writers, it is easy to portray their culture as sinister and threatening, thereby turning them into scapegoats for many kinds of “crisis.” As neoliberalism became entrenched, it developed extremely punitive policies to address its related social problems. Graffiti, and its intense criminalization, provided political elites with the type of fodder that allowed them to communicate and, more importantly, normalize the draconian penal policies of neoliberalism.

Some of these dynamics are further reflected when one considers reactions to graffiti at the urban level. Here, again, we see powerful players dominate the meaning that is given to graffiti. Within the urban context, anti-graffiti rhetoric mirrors privatism. Not only does this adversely affect graffiti writers, it also works against the interests of that portion of city residents who seek to live in urban communities rather than exploit them for economic gain. This follows from the power of anti-graffiti rhetoric to hook residents on supporting what appear to be rational, anti-crime initiatives while camouflaging how such rhetoric simultaneously serves the interests of landed capital, which essentially commodifies urban space thereby minimizing the ability of marginal social groups to remain within the city.

Note

1 Special thanks to Jeffrey Ian Ross for thoughtful comments and feedback on this chapter. This chapter builds upon my article “Moral panics and urban growth machines: Official reactions to Graffiti in New York City, 1990–2005.” Qualitative Sociology, 33(3): 297–311, 2010.

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