“If You Can’t Hear Me, I Will Show You”: Insurgent Claims to Public Space in a Marginalized Social Housing Neighborhood in France

Claske Dijkema

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“If you can’t hear me, I will show you”.

Insurgent claims to public space in a marginalized social housing neighborhood in France

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Claske Dijkema

Claske.dijkema@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr

PhD candidate

University of Grenoble Alpes

Faculty of Geography

Member of PACTE

Word count: 6601

Claske Dijkema is a PhD candidate at the Department of Geography at the University of Grenoble-Alpes and co-coordinator of Modus Operandi, a non-profit organization involved in citizen research and training in conflict transformation. Her previous work has focused on political transformations in post-white minority regimes in Southern Africa and her current research is interested in developing a decolonial approach to marginalized social housing neighborhoods in France. She has received a research grant from the Auvergne Rhône-Alpes regional government.

Abstract

This article is concerned with public space as a place of contestation, of confrontation (Springer, 2011) and insurgency (Hou 2010). It situates these everyday forms of confrontation in France's post-colonial history, arguing that the occupation of communal spaces by groups of youths should be understood as part of a larger conflict about the place that those called ‘of immigrant origin’ can occupy in French society. The article seeks to explain why youths involved in the unsanctioned use of space rely on means that are widely interpreted as uncivil or violent in order to make themselves visible and to be heard. It argues that these claims to space may be interpreted as subaltern claims to citizenship. As second class citizens, they lack ‘a place’ in society, as subalterns their discourse is not heard, so they seek alternative ways to exist. The neighborhood proves to be an eminent place to be somewhere and someone.

Text

> *A group of young men routinely hang out in a spot at the foot of a block of flats. They meet there, sit, talk, eat and drink, and allegedly deal drugs. In the evenings, under the influence of narcotics and alcohol, they are noisy and leave their litter behind. Other residents have come to fear this area and have started to avoid it, despite the fact that there are several shops. After having been informed of the situation by the neighborhood union, in response to complaints from residents and shop owners, the municipality sent in their maintenance workers to transform the seating area into a wall. This stirred an angry reaction from the young people, who had lost their meeting place. They broke the freshly applied concrete, but by the very next evening a new layer of concrete had been added by the municipal workers, which in turn was immediately covered in paint as a further protest by the displaced young people.*
> (Field notes author, 17 December 2013, Villeneuve, France)

Paint, concrete and contested public space

This example of contested space is an illustration of what Iveson (2007) meant when stating that public space does not exist as such because there is not one public. In reality there are several groups who compete over access to public space and over who is the 'public' in a particular space. Competing claims to space therefore should be understood as competing claims to be considered as part of the public (Iveson, 2007; Mitchell and Staeheli, 2008). The story of applying and breaking layers of concrete, followed by layers of pink and white paint applied by loitering youths and municipal workers respectively, is part of a narrative of contested public space in Villeneuve.

This article builds on the rich literature that has emerged over the last decades on the political character of public space (Springer, 2011; Staeheli, 1996; Mitchell, 2003; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008). Community gardening, graffiti, street vending, protesting, skateboarding, flash mobs and night markets are all examples of the 'everyday and not-so-everyday making of public space' that Hou has termed 'insurgent public space' as they 'defy the conventional rules and redefine and expand the idea of what it means to be a citizen' (Hou, 2010, p.25). The authors cited above have all focused on non-violent forms of claiming public space. The

violent potential of competition, confrontation and insurgency has been ignored by most authors. We can even detect some romanticism around violent strategies for change in Hou's term 'guerilla urbanism' or Holston's reference to insurgency in 'spaces of insurgent citizenship' that are created through grass-roots mobilization and everyday practices that 'empower, parody, derail or subvert state agendas' and that redefine 'what it means to be a member of the modern state' (Holston, 1999, p.47). This article focuses on a form of appropriating public space that clearly does not correspond to the progressive ideals of bike-riding, or of vegetarian and pacifist protesters: the everyday practice of occupying hallways and street corners by groups of youths. It argues that claims to space which are widely considered as uncivil or violent should be interpreted as claims to citizenship of the subaltern, whose discursive claims are not heard. The study area is Villeneuve, a large social housing neighborhood located to the south of Grenoble, in France.

The article first sets Villeneuve in the context of French urban policy and debates around security issues and everyday tensions; the second section discusses the political nature of space in this marginalized social housing neighborhood. The third section provides a theoretical discussion on the connection between claims to space and citizenship. The fourth section is an explanation of the methodology used for the research into the everyday appropriations of the neighborhood's halls and hallways by groups of youths. It is followed by an empirical description of these appropriations and places them in the wider context of a feeling of being denied a place in French society. In the conclusion I come back to the question to what extent the subaltern's claims to space through the everyday occupations of hallways in Villeneuve can be understood as claims to citizenship.

Villeneuve: everyday tensions and targeted urban policy

Built in the 1960s, Villeneuve is the last large housing estate constructed in France. This project was inspired by progressive ideas about public space. The buildings were constructed on pillars, thereby opening up the space under them for pedestrians; it is car-free; the high-rise architecture has freed space for a stunning park; and facilities were integrated within the architecture, thereby creating large publicly accessible areas. Over the years it has lost a lot of its appeal. According to administrative jargon, the neighborhood is "sensitive", a euphemism for dangerous. It is part of the French state's geography of special intervention zones that require specific attention in terms of security, and other types of urban policy that target low income areas (for a detailed analysis see Dikeç, 2007). Urban social policy has been developed in reaction to incidents of urban violence in marginalized social housing

neighborhoods in France. From the late 1970s onwards, a large number of commissions have been set up and reports and laws drafted with the aim of reducing social inequalities between different territories. This focus on specific areas rather than on certain 'ethnic' groups is a French particularity. In its 2015 Atlas of 'priority neighborhoods', the state authorities redrew their maps of special intervention zones and again, Villeneuve is one of the 1300 neighborhoods considered problematic.[1] Two statistics illustrate the relative precariousness of Villeneuve's residents in comparison to the rest of the city: 24% of its households receive an unemployment allowance compared to 16% in Grenoble as a whole; and 23% of the households have low incomes compared to 7% in Grenoble as a whole.[2] Moreover, Villeneuve is on the list of the French government's priority security zones and, as a result, neighborhood policing is carried out by a specialized brigade rather than by the local police force. Indeed, public space in Villeneuve, as with other marginalized social housing neighborhoods in France, has become the object of everyday tensions and competition: tension between the police and youth in relation to the drug trade (see for example Marlière, 2007), tension due to boundary-marking and the imaginary borders that draw lines between territories and identities (see for example Sauvadet, 2006), and finally tension due to belonging and the visibility of 'otherness'. Halal butchers and the hijab are the subject of heated debate around what is 'normal' in public space, and who has the right to impose their norms (Del Grosso, 2015). The example with which this article opens illustrates the tense relationship in Villeneuve between those who claim the right to occupy publicly accessible space, and others who claim the right to security, tranquility and the enjoyment of a clean and non-degraded public space.

The political nature of public space in marginalized social housing neighborhoods

In the context of economic globalization and the delocalization of employment in France and the resulting decline in manufacturing and other industries the collective identity of the working class has lost much of its importance, and therefore its ability to act as a mobilizing factor. Space has become a new terrain for struggle (Lussault, 2009). For the French sociologist Jean-Pierre Garnier, the street is an 'alternative space of representation' for those excluded from the job market (2007). Beyond everyday uses of the street for the purpose of representation, at times the street *'metamorphoses into a stage where the struggle between the dominant and dominated reappears in the spotlight'* (Garnier, 2007, p. 67). Garnier's observations are based on an analysis of the 2005 revolts that broke out in 400 marginalized

social housing neighborhoods in France, and which lasted for over three weeks. The direct cause was the deaths of Zyed and Bouna, two youths who died by electrocution in an electricity transformer where they hid in order to escape a routine identity check in a suburb of Paris. The reason for the anger was not the deaths of the two boys alone, but also the reaction of the judicial and political authorities which initially contested police responsibility and denied that the boys were being chased (Mucchielli and Le Goaziou, 2007). Groups of men -and some women- went out on the street and made their fury visible to the wider public in France through the images of burning cars that spread through television screens both nationally and internationally. Since then it has become widely accepted in academic literature that acts, generally interpreted as incivility or violence, can be considered as political expressions in the sense that they are a means of drawing attention to unmet needs (Dikeç 2007a, 2007b; Mucchielli et le Goaziou, 2006; Mansouri, 2013; Mauger, 2006).

While the scale and the duration of the 2005 revolts were without precedent in France, violent confrontations between younger residents and security forces are a recurring phenomenon in marginalized social housing neighborhoods. Villeneuve has not been spared. Riots broke out in 2010 when a 27-year old man died in a violent confrontation with the police. Karim Boudouda and his partner in crime were tracked down in Villeneuve after having organized a casino hold-up not far from Grenoble. Karim was shot by the police and died from the impact of a bullet that hit his body from the back.[3] That night and the one that followed a group of thirty young men went out in the streets to express their anger over the death of this man they knew well. They burnt roughly 100 cars, broke the glass of the neighborhood's tram stops, threw stones at the police and firemen, and set fire to street furniture. Lighting fires during the 2010 riots was definitely meant to provoke police intervention, as the latter accompany firefighters into Villeneuve. But this was not the only motivation, as fire also has the performative function of making a statement in public space. The actions of burning cars, damaging street furniture, and writing graffiti statements in mid-July 2010 should be interpreted as a form of public address. The flames expressed anger about the death of a man with the message targeting the security forces, but they also had a larger audience: all those representing the state. Two weeks later the President of the Republic, Nicolas Sarkozy, came to Grenoble to make a speech. In this speech the deviance of ‘two individuals’ was generalized to an entire neighborhood, needing a targeted intervention to bring them back into the Republic, and insisting on their foreignness although both held French nationality.[4] Both the burning cars and Sarkozy’s speech illustrate the struggle over public space that Iveson

analyzes as the competition between several publics over who is the 'public' in public space and thus the political nature of public space in Villeneuve.

Beyond paroxysmal violence, the remaining of the article will focus on everyday confrontations in (semi-) public space. The main protagonists are on the one hand young men –and in rare cases women- between roughly 16 and 26 years old without employment or in precarious work situations who occupy public and semi-public spaces in Villeneuve on a regular basis. On the other hand there are residents who contest these uses of space by appealing to the neighborhood's night mediation service and calling on it to intervene on their behalf. The English term 'loitering', frequently used for youth that stay in an area without an obvious purpose, does not quite capture the emotional charge of the words that residents, night mediators and civil servants use in French: 'to squat' and 'to occupy'. I will use the terms 'the unsanctioned use of' and 'occupation of' (semi-)public space'. The term public space is not used here in its judicial sense, but rather to denote all neighborhood spaces that are publicly accessible. I also use the term communal areas if they are privately owned but publicly accessible. Residents' attitudes towards this behavior vary from the understanding, if they see in it an innocent gathering to get out of sight of the police or parents; through tolerant and compassionate if they feel that these youths have nowhere else to go and if they identify with them; to intolerant if they interpret these gatherings as a violation of the rules and as a form of incivility. The latter group of residents takes offense at the image of degradation that this behavior gives to the neighborhood, in addition to the direct nuisance it presents, and the fact that some groups engage in illegal activities.

Theoretical arguments on the claims to citizenship through occupying space

The article's title "If you can't hear me, I will show you" is a reference to both Rancière and Spivak. The first asserts that "*political activity makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise"* (Rancière, 1999, p. 30; translation modified in Dikeç 2012, p. 674). The second affirms that 'subaltern people can't speak' (Spivak, 2008). When Spivak said that the subaltern cannot speak, she meant that they are not represented in institutions of power, and that they cannot represent themselves as they lack the power to do so (Spivak, 1988, p. 279). Does the context of structural inequality in 21st century France justify the consideration of young men and women in marginalized social housing neighborhoods as subaltern, in reference to the colonial context evoked by Spivak? This is indeed the argument of Mustafa Dikeç, drawing on Rancière, when he

discusses 'the ways in which the inhabitants of certain areas are deprived of their right to the city in the political sense of the term' (Dikeç, 2002, p. 95). These areas correspond to the state's geography of special intervention zones evoked earlier. They are racialized spaces (Bonam et al., 2017; Calmore, 1995; Neal et al., 2013), marked by a 'colonial fracture' (Bancel et al., 2005) in addition to other (e.g. economic) disparities associated with marginalized social housing neighborhoods (MSHN). Ramon Grosfoguel articulates Fanon's reading of race relationships as between those in the zones of being and non-being (Fanon, 1952:8) with Boaventura de Sousa Santos' concept of an 'abyssal line' (2014) between those who live above and those who live below the line of the human (2013, 45). Those above this line are granted access to rights and subjectivity, while this is not the case for those below the line (Grosfoguel and Cohen, 2013, p.44). Racism operates as separating force between the two. Fanon has been criticized for his manichean dualism (Kipfer, 2007) between white and black and being/non-being. I argue that these should rather be understood as abstract categories that help us to consider the complex relationships between humans that are racialized in different ways. In addition, these zones 'do not refer to specific geographic places but are positionalities' and within a country they correspond to 'zones of internal colonialism' (Grosfoguel and Cohen, 2013, 45-46). The current context of France is not that of Fanon's writings in the 1950s when it still was a colonial empire, neither that of Boaventura de Sousa Santos' North-South relations. The distinction between human/non-human should be replaced by citizenship/non-citizenship, or rather 2nd class citizenship. Citizenship here is not limited to formal membership but is understood in a broader sense, with regard to the array of civil, political and social rights available to people, also referred to as substantive citizenship (Holston, 1999, p.52). If citizens are those who have the right to claim rights (Isin and Nielsen, 2008, p.8), it is exactly this right that is denied to inhabitants of MSHN. Whenever they manifest discontent in the public sphere, their immigrant, non-French, origins are evoked. MSHN, in the non-spatial sense that Lapeyronnie attributed to them, that of 'urban ghetto' (2008), can be understood to fit with the idea of spaces of non-citizenship. This is due to the fact that the gaze of those in power is structured in such a way that they do not recognize, intentionally ignore, or distort, both the verbal and non-verbal means of expression used by inhabitants of mshn. The nature of this power can be considered colonial in the sense of Anibal Quijano's conception of the coloniality of power which asserts that 'the social classification of the world's population around race has a colonial origin and character but has survived the colonialism in whose matrix it was established' (2010, 533). The working of this power in 'the ghetto' should be understood as following: *"More than poor or*

excluded, inhabitants of the ghetto live as 'colonized'" (Lapeyronnie, 2008, p.17). They are defined by the gaze and categories of dominant outsiders, that they subsequently interiorize and, as a result, they find themselves alienated as if the dominant norms constantly invalidated their own reality (Lapeyronnie, 2008).

Let me insist though that not all inhabitants are concerned equally with the workings of the coloniality of power, depending on their racialization, gender, class, education, sexual orientation and gender. In the zones of citizenship conflicts are dealt with through evoking rights, through negotiation and political action. These means of managing conflict are discursively, institutionally and legally framed in the language of emancipation (freedom, equality, autonomy): violence is the exception here (Buonaventura de Sousa Santos Grosfoguel and Cohen 2013:46*)*. But as 2nd class citizens "can't speak", violence may replace discursive claims and may become a means of expression, as was the case with the riots in Villeneuve in 2010. If 'the subaltern can't speak' politically (Spivak, 1988), this does not necessarily mean they will remain silent and submissive. Many will, but others will find new ways to be taken into account, by occupying space and making themselves visible. The pink paint and broken concrete mentioned at the beginning of this article is one such example.

It is in space that a subject becomes a citizen

Public spaces in the city are eminent places for bodies to perform the shift from the place assigned to them, from their place of subjects, to that of citizens (Isin and Nielsen, 2010). Investing the spaces where one is made to feel 'out of place' can thus be a *de facto* claim to citizenship. For example, if youths collectively go to an area where they feel out of place with the intention of showing that they also have the right to be there, this should be understood as a claim to citizenship. Both Holston's interest in the sites where new, subversive citizenship emerges, and Isin and Nielsen's inquiry into the acts through which this process takes place are central to this article's inquiry into the practice of everyday occupation of hallways as both sites and acts of insurgent citizenship. Because, if a political act is what makes a citizen, and if the act of burning cars is political in certain contexts (Arfvidsson, 2012), we could argue in similar vein that the everyday occupation of hallways is a political act in the sense that it involves the shifting of bodies from the place assigned to them as subjects to that of citizens. The section that follows will present the methodology used to inquire into everyday unsanctioned uses of communal areas by groups of youths in Villeneuve.

Methods

The research presented here is part of a wider (PhD) project that seeks to develop a decolonial approach to mshn in France. For the overall project a mixed methods approach was adopted, made up of participatory observations in collaboration with four neighborhood organizations over a four-year period from 2013 to 2016. This article draws in particular on three forms of collaboration. Firstly, with the *Régie de Quartier,* a community development organization based on a triple partnership between residents, local authorities and housing corporations, and financed by both public and private funds. It offers a range of services, one of which is night mediation. In the context of increasing feelings of insecurity and the decline in the attractiveness of real-estate and social housing in the neighborhood, the night mediation service was created in 1998 in response to residents' complaints about the nuisance caused by groups of youths in alleys and hallways. While its reports distinguished between 18 categories of nuisance in the neighborhood, the core of their work was centered on two of them, namely the 'gathering of persons' and 'unsanctioned occupations'. The work of the night correspondents consists of patrolling the communal areas in the neighborhood from dusk onwards, of taking note of logistical issues such as broken windows, lights, locks etc., of approaching groups of youths that occupy these areas and of convincing them to leave. The daily reports produced by the neighborhood's night mediation service over the period from 2009-2016 provide short descriptions of 1,439 reported unsanctioned uses of (semi-)public space considered problematic. They were analyzed using Excel and Nvivo in order to understand the motives of the night correspondents' interventions, their outcomes, their frequencies, their distribution throughout the year, and which specific places in the neighborhood were occupied. In addition I draw on informal, semi-structured interviews with four night correspondents and two youth workers. Secondly, this article draws on participant observation in the '*Université populaire*' project that seeks to configure places of speech to discuss issues proposed by neighborhood residents. In preparation for the debate, "Ghettos, apartheid, ZEP, ZUP, ZUS, ZSP: the neighborhood between experience and stereotypes", roughly 70 informal (street) interviews were carried out by the author and two collaborators in November 2015. Finally, I draw on an interview with a 25-year old man from the neighborhood next to Villeneuve who belongs to a youth collective in which I also participate, called "Acting for Peace". This collaboration made it possible to reach out to youths involved in the unsanctioned use of public space. The next section will draw on these different voices

to paint a more detailed picture of what is involved in the practice of occupying communal areas.

Occupying hallways as an insurgent claim to public space and citizenship

Jean-Pierre, a youth worker who only recently started working in Villeneuve but with previous experience in other MSHN in Grenoble, discusses some of the drivers behind youths' appropriation of public space.

> *I will generalize a bit but in the families they are often quite a lot. There is no place for everybody at home and so children don't have much space. The only private space there is, is reserved for the parents. Children don't have a place to relax, to watch a movie or something like that, so they are out there in the street and they turn public space into private space. They eat outside, they work outside, there are those that have their first sexual experience outside. Really, public space becomes their property. When one arrives… when we [as youth workers] start to work in a neighborhood, we really feel that we are in their place*[5].

An analysis of the night correspondents' reports provides us with 15 categories of behavior observed during 'unsanctioned use' of (semi-)public space: unrest (disputes, fights, aggressive behavior); alcohol consumption; hanging out in a calm manner; smoking weed and cigarettes; confrontation (when youths demonstrate aggressive behavior towards the night correspondents or when they refuse to leave the place they occupy); degradation of the site (breaking locks, graffiti, urination); talking and debating; seeking shelter (from rain or cold and from the surveillance of parents or police); partying; playing ball-, card- and computer games (they even at times install play stations in the hallways); eating; listening to music and making noise; watching a movie on a TV or a computer installed in the hallway for the occasion; dealing drugs; and finally surveillance, when they use the spot to surveil the neighborhood or when the night correspondents feel surveilled. The night correspondents stressed during the informal interviews that the nuisance the youths cause in these communal areas is very variable, *"You have differences and we need to make a distinction"*: from zero to extreme nuisance. Despite the wide variety of behavior, one night correspondent made the distinction between two categories of youths:

> *You can very well have a group of youths that occupies a hallway and all that they have done during the day is being bored. They have nothing to do, no education, no perspectives; they have quit school at the age of 16 and since, they have "held the*

wall" [direct translation of the French expression for loitering while leaning against a wall]. In the evening they probably don't feel like staying at home, at their parent's place, so they loiter in a hallway, smoke a cigarette if they have one, drink a beer if they can obtain one. Those ones, you can make leave if you explain to them nicely that they have no business being there and that their presence will annoy the residents. But there is this other group that is the real problem. You have groups that go from one hallway to another, from one building to another between [two spots in the neighborhood] and whom we know are already under the influence of weed or alcohol and that supposedly deal drugs. When we are up against these groups of youths, you can imagine that the night correspondents disturb them in their activity or, if they don't disturb them, it is simply impossible to reason with them because they have already been partying, they have already consumed…. Well, the result is that the night correspondents cannot act on these groups, as opposed to the groups I talked about before: nice boys that are bored.[6]

One such 'nice boy' explained in an interview that hanging out is part of the life style in mshn.

> Interviewee: *Whereas some go out on Friday night, have a drink and party, that is not at all our style. We stay here in the neighborhood. [..] We spend our evenings among friends, we are cool, we play [on the play station] or we talk and have fun [and smoke weed]. Many of my friends, actually the majority, feel ill at ease when they go out of the neighborhood [..] simply because they miss their reference points. They like to stay in the neighborhood where they know everybody and where they have their little comforts.*
>
> Interviewer: *Is it a question of financial resources?*
>
> Interviewee: *No, it's not even that. If they go out of the neighborhood, they don't feel they belong, I think. They feel apart from society, they don't feel in their place, maybe because they feel gazed at, they feel spied on and therefore…[they stay]*[7].

This statement formulates a recurrent theme in 70 street interviews which highlight the feeling, among those associated with post-colonial immigration, that '*there is no place/space for us'*. It is an expression of the sentiment of being assigned to, or even imprisoned in, an 'urban zone' which has clear demarcation lines between 'our' and 'their' space. A claim to space in the neighborhood can be understood as making it 'ours'. The feeling of being denied a place is reinforced in the case of unemployment. 'Our' space is that of the neighborhood,

destined for those ‘of immigrant origin’ and ‘theirs’ is that of ‘the French’, who are imagined as white. Where precisely this border lies varies among interviewees but the “Simply” supermarket beyond the tram line is mentioned at several occasions as one of the most immediate demarcation points of the neighborhood. It is situated on a major road that connects the neighborhood to the rest of the city. One youth worker, Teddy, affirms that while *“certain youths are mobile, like the rest of us and go from one place to another, others have more difficulty, they think France starts at Simply”*[8]. The latter statement implies that the neighborhood is outside of France and that France is not for them. Teddy further evokes a symbolic barrier between the space of the neighborhood and beyond and that leaving the neighborhood induces a confrontation with different social codes. Jean-Pierre adds that when they take them out of the neighborhood: “*it’s violent because they realize that the real society is the one outside and not the one that reigns in the neighborhood”*[9]. Despite differences in situating the neighborhood’s borders, opinions converge that the city-center is beyond the boundary. It is here that many report that they are stared at and that they feel ‘out of place’. *“I don’t even go to the city center anymore. Even if we respect the law, they don’t want us. They let us know through their gazes, through small remarks at the cash register”.*[10] Frequent identity checks further reinforce the feeling of being denied a place, particularly among young men associated with immigration, who regularly have to justify their presence in public spaces. “*They [the French] reject us through police controls with words that hurt”*[11] and *“They [police officers] always associate you with something that you are not.”*[12] This permanent suspicion also means that one is no longer master of one's own time. A police control can take 10 minutes or half an hour, depending on what they find. Police interventions in the neighborhood are perceived by those who do not feel represented by the state as a form of state penetration into a space considered as private.

On the basis of these informal interviews, three strategies can be identified in response to the feeling of ‘having no place’: the first is withdrawal from public space in favor of a retreat into domestic space, leading to isolation; the second is assimilation, adapting as much as possible to the projected image of the Frenchman and hoping to dissolve into this category, escaping one’s otherness; the third is confrontation in public space, as a place where one encounters ‘the dominant other’, ‘the Frenchman’. A retired immigrant from Tunisia attributed this difference in strategies partly to a difference in generation: the younger generation no longer conforms to the imperative of invisibility and chooses to make themselves visible in public space: “*Now they are visible, but not really how we would have liked them to be”*.[13] The

function of the unsanctioned everyday use of communal areas, as described in the night correspondents' reports, is that of self-defense, of survival, according to Jean-Pierre. He has often heard youth say: *"I am in France but look at my face! People treat me as an Arab but when I go with my parents to the* 'bled'[14]*, they treat me as bloody French. So who am I?"*. He observes that "*it's complicated if you don't know who you are. (...) In some way, it's a question of survival huh? One has to exist, one has to be somewhere and someone"*[15]. The space of the neighborhood becomes this somewhere. The pictures below illustrate this spatial claim. They both show communal areas where youths have marked the space, respectively with a pen and a lighter. "38100" and "38" are references to the local postal code but they are also references to "93", the area code of the Paris *banlieue* that has the highest concentration of mshn. It is also here that the revolts started in 2005. This number is frequently used by rap artists in their lyrics about the *banlieue*.

Image 1. A building's floor number has been transformed into the postal code of Villeneuve (Photo by author)

Image 2. Youths have drawn with a lighter the area code on the ceiling of one of the communal areas. (Photo by author)

Conclusion: Claiming a place in France

As the empirical data has demonstrated, the act of occupying hallways and alleys may be interpreted as uncivil and at times violent behavior in the sense that it regularly goes hand-in-hand with litter, noise, insults, and threats; and thus with disrespect for the needs of the other inhabitants. In order to argue that they are acts that claim citizenship, I draw on the four theoretical inputs discussed before. Firstly on Rancière's definition of a political act (that shifts a body from the place assigned to it, makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise); secondly on Isin and Nielsen's argument that performing a political act is what makes us citizens; thirdly on Spivak and Grosfoguel's distinctions between the subaltern and a citizen (the latter are audible); and finally on Iveson's notion of public address.

Arguments in favor of qualifying the acts of occupying hallways by groups of marginalized youths in Villeneuve as political is that they constitute a rupture in the sense that they break

with the historic invisibilization in France's post-colonial context and the imperative to assimilate and remain discrete. They open a confrontation and they pose a conflict. When marginalized and racialized youths make their bodies collectively visible, they 'make visible what had no business being seen'. These forms of appropriation of public space however only partially correspond to Rancière's definition of what it means to be political, as rioting and loitering so far have not made the voices of these youths heard. While groups of young men (and on rare occasions women) position themselves in space, we cannot speak of public address. Youths do not use the street to make a claim and address a wider public: access to space *is* the claim. This is what distinguishes everyday occupations from setting fire to cars as a contestation of police action. The *de facto* claim to publicly accessible space is an enactment of young people's right to access the city and thus of their larger struggle to be part of 'the public'. Their acts of occupation are not accompanied by discursive claims. Through occupying space, they question, resist, challenge and disrupt the established order of things but they do not produce discourse, apart from the rare demands they express to the night correspondents of jobs and a place to meet. Spivak, Grosfoguel and Fanon have provided arguments for understanding why they have recourse to noisome acts rather than speech and why they are not politically audible. These acts therefore do not turn youths into citizens, but should be understood as claims to citizenship.

In the context of the widespread feeling among immigrants' (grand)sons and (grand)daughters living in marginalized social housing neighborhoods that they are being denied a place in France, making oneself visible in public and semi-public spaces takes on a political meaning. The transgression of laws, rules and norms in public spaces carried out by a post-colonial 'other' may be a way of distancing themselves from and refusing the power of the dominant 'one' and thus performing the shift from the place assigned to them to a place that is claimed. Hallways and street corners become sites of struggle. This is what Holston referred to as the 'sites of insurgent citizenship', where everyday practices from those at the margins challenge power relations and redefine what it means to be a citizen. Occupying public space in Villeneuve and its associated behavior transgresses laws (anti-gang law, drug use, public drinking), and the housing corporation's rules with regard to communal spaces and norms (extending living room behavior to the street, being loud and impertinent). For these reasons, it can be qualified as 'insurgent'. Claiming a place in the neighborhood as 'theirs', should be understood as an alternative claim to citizenship: if one cannot be considered a French citizen in the political sense of the term, then at least one can appropriate the space one needs to exist

in the neighborhood. Occupying a public space in the neighborhood in a society where one is made to feel ‘out of place’ is a *de facto* claim to the right to access the city and indirectly to be part of society.

To conclude, this article on contested public space in a marginalized social housing neighborhood in France contributes to the academic debate on conflict in, over, and for public space. It has sought to expand the spectrum of case-studies beyond the fetishes of the political left, focusing on ‘guerilla gardening’, bike-riding and peaceful protests in parks, to include everyday occupations of public space that are considered harmful by other residents. These insurgent claims to space subvert power and challenge established norms and therefore are part of the subalterns’ struggle for citizenship. They have a political meaning and deserve to be heard as such. However, despite becoming visible and making noise, they have not yet become politically audible. Spaces need to be created in which their noise can be turned into voices.

Notes

Please find the notes at the end of the document. I have not been able to include them here

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Notes

[1] Observatoire national de la politique de la ville, 2015. Annual Report and its "Atlas of priority neighborhoods". <https://sig.ville.gouv.fr/Atlas/QP/> (accessed 01.02.2017)

[2] Centre Communal d'Action Social, la Mairie de Grenoble, 2014. Fiches secteurs Grenoble, approche territoriale des caractéristiques et dynamiques sociales et urbaines.

[3] Desnos, M., « Grenoble: Une plainte pour comprendre ». *Paris Match. 21.07.2010*

[4] Speech President Nicolas Sarkozy, 30 July 2016, Grenoble

[5] Interview with Jean-Pierre (real name), youth worker at CODASE, 29 September 2017

[6] Interview with night correspondent, 20 September 2013

[7] Interview with young man of roughly 25 years old, 17 November 2015

[8] Interview with Teddy (real name), youth worker at CODASE, 29 September 2017

[9] Teddy, *Ibid.*

[10] Street interview with man on the *Place des Géants*, 30 years old, 20 October, 2015.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Interview with young man of roughly 25 years old, 18 June 2015

[13] Interview with man of around 70 years old, *Union de Quartier*, 9 November 2015

[14] 'Bled' is an Arab word that literally means small village but that has become jargon for going to Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria if that is where one's parents come from.

[15] Jean-Pierre, *Ibid.*