



With the Current, Against the Wind: Constructing Spatial Activism and Radical Politics in the Tel-Aviv Gay Center

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Abstract

On the basis of an analysis of the Israeli LGBT group Trans in the Center, this article provides a theoretical and empirical account of spatial activism implemented "from within" through sexual politics. The paper first reviews the political-civil background and geographical-spatial discourse of activism. It then reviews the state-of-the-art literature on social centers, sexual politics and activism, focusing on Trans in the Center and the Gay Center where it operated. This case study gives an opportunity to examine LGBT spatial activism as a form of activist civil and sexual politics, unveiling a silenced reality and dialogical exchanges among community members as well as between members and the broader public. The paper articulates the potential of spatial activism to radicalize conservative and semi-hegemonic institutional space, promote social change and facilitate public visibility and discussion by working from within.

Key words: Spatial activism, Queer, Community center, Sexual Politics, Israel, Radical politics



Introduction

What might be defined as spatial activism and how can it be implemented in a local-urban scale of LGBT politics? Based on an analysis of the Israeli Trans in the Center group, this paper offers a theoretical and empirical account of spatial activism. Trans in the Center is an activist group which combines queer, feminist and transgender agendas, and has operated until recently in the Gay Center in Tel-Aviv. Following Pickerill and Chatterton's argument that "there is no place outside the reach of capitalist relations, 'new places' have to be created from within, through an attempt – however complicated, contested and fractured – to alter and challenge every-day places" (2006:742), I focus on the ways in which construction of space, sociocultural, symbolic and physical, emerges from within the LGBT community's (semi)-hegemonic municipal center through the creation and construction of spatial activism and subversive politics. In so doing, I would like to ask whether a radical queer group operating within a municipally funded space can subvert that space.

Recently, there has been growing interest in the spatiality of activism in general and in relation to the politics of sexuality in particular, and the ways in which these activities reconstruct space. Following Doreen Massey (2005) and Henri Lefebvre (1991), I recognize space as the product of interrelations, as constituted through interactions, and as the sphere enabling multiplicity. Space, then, is always under construction – it is never complete, never closed. Furthermore, I claim that the spatial is political, an argument that can be almost taken as given. But again, following Massey (2005), if we understand space as a product of interrelations, relations here are understood as embedded practices. Rather than accepting and working with readymade constituted entities or identities, this politics stresses the relational contractedness of entities such as political subjectivities.

I will present the context in which activism occurs and the potential for such activism to subvert and undermine the hegemony "from within", namely, by acting in the arenas of the establishment and (partly) collaborating with it. I open with a review of the political and civil context of activism, focusing on how political philosophy discusses it, and review the developments arising from a perspective informed by geographical discourse on this subject. Accordingly, I define the concept of *spatial activism*, which serves as an analytic tool to define and understand the constitution of space through interactions and multiplicity, and briefly review the geographical discourse on activism and politics of sexuality. Next, I discuss social and community centers and focus on the case study of the Trans in the Center group that has operated in the Gay Center in Tel Aviv. In

particular, I refer to physical, socio-cultural and socio-organizational space within which activism is created².

The Political and Civil Context of Activism

Activism is defined as actions committed by a certain group of people, mostly volunteers, to change a certain reality. Activism is also a practice of organizations, usually nonprofit or private, aiming to promote certain ideas, to apply political or economic pressure, or change existing practices (Takahashi, 2009). Activism is perceived by modern society as one of the modes of expression of a diverse civil society, and is associated with social movements (Tilly, 2004; Chari and Donner, 2010).

In recent years, there has been growing interest in activism occurring in social spatial contexts, within the framework of “deliberative and active democracy” (Menuchin, 2010:28), referring to the public space of civil society, which is actually the ideological and social space in which activism occurs. Young (2001) challenges this conception, suggesting a tension between *deliberative democracy* and *activism*, and contends that although both are fundamentally based on “good citizenship” and the struggle against injustice, they are realized differently. While deliberative democracy proposes political discourse that emerges from the power relations between the different actors, activism proposes *active* involvement in demonstrations, boycotts, direct actions, and so on. As Young describes it, “Often activists make public noise outside when deliberation is supposedly taking place on the inside” (ibid, 673). Later I will show how the sexual politics of Trans in the Center might blur the boundaries of the “inside” and “outside”.

Moreover, activists often *prefer* direct action to discourse because they oppose collaboration with the establishment, do not trust it and reject the power relations upon which it is based. In many cases the aim of activism is not necessarily to stake a claim or reach an agreement but to stimulate the public into thinking about certain issues (Young, 2001). For analytical purposes, Young artificially separates the two concepts and notes that both are most significant in political theory and practice, even though this theory tends to not to highlight activism. Hence, she suggests that organizations and individuals whose aim is to promote justice should pursue both activism and deliberative democracy, despite the difficulty in maintaining both simultaneously in the same space.

Thus, activism is regarded by Western society and political philosophy as an actual realization of citizenship, which is not just a bundle of rights, but a means to integrate individuals and groups into society (Peled & Shafir, 2005). In Israel – a

² This study of the Gay Center is part of a larger research project titled “Spatial Activism in the City: Perspectives of Body, Identity and Memory”. In this project activism is examined in three organizational arenas in different geographical locations in Tel Aviv. This article focuses on issues of spatial activism in the context of sexuality and the activism-community-establishment relationships.

centralized, mobilized state with a layered social structure – a complex civil discourse has developed, combining ethno-national, liberal and republican elements. Consequently, Peled and Shafir (ibid) propose a democratic, multicultural regime in which citizenship would be based on equal rights. Yet, this is only a future vision, and in the meantime Yishai (2003) argues that Israel's political culture discourages the growth of a civil society that respects individuals and their rights, and the individual is still secondary to the regime. In such a reality, argues Svirsky (2012), political activism is required to promote civil values and social change. This is a local activism that does not necessarily draw on the global phenomena of activism as Tarrow (2009) suggests, so that its local nuances (Kaldor, 2003) are more significant than external influences.

This activism should operate in a context of an independent civil society and not as a collaborative, subservient entity which preserves and serves the interests of the regime and actually propels *slave activism* that serves the state, without challenging or undermining it in any way (Svirsky, 2012:17). In this article I will challenge this approach and show that in certain cases spatial activism can subvert, undermine and challenge the existing institutional order *from within*, through some degree of limited collaboration with the establishment.

Activism and Geographical Discourse

Suja (2011) contends that space can be a political meeting point for different groups, stimulating joint activism by bringing together movements and groups with no other common basis. The current literature distinguishes between *geography of activism* and *activist geography*. In this article I elaborate on the concept of *spatial activism*, which corresponds to the existing research on both. Geography of activism usually refers to different models of activism in space, distinguishing between the different goals and types of activism (environmental, gender, etc.) and its different spatial scales (national, urban, neighborhood, etc.). The basic idea is that activism is not only a social but also a spatial phenomenon, and that geographers have a key role to play in its development and understanding. Hence it is associated with another concept – activist geography, or action aiming to change oppressive power relations manifested in “autonomous geographical spaces” where geographers are involved in activism (Pickerill and Chatertton, 2006; The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010), and also in academia-community collaboration (Routledge, 2009).

I define *spatial activism* as collective action that strives to transform power relations within and between different groups in society and plays a part in the (re)production of physical, social, cultural and symbolic space. In this sense, spatial activism is reciprocal – the action affects the (re)production of space, but is also affected by it. The spatial is thus political and constructed by the activists and their actions, as shown below in the case of Trans in the Center. This definition is based on the ways in which geographers have already understood activism (e.g. *geography of activism* and *activist geography*), and on the argument made by

others (Massey, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 2010) that all social relations are inherently spatial and activism is about the transformation of sociopolitical relationships. I thus agree that any activism is always essentially spatial, as demonstrated in particular by many feminist and queer scholars and geographers. By proposing the concept of *spatial activism* I seek to contribute to the existing critical discourse a tool for analyzing activism operating on several levels, sociocultural, physical and symbolic. It is not a new type of activism, but rather a new analytical tool.

One of the first researchers of activism was Amitai Etzioni. Etzioni conducted a critical study of the social and community aspects of activism, arguing that it was the moral obligation of the individual to be an activist (Etzioni, 1968, Hans, 2006). In that, he prefigured more radical theories, such as Laclau and Mouffe's ([1985] 2004: 36) pluralistic democracy, which refers to activism in the context of dismantling the existing hegemony. Queer geographers, such as Brown (1997), criticized Laclau and Mouffe's model, particularly for its dichotomy between the state and politics on one hand and civil society on the other. Still other geographers studied activism at the meeting point of the private, public and nongovernmental sectors, the new meanings this encounter offers to different communities, the physical and social space of activity, and the transforming role of the activists themselves (Larner and Craig, 2005). Different types of power and suppression (e.g. gender, ethnic) were seen to create meaningful and diverse sites and spaces of protest and resistance (Katz, 2003), such that effective response to "power" required not only creative ideas but also creative geography that took into account the dynamics of activism and resistance space (Wright, 2008:384). Moreover, these daily spaces and their political layers (Pile, 1997) were associated with the defiance of individuals and groups in the globalized, capitalistic world (Appadurai, 1996).

Activism in Social Centers and the Politics of Sexuality

In recent years social centers have been offering new kinds of community activism for city residents (and even non-residents, e.g., immigrants or refugees). Hence, their activism occurs on a regular basis, subverting the neoliberal spatial order (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006; Montagna, 2007; Mudu, 2004). Yet, not enough attention has been paid to the everyday practices of autonomous politics and activists *within* these centers (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). Lacy (2005) highlights the importance of networks emerging from the interaction of activists in shared physical and emotional spaces in a neoliberal urban context in the UK. Emotional reflexivity within activist spaces can also contribute to more sustainable individual and collective engagement (Brown and Pickerill, 2009). These interactions not only create new patterns of activism which challenge physical and emotional spaces, but also, as Chatterton (2005) notes, create a third space, in which activists and non-activists meet and interact. Such interactions generate new agendas and challenge the community's power structures.

Despite the growing number of LGBT centers in Western cities, few have been studied in their geographical context. Recent research on LGBT and queer activism in social centers and organizations focuses mainly on NGOs and the way they provide queer space and portray themselves as sites of counter-publicity. Shokied (2001, 2012) focuses on the social and intimate spaces created in the LGBT Center in New York, and argues that they replace conventional consumer spaces within the gay community, such as bars and clubs. They do not remain limited to the center, moreover, but trickle to external spaces in which participants meet and support each other.

Andrucki and Elder (2007) draw on fieldwork in Vermont to claim that state power is constitutive of the material and discursive configurations of queer NGOs, which have come to embody a form of queer space peculiar to advanced liberal democracy. They argue for a skeptical analysis of NGO claims of providing autonomous space for queer representation, and call for a critical re-placing of queer public space. They distinguish between non-formal consumer spaces serving the LGBT community and formal spaces of community organizations that are nongovernmental by definition and are part of civil society – both typical to neoliberal contexts. Furthermore, despite the separation between state authorities and NGOs, the latter are deeply involved in the political, financial and social establishment, preventing them from pursuing activism that challenges and criticizes the establishment, especially out of the fear of losing their legal status and funding.

While queer geographers and scholars have focused on activist spatial politics of pleasure at sites of carnivals and parades (Browne, 2007; Hubbard, 2011; Johnston, 2005, 2007); queer political performance of activism (Baum, 2006; Shepard, 2010; Ziv, 2010); or the spatial politics of solidarity among LGBTQ activists (Binnie and Klesse, 2011), not enough attention has been paid to the construction of queer spatial activism in community centers and other spaces that provide and produce routine activities, and especially to the potential of such activism to subvert existing practices “from within”.

Brown (2007b) considers a set of alternative, autonomous queer spaces outside the mainstream commercial gay scene. These are created by radical queer activist networks and tear open the neoliberal city's bureaucratically planned spaces. Kohler and Wissen (2003; in Brown 2007b:2696) argue that these activist practices open up a discursive space in which social and political alternatives become thinkable. According to Brown (2006), these spaces do not exist outside capitalist social relations and the commercial gay scene infrastructure of mainstream service organizations. Brown also claims that these radical queer spaces "are important because they provide a constructive and practical attempt to offer a non-hierarchical, participatory alternative to a gay scene that has become saturated by the commodity. They offer more than empty transgression. They are experimental spaces in which new forms of ethical relationships and encounters based on co-operation, respect and dignity can be developed" (2007a:205).

Jeppesen (2010) adds that anti-heteronormative strategies used by activists disrupt heteronormative spaces and create queer counter-publics in spaces like gay bars and villages. The case study presented below uses such strategies to challenge not only heteronormative spaces, but also homonormative spaces, and also create an autonomous space within the Gay Center.

The Tel-Aviv Gay Center and Local Sexual Politics and Activism

The Israeli LGBT community went through significant changes since the end of the 1980s. Before this time, Israel was a conservative place for LGBTs and in many ways excluded them from the public sphere. The turning point was the amendment of the penal code that prohibited homosexual intercourse. This penal code adopted from the British law and although very rarely used, its amendment in March 1988 heralded a revolutionary decade (Harel, 1999). LGBT identity began being recognized not only legally but also in the media and in other symbolic spaces within Israeli society such as the military (Kama, 2000, 2011).

In the 1990s, Tel-Aviv became the gay capital of Israel, and unlike the official capital, Jerusalem, began supporting the LGBT community (Alfasi and Fenster, 2005; Kama, 2011). The local gay scene flourished and began attracting growing numbers of gay tourists. As in other gay capitals (Binnie, 2004; Browne and Bakshi, 2013; Hubbard, 2011; Quilley, 1997), this intersected with commercial interests and faced some criticism in the last decade, mainly by small radical groups who criticized LGBT politicians' tendency to ignore the oppression of others such as the Palestinians (Ziv, 2010), or serve Israeli homonationalist agendas (Gross, 2013; Hartal and Sasson-Levy, forthcoming; Schulman, 2012). As shown below, Trans in the Center represents the second generation of this critique, combining feminist, queer, and trans ideas and practices with marginalized voices.

This process culminated in the opening of LGBT Center in January 2008 in Gan Meir, a park in downtown Tel Aviv. Its opening is related to municipal politics, because since the middle of the 1990s the local political influence of the LGBT community grew (Kama, 2000), attracting increasing resources and services³. This tendency is also related to globalization processes of decentralization, where the state and its institutions tend to become weaker and local administration gains more power and pursues an independent and sometimes even inconsistent policies. Indeed, some argue that the Tel Aviv Municipality is the

³ In this period the Tel Aviv Municipality invested heavily in identifying the community's needs, including two comprehensive surveys: The "Pink" Survey (Balnero and Fridman, 2001) and a 2004 survey defined as "needs survey" towards the establishment of a community center which will serve the LGBT community (see Pizmoni-Levi, 2005, for more details). Prior to the opening a physical analysis of the building and other practical needs was undertaken, and the organizations supposed to use the building were also assessed (Egertt, 2007).

only authority in Israel that recognizes the LGBT community and provides for its special needs (Alfasi and Fenster, 2005; Fenster and Manor, 2010)⁴.

The center is located in a three-story building owned by the municipality, a former school at the edge of the park. It offers extensive leisure and cultural activities for the local LGBT community, such as an open community-oriented clinic, events hall, café, offices and information center. It also houses various community organizations that have been scattered in different places before. It is funded mainly by its own revenues (rent, café revenues, and modest participation fees), and partly by the municipality, plus a small amount of donations. From the socio-organizational aspect, the center can be characterized as a “hybrid organization” which does not belong entirely to either the third sector or the municipality. Whereas it is located in a municipal building and partly funded by the municipality – including fully paid manager and staff – it operates as an NGO relying on a large number of volunteers. Note that this model is unique and innovative on a global scale. Even though LGBT community centers operate in many Western cities, they are mostly pure NGOs, and although they might obtain some funding from the government or municipality they are usually not managed and operated by them⁵.

Since its opening, the Gay Center became a significant arena for the community, both in Tel Aviv and beyond, and many NGOs relocated to it. The center began offering activities, mainly sociocultural but also therapeutic, specifically designed for teenagers, youngsters, parents, senior citizens, Russian-speaking immigrants, transgender people and others. Furthermore, the center became involved in community activism such as organizing the annual Pride Parade, donor events, the Transgender Day of Remembrance, and various campaigns.

Nevertheless, it is criticized for having become a hegemonic place, dominated by middle-class, European gay men (Gross, 2013; Hartal and Sasson-Levy, forthcoming; Moreno, 2011). Moreno (2011) claims that the center serves as a catalyst for increased national and municipal control over the LGBT community, representing a neoliberal process of privatization and consumption. Gross (2013), in turn, criticizes her and claims that this is a case of nationalization rather than privatization. He agrees that the center has been consumerized but claims that this is not necessarily negative consumerism. Both Moreno and Gross agree about the ways in which the center has come to represent homonational politics of assimilation and cooptation with mainstream politics, a process considered by Kama (2011) as typical of traditional LGBT politics during the last two decades,

⁴ For more on the relationships between the LGBT community in Israel and the establishment since the early 90's, see Kama (2011).

⁵ The Tel Aviv Municipality actually finances and produces the annual Gay Pride Parade together with the LGBT center's staff (also employed by the municipality) (Kama, 2011).

with gays and lesbians starting to “parading proudly into the mainstream” (p. 180).

This kind of criticism is not unique to this center and is voiced against other LGBT communities worldwide. It is addressed at the “queer patriarchy” (Nast 2002)⁶, particularly by women and marginalized groups within the LGBT community, such as transgenders and bisexuals⁷. The struggle of these marginal groups is for sexual citizenship that can be defined as a collection of rights and duties determining sociopolitical membership, providing access to resources and benefits, including membership in the politico-legal community (Monro, 2003, 2005).

I will argue here that the center indeed represents a semi-hegemonic position. On the one hand, as others have argued, it is a powerful center of mainstream municipal politics also embraced, since 2009, by national rightwing politics⁸. On the other, it presents an image of a place open to everybody. The case of Trans in the Center shows the complexity of the latter image, since it was originally intended as a social group for trans people, not a radical activist group open to all the “queer unwanted” (Binnie, 2004), and yet the management accepted this. Thus, while the center's politics is led by gay middle-class males who support and have close relationships with the mayor and other politicians at the local and national levels it is still partly open to radical groups.⁹

As part of the aforementioned broader research project on spatial activism, in this paper I focus on one of the groups operating in the center, called Trans in the Center. I began the qualitative-ethnographic research process by taking part in the group's meetings as a participant observer, during which I took part in all group meetings and related events and documented my observations in my field notes. The participant observations helped me to learn more about the group, its activities and members. After six months of observations I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 17 people – including gays, lesbians, straights, queers, transgenders, genderqueers, bisexuals and pansexuals – who participated or contributed to the group's meetings. These interviews were held in public settings

⁶ In “Queer Patriarchies, Queer Racisms, International”, Nast describes the development of a homonormative patriarchy that includes mainly white, wealthy men who belong to the creative class (Florida, 2004). This patriarchy is connected to the establishment and to patterns of global capitalist consumerism, reproducing heteronormative patterns and largely replacing the older heteronormative patriarchies such as family and racist and militaristic models. This influential article was criticized, mainly by queer masculine geographers, for its essentialist theorization based on visual representations and texts rather than real people and their lived experiences, as gay men are still being discriminated (Elder, 2002 and Sothorn, 2004).

Even harsher criticism against homo-normative patriarchy was voiced in the last decade by the radical queer community in the US, which is identified with anti-capitalism, anarchism and transgender and queer politics (Mattilda, 2004).

⁷ For similar criticism against the Tel Aviv center and its management, see Eisner (2012).

⁸ Gross (2013) sees the 2009 murder of two youngsters in the Aguda (the first LGBT organization in Israel) as the turning point within the Israeli LGBT politics. After the murder the community was embraced by national right wing politicians including Prime Minister Netanyahu.

⁹ I would like to thank Prof. Gross for helping me clarify this.

or in the informant's home, and took between one to two hours. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed together with the field notes and thematically coded. When citing the informants, the identity mentioned is self-determined, except for officials, whom I cited under their real names, I used nicknames for all others. The methodology also included analysis of center documents and other materials.

Spatial Activism Challenging the Established Order "from within": The Case of Trans in the Center

The Group and its Goals

In July 2009, Trans in the Center began operating at the Tel Aviv Gay Center at the initiative of the center's transgender coordinator Elisha Alexander. The group, that used to meet regularly until the summer of 2012, was defined as:

A series of community meetings on transgender/queer/feminist issues. The meetings are open to the public and are not limited to transgender people. They are held twice a month at the Gay Center, in order to encourage inter-communal discourse, raise awareness, and facilitate change (translated from the group's Facebook profile; emphasis in the original)¹⁰.

Originally designated as a channel for transgender community activities within the center, the group transformed itself from a discussion group on transgender issues to a site of community activism connecting transgender, feminist and queer issues in a radical approach, in terms of both contents and modes of operation. The biweekly meetings included several dozens of participants, some regular and others irregular, of different ages (mostly 20-35) and genders (transgender women and men, heterosexuals, gays and lesbians, genderqueers¹¹, bisexuals, etc.). They were mostly Jews living in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area.

The group's founder was determined to create a space that will generate activism and community change:

From my point of view the idea and aim of the group is to raise awareness and bring into the community's discourse things that are not there. Of course it's a political phenomenon, but oppression and silencing are also political and what we have been doing is actually a form of resistance. Another thing that we do is... connect different people and subjects, both to create solidarity and to erase certain phobias... but also to align struggles and to lead to other things

¹⁰ <http://www.facebook.com/groups/98485168653/members/> (last accessed December 12, 2013).

¹¹ A genderqueer is not defined as either a man or a woman, and sometimes moves freely between the two identities. This is not gender mix-up but an identity that does not fall within social conventions (for more information, see Nestle et al., 2002).

through discussion and discourse. (Elisha (Shuki) Alexander, 35, queer, trans and feminist man; interviewed on April 7, 2011)

According to Shuki, social change can occur through political activism that opposes the silencing and exclusion of marginalized groups. This kind of action should lead to activism beyond the center's biweekly meetings and physical space and connect issues that are often not discussed openly in the LGBT community.

The practices of Trans in the Center attempted to combine queer and feminist perceptions with transgender dilemmas, such as practices which not only are not heteronormative, but not even homonormative, such as genderqueer, and developed a discourse on topics considered almost taboo even in the transgender community. Thus, in April 2011 one of the meetings discussed intersex¹². Another one, titled "Second thoughts: Trans who've changed their minds", dealt with people who began a process of gender reassignment but changed their mind in midstream. Other meetings discussed concepts such as family, immigration, and faith from a radical perspective.

The space offered by Trans in the Center largely undermined identity politics in the LGBT community, that tends to focus on a specific identity (for example, tailoring activities for youth, Russian-speaking lesbians, mature gays, etc.). The group promoted feminist and queer connections (Misgav, 2014), as Lital explains:

The discourse at the meetings is part of the way of the feminist and queer participants of conducting the group. In Trans in the Center, I don't identify hierarchical patterns familiar from other groups. I think that they try hard not to have such patterns, extremely aware of it, these are people who have internalized feminism, both women and men, and they take it everywhere in their lives. (Lital, 34, a feminist heterosexual; interviewed on July 1, 2011)

The group activity was based on queer principles and a perception of "queer" not only as a catchword for a person whose identity is not hetero-normative (Browne, 2006; Oswin, 2008), but as a definition that embraces a vast range of radical possibilities, undermining heteronormative hegemony. Hence, queer is an expression of complex connections between different identities – national, sexual and even intellectual – and its personal and theoretical expression is the study of the relationship between social boundaries such as race, gender, class and sexuality (Elder, 1999). Queer has also a broad meaning not only as an identity but as a kind of politics, as offered by Puar's (2005) discussion of queer, that frames it as inherent to subjectivity, claiming queer is not in binary opposition to normative discourse but rather "contains" both the norm and resistance/subversion of it. The resistance to hegemonic power in this sense is meant to unveil the way the norm is sustained and subverted all at the same time. In a way the group tried to make the

¹² People with both feminine and masculine sex organs.

center more queer and radicalize its conduct. This is one side of the dialectic relationships suggested by the concept of spatial activism – ways in which the group not only was affected by the space where it operated, but also tried to affect it. The conceptualization of queer offered by Puar (2005) corresponds here with the argument regarding the interplay of radical activism with municipal capital and space, portraying queer not as alternative to normative politics but as a complex set of vectors. I will elaborate on this argument later in the paper, and will show how working “from within” the establishment and providing radical agenda while using the municipal and mainstream space of the Gay Center has the potential for daring activism, that challenges the existing order.

Theoreticians stress queer as a way of undermining and rethinking traditional institutions such as family, communal organizations, and different bodily aspects, while creating an alternative, “queer” way of life and subculture (Halberstam, 2005). The group's queer and feminist dimension led to a deconstructionist view of the participants' identity, the issues discussed and the way different struggles should be brought together; as one participant explained:

Trans in the Center is a radical group that always strives to combine struggles... You expect them to struggle and demonstrate only for what is relevant to them, but they have a wider agenda and ideological spectrum. This is the queer part of the group, it is beyond specific transgender struggles, it is the perception of human rights in general, of feminist and queer radicalism, from the struggle against the occupation to the fight for migrant workers, women... all this spectrum of struggles exists in their radical queer feminist agenda. (Lizzie, 50, queer, pansexual woman; interviewed on July 7, 2011).

Lizzie's powerful voice represents a woman experienced in activism. She participated in the group's meeting for long time while at the same time taking part in many other struggles. Lizzie's involvement in the group serves as a good example for the power of spatial activism not only to provide the physical, sociocultural and discursive space for “doing something”, but also encourage participants to take part in other activities and allow them to develop their own agendas and activist way of life. Nevertheless, for many group members the meetings remained a source of sociocultural encounters and fun, and not necessarily activism. Thus, some participants did not view themselves as activists active for social change and challenging the existing order, although in fact that was exactly what they are doing (Bobel, 2007).

Discursive Spaces and Spatial Scales of Activity

The meetings of the different groups active in the Gay Center take place in different rooms. This is not only a physical environment but also sociocultural one, producing symbolic spaces. The group's discursive space is described by Whitzman

(2007) as generating community leadership, as it brings forth a discourse of a new and different agenda, and may even change norms, opinions, power relations and interactions between people. In this sense it is a space of activism, namely of change, both sociocultural and cognitive. Brown (2007a) adds that in the radical queer context, discursive spaces of activism have the potential to undermine spatial dichotomies of the personal-public and allow a space in which social and political alternatives get to be at the center of discussion.

The discursive space in *Trans in the Center* facilitates discussion of political and sociocultural alternatives, part of which are marginalized or ignored by mainstream community discourse, such as critical discussion of family and parenthood, surrogacy, gender reassignment, religious beliefs, and sexual practices. While this and similar groups are open to the public and anyone can participate in their meetings, in practice they are usually limited to queers familiar with analytical discourses. *Trans in the Center* is unique in that it simultaneously addresses both the general public and the LGBT community; as Valery explains,

Trans in the Center is activist in that it aims to undermine a little the center's very lukewarm and hegemonic discourse. This is the only group... that strives to undermine the existing sociocultural order within the LGBT community, issues that the community prefers to ignore, representing a hegemonic heteronormative ideology accepted in the community... The activities... trickle out of... the Gay Center into the social spaces of the participants... There are people who may never come to the Gay Center or to a *Trans in the Center* meeting, but in this way are exposed to the ideas and discourse generated by this group, and in this way it is spread around in ever-widening circles... (Valery, 26, lesbian, butch woman; interviewed on July 16, 2011).

Valery uses the group discussions not only to learn and be empowered but also to share ideas outside, and bring a change not only to a limited group of people but to the entire community and even beyond. The spaces of discussion allow mobilization for political and social activities beyond the regular meetings, going outside the Gay Center. For example, activists and participants in *Trans in the Center* demonstrated time and again against oppression and injustice. They organized the Radical Parades of 2010 and 2011 as an alternative to the commercial Pride Parade sponsored by center and the municipality, with its neoliberal, capitalist, homonormative and depoliticized agenda. People who got organized during and after the group's meeting demonstrated against authorities such as the Ministry of Health for oppressing transgender people, or against a leading newspaper after it had published a homophobic column.

Another example is the transgender-queer-feminist tent erected in the Levinsky encampment during the social protest in the summer of 2011 (Misgav and Fenster, 2014), as the group's members joined a feminist camp established by

ethnic women downtown. The activities included sociocultural dimensions, such as a fun day on the beach for trans people and their friends, an activity meant to provide a safe space and friendly environment for people who usually avoid exposing their body. In these activities¹³ the demand for sociopolitical change and the outlook were directed simultaneously outside, to the general public, and inside, to the LGBT community. Moreover, the spatial aspect was integral to every activity, as they all provided social space for interaction (inside) and also physical space (outside) that together aimed at social change, representing the two patterns of activism defined by Young (2001): discussion and direct action.

The Socially Embodied and Symbolic

The politics and activism in the group are charged with meanings of body and memory. As a group representing marginalized sectors within the LGBT community, organizing and activity revolve around issues of physical identity, identity embodied in oppressed bodies and fringes excluded from the community mainstream, be they the transgender or trans-queer. These bodies and the emotional spaces created in their power relations and group encounters are understood to a large extent through a politics of emotions, such as shame, which generate collective action (Ahmed, 2004).

Queer theoreticians developed the concepts of “shame” (Probyn, 2004; Sedgwick, 2003), or “ethics of shame” (Warner, 1999) as juxtaposed and opposed to the more common concept in homonormative identity politics – pride. Others emphasized the bodily dimension of shame beyond the emotional aspect, namely, the shame to of owning an unconventional body that does not fit the gay mainstream culture (Halperin and Traub, 2009). But body politics of shame and other emotions can have different aspects: whereas the LGBT activism of the 1980s and 1990s did not seek to accept their difference but the inability to be the same, the activism of last decade, at least its queer radical part, is motivated by shame as a social power which generates radical action opposing establishment but also LGBT hegemony (ibid).

In *Trans in the Center*, shame becomes a source of empowerment, where the body does not necessarily seek to integrate but rather to emphasizes its difference. The interplay of shame is always twofold: it reveals an appropriation of shame by the activists, who refuse to be ashamed for something they think is not a matter of shame, thus exposing the power structure and creating an alternative to pride discourse, and at the same time it locates and makes shame present, underpinning the need for safe spaces where shame can be mobilized¹⁴. Consequently, the group

¹³ Even though some of the activities outside the LGBT Center were not formally *Trans in the Center* activities, they did include the prominent activists from the group and the group provided them space for organizing and support.

¹⁴ I would like to thank Gilly Hartal for her insights regarding the role of shame for the group's activism. On mobilization of shame see (Keenan, 2004).

functions, like other queer spaces within the Israeli queer context (Hartal et-al, 2014), as a safe space, where shame can be explored and ‘outed’, a process which leads to its mobilization and to subversion of the “outer”, normalizing consumerist and national-Zionist discourse. Addressing the group is oriented both inside, towards the excluding LGBT community, and outside towards society in general. Activities outside the center, such as the Radical Parade or the tent in Levinsky Park, are directed towards the general public and are not limited to the LGBT community. Yet, the group’s ability to address the general public is limited and sometimes remains strictly declarative, while inside the LGBT community and Center the group gains influence which can be measured by the large numbers of people participating in its activities.

The group also empowers memory and its physical context and turns it into a resource. One of the group meetings revolved around the memories of an aging trans woman, another dealt with the unconventional body and included personal stories and past experiences of the participants, and the group also organized related events at or near the center, like the Transgender Day of Remembrance. By doing so the participants created a dialectic relationship between the symbolic, the social and the physical dimensions that together constructed spatial activism for social and political change. For example, I wrote the following in my field notes during a meeting on "Communal activity from the point of view of trans women", which took place on International Woman's Day:

A lively discussion... about... feminist and queer activism, and each participant wants to share his/her personal experience and place in the activity, either at the workplace, in demonstrations, in the Center or in other communities. At a certain point more and more people join in and the circle grows... One of the women participants describes her course of life and activism... describing a geographical route which combines a life story, memories, insights concerning places and experiences and diverse activism representing life experience and changes which have influenced her activities. Her personal story evokes many reactions and encourages others to tell their life story. (March 8, 2011)

These notes helped me understand the relationship between identity and subjectivity, and the activity spaces of these participants, both in their personal lives and in their activism, bodily experiences and memories. The participants' narratives show the direct linkage from memory and personal autobiography to collective action, or in another words, from the personal and symbolic to social activism and its spatiality, from the most personal space of the subjective body to collective action – analyzable through the lenses of spatial activism.

Subversion versus Establishment

Based on our preliminary analysis, it seems that Trans in the Center represents a model of radical, subversive politics that undermines community hegemony, the establishment and community institutions, or even national authorities, creating political spaces for activity and interaction in the process. In the meetings, the participants criticize the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Interior for violating gender rights; and the municipality for sponsoring the commercial Pride Parade, supporting capitalism, or oppressing inner city residents. They also criticize the center itself, while using its space and funding. For example, the meeting called “Where is the elevator?” criticized the center for its lack of disability access, symbolic of the exclusion of marginalized groups (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Invitation to a Trans in the Center group meeting titled "Where is the Elevator?" July 2009.

Even more subversive was the meeting “Ouhch,¹⁵ boycott!” held in May 2011 to deal with the relationship between LGBT tourism and the way the Foreign Ministry uses LGBT rights in Israel to fight the Palestinian and international BDS campaign (Figure 2) by pinkwashing occupation of Palestinians (Schulman, 2012).



Figure 2: Invitation to a Trans in the Center group meeting titled "Ouhch, boycott! Between homo-nationalism and queer nation, about the boycott, pinkwashing and gay tourism" (in the background you can see the Tel-Aviv beach and the Separation Wall), May 2011.

Discussing the boycott from an affirmative point of view, and moreover, connecting it to the LGBT community as a pinkwashing "tool" raised objections and demands to cancel the event, as part of the intra-community power relations between the heteronormative and homonationalist (semi-)hegemony on the one hand, and queer radical activism on the other (Gross, 2013). It is also important here to go back to the conceptualizations of “queer” as shown earlier, since there are different meanings of queer within the local activist discourse. Usually the

¹⁵ Ouhch (sis) is a moniker used in the LGBT community to describe feminine gays. It is actually a queer appropriation of the masculine and militaristic moniker "Achi" (bro).

meaning of “queer” within the radical queer community is linked to identity politics marking leftist anti occupation stances, together with anarchic and vegan agendas, but transgender politics is not always fully in compliance with these agendas . In the case of Trans in the Center group it is important to see that the radical politics, which strives to joint struggles, combines trans politics together with the broaden meaning of queer and with non-queer struggles relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian context, or struggles for other oppressed groups or even for animal rights. As the coordinator told me before the event:

I am going to hold an event dealing with the boycott. I secretly hope that they [the Gay Center's management] would not allow it. It will stir up the community... What gave me this idea is an anti-apartheid party that was supposed to take place at the LGBT center in New York, but they were not allowed to do it. Therefore, I am curious to find out whether here, in our center, they will let me do it... If they do, it's cool, because a discussion will take place. If they don't, it's still cool, because a public discussion will still take place. One way or another we are going to have a discussion (Interview, April 7, 2011).

There were many appeals to the Center's manager, and also to municipal council members, to cancel the event but it took place and attracted many. I asked Yuval Egerтт, the manager, why he had chosen not to cancel the event, and he replied:

As part of the establishment, I should have said that it is a public, municipal venue, and there is no way we could allow such an event to take place here. Many people called me to cancel the event. I had to stop the train and say "not in our house", all the more so given the fact that the organizer works here at the center... But the great thing about this event was allowing it to happen. Also because it evoked the counter-arguments and generated public discussion... That's what matters, to be right at the center of things!... This event has created a discourse that asks, what are we above all – gays, Zionists, Israelis, a marginalized population? I don't want to miss this tsunami that evokes many things that are very significant in Israeli society. My personal gain out of it was again, being at the center of things. Again the Gay Center became the center of public and community discourse on every possible subject. That is what people call social change (Interview, August 17, 2011).

Examining this controversial event reveals a complex situation. Sometimes it seems that each part “plays” a predefined role, one radical and subversive and the other conservative, but the eventually everyone wins. The Trans in the Center's activists managed to raise the stakes, to hold a public discussion on a subversive topic and to arouse objection from the heart of the establishment they criticize, while the establishment allowed them to act and was thus perceived as pluralistic

and tolerant. Egertt's response also highlights the Gay Center as a hub of activism, social change and inter-communal discourse. On the one hand, but on the other hand, who serves as the “gatekeeper” of this activism? Who decides whether to allow any activity? At the end the decision is made by the center's administration, representatives of the local queer patriarchy. Thus it can be said that despite the subversive element in the *Trans in the Center's* politics, it is characterized by a certain conventionality stemming from the place where it chooses to operate, and from the way it allows the establishment to appear liberal and pluralistic. Again, this shows how the group both affects and is affected by the space where it operates, or spatial activism as defined here.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article presented and developed the concept of spatial activism as a means for spatial realization of activist politics and as an analytic tool to understand and analyze activism and the dialectic spaces involved in it. According to the conceptualization proposed here, spatial activism connects the physical-spatial dimension with the sociocultural and symbolic-cognitive dimensions. In this case the different spaces, the Tel Aviv Gay Center and the external and urban spaces to which the activism trickled, were involved in this type of activism and carried physical, emotional and symbolic meanings. The case study presented shows the dialectic relationships demonstrated in its spatial activism – on the one hand the activism affected by the social, political and physical space of the Gay Center, and on the other hand its attempt to affect, challenge and radicalize space from within.

I asked at the beginning whether a radical queer group operating within the space provided by a municipally funded Gay Center can subvert that space, and I tried to show that by analyzing *Trans in the Center* group through the lenses of spatial activism we can then understand the spaces, strategies and tactics used by the group in order to bring about sociopolitical change.

The spatial activism articulated in *Trans in the Center's* activity at the Gay Center is the framework within which spatial politics is shaped, constructed and consolidated through an internal dialogue of community members and an external dialogue with the surrounding public. It is characterized by different approaches to politics and activism, partly collaborating with the establishment and empowered by it, and partly undermining its hegemony and challenging it from within. Despite its radical subversive approach, the group also has an establishment dimension, as indicated, for example, in the way both the group and the center's management handled the boycott event. Thus, following queer theory, we have to reconsider the binary divisions between state and community, radical and mainstream, etc. The fact that the center's management financed the group and provided the physical space for its meetings further blurred binary distinctions. Following Browne and Bakshi (2013:235) it might be helpful to view the state and the establishment as “constantly becoming, spatially contingent assemblages”, and thus “cooption,

deradicalisation and loss of activism are not always, or necessarily, the result of working within and with the state". In discussing the blurring of these distinctions it is important to pay attention to the power relations and power differences between the two sides. As I showed the (semi)hegemonic side aims to blur these power differences, framing itself as inclusive and tolerant while the radical queer activists usage of the resources available to them or offered to them by the mainstream does not necessarily indicate such an intention but directed at cultivating this binary. The result of this boundary work is in fact the blurring of the distinctions between radicalism of the group and the (semi)hegemony represented by the Gay Center.

The case described above deals not only with the group's geography of activism, but also with its social, cultural and symbolic dimensions, with the contents of activity, the activists' identity and the complexity that their activity creates in a mainstream, semi-hegemonic space. On the one hand they did their best to remain independent and radical, to deal with silenced issues and diverse sexual politics, and on the other they did all this in a kind of collaboration with the establishment. This analysis is consistent with the spatial activism conceptualization proposed here. Since the researcher has been a participant observer of this group's activity and is personally familiar with many of its members, this research may also be regarded as activist geography.

Such spatial activism is consistent with Oswin's (2004) argument about queer activism. Oswin argues that we need to rethink activism and the community spaces allowing it. Activism cannot be limited to radical, autonomous activism that operates outside the establishment, but must collaborate with the establishment in what she calls "queer complicity". Such collaboration stems from the understanding that while social change occurs outside the establishment the power of the establishment can be harnessed to promote change by way of activism "from within" (Cooper, 1994).

Oswin's "queer complicity" (2004, 2007) has pushed critical geographers to rethink the political from a more "queer" perspective – not in terms of binaries such as hegemony/resistance but rather as ambivalent and porous, where resistance and capitulation take multiple and unpredictable forms. In a way, this might seem as an extension to what Brown (1993) defined as "wounded attachments", in relation to identity politics: when we organize around identity, we are compulsively repeating a painful reminder of our subjugation, and maintaining a cycle of blaming which continues the focus on oppression rather than transcending it (Alcoff, 2000). More relevant for our current purposes, "queer complicity" can also be seen as a geographical extension to Gibson-Graham's (1996) "queering globalization" or their way of using queer theory to tell non-capitalist stories of globalization. As Oswin (2007) shows in the case of post-apartheid South Africa, using Gibson-Graham's methodology, in the era of globalization the nation state is queering itself, but "it does not necessarily do so from the margins... the webs of complicity that homosexual lives are entangled within have been re-crafted and

require careful interpretation. The specific ways in which queerness acts as a progressive and/or regressive force, the ways in which (homo)sexual politics break down and/or help consolidate imperialist, radicalized, classed and gendered inequities, must be carefully considered in context” (p. 107). Thus Oswin suggests that the problem is less a question of dominance vs. resistance but rather a mode of representation invested in reproducing the very systems we seek to transform. This is exactly the way in which we should analyze the Trans in the Center activism through the lenses of their spatial activism – not as pure resistance against the center’s hegemony but as a more complex way of acting and voicing from within.

Thus civil activism can coexist with the establishment and challenge its order from within. This is not necessarily “slave activism” as Svirsky (2012) suggests, but rather daring activism that facilitates a more just space for excluded groups¹⁶, both spatially (because they rarely get a space in the community center) and in the community discourse and collective memory. This articulates the ability of spatial activism in itself to radicalize institutional conservative spaces and those involved in them, promote social change and public visibility and discussion. Seen this way, “queer complicity” and “slave activism” are only two among a broad repertoire of options brought about by spatial activism. Of course, full understanding of spatial activism or the ways in which we can use this analytic tool in geographical research requires more thorough analysis going beyond the notion of spatial politics of sexuality in order to identify its relevance for other forms of spatial politics, but I hope that this case study contributed to the emergence of such understanding.

Acknowledgements

This paper is part of a larger PhD project titled supervised by Prof. Tovi Fenster at the PEC LAB (Planning with Communities for the Environment) in the Department of Geography and Human Environment, Tel-Aviv University. First and foremost I would like to thank the people who agreed to be interviewed for this project. Without their insightful contributions there would be no article. I am also grateful to Lynda Johnston, Aeyal Gross, Gilly Hartal, Ariel Handel and Merav Amir for their comments and critique on earlier versions of this paper. I wish to thank Elisha (Shuki) Alexander and Yuval Egertt from the Gay Center for sharing their knowledge with me. Helpful comments from audiences at CityState international workshop in June 2013, and from the research group on space in Minerva Center for Humanities, both in Tel-Aviv University, also helped me develop some of the ideas in this article.

¹⁶ These groups, such as transgenders and other non-heteronormative and non-homonormative people are excluded also from geographical research (Brown, 2012)

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