

"Glued to the city". Urban semiotics and political ideology in Bucharest's stickers

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Abstract

This paper explores the sticker as a semiotic and ideological element in urban space, through which social groups communicate competing meanings. From a methodological point of view, starting from the character of the flâneur, walking is considered a useful tool for understanding the signifiers of the city. Thus, this paper presents a content analysis of the stickers displayed in the central area of Bucharest, documenting over a thousand stickers. Two stickers with an anticommunist message numerically dominate the other stickers in the analysis. Researching the emitters of these messages, the paper concludes that anticommunism is used by them in order to propagate far-right ideas and to glorify the Romanian legionary movement.

Keywords

Stickers; Flâneur; Semiotics; Anticommunism;

Introduction

First time I am flying: Bucharest Henri Coandă to Stockholm Arlanda, January 2020, a few days before I started my semester as an Erasmus student at Umeå University in Sweden. My schedule looks something like this: two hours of faculty in a week and four hours in seminar weeks. What can I do with so much free time? In February, I was lucky enough to see the Northern Lights. In March, I had the misfortune of a global pandemic taking the university courses online (however, there were no other restrictions such as lockdowns or curfews). The next course took place entirely on the university's online platform, meaning

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prerecorded lessons were uploaded there and we checked them at our own convenience. What can I do, then, with all this free time?

By mid-May, darkness had disappeared altogether. At midnight there was still light outside as it would be here on a summer evening, while at two in the morning a sunrise stretching for several hours began. So, I spent my time walking, *a lot*. I went wherever my legs could take me and then back again. However, being a small town, I saw the same few streets over and over again, especially on the way back home. So while on those few streets I started looking at, one by one, the color of the buildings, how short they are, what decorations they have in their windows, who enters those houses and blocks, at the tall forests next to them, the tiny postman's car, the many cyclists and the road signs (here I saw several pedestrian crossings with the figure of a woman walking, as well as announcements at bus stops written in Swedish, English and the languages of the city's immigrant communities).

Then my eyes fell on the street lights and metal poles on which they lay. More specifically, on the many stickers displayed on the poles, which had politicized messages with a clear direction: *ANTIFA, Anti-homophobic Action, Goodnight White Pride, No classism, no sexism, no transphobia, no debate*, calls to organize, to protest, quotes from socialist leaders and writers, and so on. Someone could have changed their political opinions on their way to the supermarket just by reading these stickers. So, I asked myself: what about our own metal poles?

Therefore, in this paper I intend to research the stickers displayed in the center of Bucharest, to find out which are the most numerous, who are the emitters and what messages they communicate to us, those traversing the space by foot. Although stickers are all over the city, they have largely been neglected by sociological research. Starting from the investigation of the sticker as a sign that communicates in the public space, we can try to sketch a portrait of the groups offering meaning to the city.

Flâneur, sociologist

To answer the research question, we must first become a *flâneur*. Walter Benjamin made the *flâneur* one of the most important characters of nineteenth-century Paris through his writings on the work of Charles Baudelaire, which Benjamin considered to be the most accurate way to understand social life in Paris (Gilloch, 2013, p.133). The *flâneur* described by Baudelaire is a careful observer who loves to spend his time in the hustle and bustle of the city, in the midst of crowds. He feels at home no matter how far from home he is (Baudelaire, 2010). Walter Benjamin (2006) considers the *flâneur* the character through which we can understand modernity and the daily shocks it produces. Moreover, Jenks & Neves (2000, p. 5) add that the *flâneur* itself is the product of modernity and urban space. He could not have appeared at any other time and place than in the busy crowds of big cities. At the same time, the *flâneur* goes against modernity whenever he takes his turtle out for a walk in the crowded arches of Paris, a way of protesting the dehumanizing rhythm of life imposed by alienating factory work (Benjamin, 2006, p. 84). The slow gait of the tortoise opposes his contemporaries, always in a rush to work or to consume. For a *flâneur*,

the greatest ambition is to walk aimlessly, walking the city is in itself a reward. “Sloth is heroic” says Gilloch (2013, p. 155).

Flânerie, the activity of a *flâneur*, essentially means to walk and observe, the two are inseparable. Jean Jacques Rousseau confesses: “I can only meditate when I am walking. When I stop, I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs” (quoted in O'Mara, 2019, p. 9). A *flâneur* must walk to be able to observe. O'Mara, in his book *In Praise of Walking* (2019), tells us how walking helps to see better and react faster to things happening around us. Moreover, walking is associated with improved creativity and well-being (idem). The main instrument of a *flâneur* produces in him the conditions that make it possible to practice *flânerie*. His inspiration lies not in the silence of the office, but in the hustle and bustle of the street (Gilloch, 2013, p.134). Walking the city, he knows the city best (O'Mara, 2019, p. 76).

We can, then, consider it reasonable to associate the *flâneur* with the sociologist or ethnographer who studies the urban by going out into the field, collecting data, practicing participatory observation. David Frisby (1994) says that sociology has erased from its history characters such as the *flâneur*, leaving only scientifically and formally accepted works and authors in the desire to legitimize itself as an academic science. Also, Jenks & Neves (2000) see the similarities between the *flâneur* and the urban ethnographer through their common interest in certain urban groups, especially marginal ones (Walter Benjamin also analyzes besides the *flâneur* other characters from Baudelaire's Paris: the gambler, the tramp, the prostitute), and by the awareness that their research cannot be rushed. Sociology's contact with modest or sometimes obscure occupations, such as the *flâneur*, may provide new methods for understanding social life, argues Frisby (1994, p. 84).

The *flâneur*, therefore, is important for this paper because he can observe people, social contexts, the configuration of spaces, architecture, fleeting moments and seemingly insignificant details. Most importantly, he can read the city and its signs (Frisby, 1994).

The city as text and the language of the city

In other words, *the flâneur* is skilled at urban semiotics. Semiotics is the discipline which deals with the study of signs. According to Ferdinand de Saussure (quoted in Sebeok, 2001), one of the founders of modern semiotics, the sign consists of two components: the *signifier* is the material realization of the sign through sounds, letters, gestures, etc.; and the *signified* is the concept or mental representation to which the signifier refers. Put it simply, the word "cat" conjures up the image of a cat. It has a tail, whiskers, green eyes, gray fur or anything else that a person imagines when reading the word "cat". In this case, the string of letters that make up the word "cat" is the *signifier*, while the cat we think of when we read this word is the *signified*. Saussure argues that the relationship between the two components is arbitrary. There is no obvious reason why the word "cat" is used to refer to this category of animals. Any other word would have performed the same function just as well. The signified cat can also have as signifier the words "pisică", "chat", "gato", "mačka", etc. (Sebeok, 2001). A somewhat famous example of signifying is René Magritte's painting *La Trahison des images* (1929), in which

we see painted a pipe underneath which is written “*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*”. Magritte is indeed right because what we see is not actually a pipe, but only a signifier for it.

Roland Barthes (quoted in Storey, 2018) extends Saussure's theory, adding a new level of meaning: the signifier produces a signified at the *denotative* level. This signified may in turn become a new signifier on a *connotative* level. For example, a piece of cloth divided into three equal parts, painted with blue, white and red respectively (from left to right), i.e. a flag, is the signifier which produces at a denotative level the signified “France”. On a connotative level, “France” can signify Tour Eiffel, Louvre, wine, Islamophobia, romance, etc. Thus, the signified became a new signifier for the listed meanings. Barthes uses this model to analyze fashion, movies, music, etc. Waiting in a barbershop, for example, he notices the cover of a French magazine: on a denotative level, a black soldier appears saluting the French flag. On a connotative level, the desired meaning is a favorable image of French imperialism (Storey, 2018).

Saussure (quoted in Sebeok, 2001) divides the study of signs into two branches: synchronic and diachronic. The former studies signs at a particular point in time, conventionally the present, while the latter investigates how the form and meaning of signs change over time. The distinction is important because, as Gottdiener (1986) reminds us, space has a history. Not only does it signify meaning, but space is the result of an economic and political process in which one meaning among many others has gained hegemony (*idem*, p. 214). At the same time, the city is polysemantic, the multitude of meanings it communicates reflects the diversity of social groups, different interests and conflicts over the meaning of space (Gottdiener, 1986).

Urban semiotics studies these social meanings of space and the ways in which objects communicate meanings through signs (Jaššo, 2012, p. 2). The city has a language through which it speaks not only about the urban space itself, but also about its inhabitants (*idem*). For Barthes (1988), this is the true challenge of semiotics: to be able to speak of the “language of the city” without speaking metaphorically (p. 415). More specifically, we should talk about the “*languages* of the city” (which is literally true in the case of multicultural communities) because when we change where we look, the meanings also change: from the architecture of a neighborhood to the names of streets, the gender of statues, the advertisements on buildings and billboards, the number of businesses on a street, the graffiti on the subway, the cars parked in the center or on the outskirts of the city, the width of the streets, the route the buses take or the stickers glued on the back of traffic signs, each becomes a new signifier, it communicates something about the city and about those who inhabit it. The *flâneur* can help us find the signified.

Walter Benjamin (quoted in Frisby, 1994) compares the *flâneur* to a detective, an investigator of the city's signifiers. Benjamin (*idem*, p. 94) also suggests that some form of distancing from one's own images of the city is needed to read them better. Stahl (2009, p. 255) shares the same feeling when he realizes that living in Montréal is a good way to think about Berlin, and Berlin is a good place to think about Montréal. Our *flâneur* was thinking in Umeå about Bucharest and in Bucharest about the stickers in Umeå. With the tortoise ready on a leash, he will always lose the subway but gain knowledge in return.

Glued to the city

Before we go out on the street, we first need to explain the object of our research, the sticker. A sticker is a printed piece of paper or plastic with the other side covered in adhesive which allows it to be applied to a smooth surface. Generally, the sticker is of small dimensions and can have decorative or functional purposes: fruits come with stickers to indicate their origin while a sticker on the back of an identity card confirms if the owner has 'VOTED 06.10.2018'. Laptops are often decorated with stickers showing preferences for certain genres of music, organizations, events, movies, etc. In this research, we are interested in those stickers displayed in public spaces, communicating meanings to those who traverse the space.



Sticker 1. „ANTIFASCISTISK AKTION” in Sweden. The text translates to „Antifascist action. In constant conflict with sexism, racism, capitalism and homophobia”

Unlike Chiquita stickers on bananas in the store, or stickers of our favorite band on personal belongings, stickers put up in public spaces are illegal. They thus acquire a status similar to graffiti, both being signs that communicate in public without being authorized to do so (there are some exceptions, for example a mural commissioned by the city authorities will be appreciated as street art and not vandalism). Dovey et al. (2012) consider that punishing graffiti is based on the perception of violated property rights and the degradation of a place's identity.

However, echoing the argument of Gottdiener (1986), the identity of a place represents only one of the meanings that has gained hegemony over the other competing meanings. Which of these comes to predominate at a particular time and place depends on which groups and classes have more of a say in defining and organizing the social world, writes Hebdige (1979).

Members of subcultures often challenge the hegemony and dominant conception of reality imposed by groups with more power in society (Lachmann, 1988). Through graffiti, subcultures violate not only the “purity” of a place, but also its authorized meaning (Cresswell, quoted in Dovey et al., 2012, p. 2). Reershemius (2018) makes a similar observation about stickers, which he considers a form of “claiming space”, turning the sticker into a medium of communication for groups and individuals who are not

represented by a particular space. Stickers are often identified as a sign of subcultures, adds Vigsø (2010), and are accessible to a large number of emitters. Importantly, stickers can be quickly displayed, which reduces the risk of getting caught and fined by police. Thus, stickers can quantitatively dominate signs in certain parts of the city, despite their small size (Reershemius, 2018). Quantity is also important for graffiti in the form of tags, a quickly written signature with the main purpose of putting a name in a place and communicating “I was here” (Dovey et al., 2012). The more tags, the more likely you are to be recognized, say respondents to Lachmann’s (1988) study who are competing for reputation in New York City’s subway. They compare their graffiti to advertisements, arguing that they “buy” their space with their style and courage instead of money (Lachmann, p. 237).

Stickers by football fans are also compared by Vigsø (2010) to the style of tags, saying that a large number is a sign of strength and signals the presence of supporters of a team in a certain place. The lack of a message which could be decoded and understood by an uninitiated audience (for example, "Vote", "Come eat", "Go to the movies", etc.), suggests that these stickers are addressed to fans of opposing teams in order to challenge them and demarcate territory (Vigsø, 2010). Similarly, Lachmann (1988) learns that tags are meant to be seen by other taggers, acknowledging each other’s signature. Moreover, reinforcing Vigsø’s (2010) idea of demarcation, Lachmann (1998) learns from interviews that gang leaders in New York use graffiti tags to strengthen their presence and discourage other rivals from entering their territory.

However, most of the stickers analyzed by Reershemius (2018) are open to communication with the public, offering the opportunity to continue the conversation online. We can assert this is a feature specific to stickers more than graffiti because they allow the creation of images and texts that are easy to read and decode for an ordinary passerby. The name of an artist, event, group, Facebook page, or a simple anonymous slogan can be further searched for, thus moving the level of communication from the back of a traffic sign to online. Graffiti, on the other hand, is often stylized and unintelligible to audiences who do not participate in graffiti writing. Thus, as Lachmann (1988) observed in the case of tags, communication remains confined to members of the tagging community, without extending to uninitiated receivers.

Reershemius (2018) adds about stickers, and Dovey et al. (2012) about graffiti, that they can be used by certain stores for promotion if they are related to the subcultures they try to address (stickers advertising a skateboarding shop, or graffiti made by a business selling spray paints, stencils, etc.). In this case, the purpose of communication goes beyond the simple marking of one’s presence in space, rather trying to perform the more common function of marketing. Some stickers show “dialogue signs” as Reershemius calls them (2018, p. 13), i.e. stickers which have been covered, written over, or intentionally torn off. This dialogue represents, fundamentally, the conflict for meaning and the claim of space by diverse groups that have their own interests and conceptions of the social world (Gottdiener, 1986). For example, a torn off sticker with a political message tells us that there is someone out there who has a different political opinion. The semiotic landscape of stickers is dynamic, diverse, contested and constantly changing, and through its analysis we can better understand the social groups competing for meaning in the city.

Methodology

For this study, I walked. I must first note the obvious: this paper is written during the COVID-19 pandemic. It hasn't gone through lockdowns but it has seen restrictions become tougher or looser depending on the number of cases and political will. Curfew hours, closure of cinemas, terraces and restaurants open only at reduced capacity, wearing face masks in open spaces, but especially the fear (or suspicion) towards other people were, for the most part, permanently present while I was doing research for this paper. Getting on a crowded bus puts you at risk of becoming infected while going to an apartment party with friends is a sentence to anxiety for the next two weeks while you wait for the news about who tested positive.

In this context, where every aspect of the day is affected by restrictions and the night ends at ten o'clock, walking becomes a form of regaining control. Like the *flâneur*, I walked aimlessly through streets I had never been to and didn't know where they would lead. A provincial like me still finds in Bucharest infinite fascination with the narrow streets crossed by the tram line, the corner shops on the ground floor of communist blocks, or the contrast between the old, almost collapsed houses and the glass corporations behind them. I also went to the cobbler to have the soles replaced from so much walking.

Thus, walking led me to stickers and stickers led me to ethnography by walking. More specifically, I conducted a content analysis of stickers in the central area of Bucharest. I chose the city center for a somewhat symbolic reason (it is the center) and because it provides visibility to stickers through the large number of people crossing the space by foot and who can observe these messages. Since it is a crowded area, I also expect stickers to come from a large number of different emitters. The city center is also important for its anticommunist history, which may have attracted more such messages, as we will discuss later.

I started the documentation from Unirii Square, at the intersection of Ion C. Brătianu Boulevard and Halelor Street, so that on my right is Unirii Passage and on the left there are terraces and shops. I went straight, crossing the Nicolae Bălcescu pedestrian passage on the boulevard with the same name. At the crosswalk at Romană Square, which separates Gheorghe Magheru street from Lascăr Catargiu (before the cross in the intersection), I turned around and continued the same route only in the opposite direction until I got back to Unirii Square.

Thus, I took 634 photos of stickers displayed on traffic signs, bus stops, traffic lights, downpipes and on the windows and walls of unused spaces. I photographed every sticker I saw along the described route but in order to make it easier to count and classify them, I decided to exclude from the analysis scratched, torn, peeled, scribbled, covered stickers, or those faded away by rain and sun, i.e. stickers whose content I could not fully identify. From this analysis, I obtained a total of 1093 stickers, which I classified according to two distinct criteria: which individual sticker models appear most often, and which sticker categories are the most numerous.

Starting from Reershemius' (2018) observation about the possibility of continuing the communication online, I tried to use the names of authors, events, pages, groups or

slogans displayed on the stickers in order to attribute them to a specific emitter. This allowed me to divide stickers into different categories depending on the type of emitter and purpose of communication. The categories and the criteria for including a sticker in a certain category are detailed further in the paper.

It should also be noted that this research presents the semiotic landscape of stickers only for a certain point in time, with data collection taking place between February 10th and 11th 2021. This landscape is constantly changing, new stickers from various emitters appear while old ones are torn or covered up. In the following sections, I will present which individual sticker models and sticker categories are most common, and then I will discuss each category in further detail.

Results

In Figure 1 we have the distribution of stickers according to the number of occurrences of each model of sticker (i.e. not grouped into categories). For the graph's clarity, I chose here to represent the first 50 most common sticker models and put labels only for the first two, which we notice numerically dominate the other stickers in the analysis. The most commonly found sticker, "Mai bine mort decât comunist" (translating to "better dead than a communist"), appears 111 times (10.1%), followed by "89' Eroii nu mor niciodată" ("89 Heroes never die") with 85 appearances (7.7%). Together, the two sticker models account for 18% (196) of the total 1093 stickers analyzed.

To put this result into perspective, let's notice from Figure 1 that only seven other sticker models have more than 20 occurrences in our analysis. In fact, 80% of stickers appear no more than five times while stickers appearing just once account for over half of the documented stickers. Thus, the first two stickers take up 18% of the total 1093 stickers displayed in downtown Bucharest, while the last 80% of stickers make up 21% of the total. This result tells us that there are a large number of different emitters generally displaying a small number of stickers. Obviously, the exception here is the anticommunist stickers.



Figure 1. Sticker distribution

In Figure 2, I assigned each sticker model a category and sorted them by the categories with the highest number of stickers. Let's define these categories first:

- **Anticommunism:** is the category formed by the two dominant stickers in the analysis, "Better dead than communist" and "Heroes never die".
- **Political:** these are stickers that communicate a politically charged message, some explicitly from political parties, but most in this category are nationalist messages. Certainly, anticommunist messages are also political but I considered that they should be discussed separately because of their disproportionately large number.
- **Ultras:** in this category I placed stickers that have ultras groups as their emitters, fanatical supporters of various football teams (*Honor et Patria*, *Uniți sub Tricolor*, *South Boys*, *ShadowS*, etc.). We shall see that ultras, in addition to stickers indicating membership to certain groups and teams, are also emitters of anticommunist and nationalist messages.
- **Art/artist:** these stickers are used by artists to gain exposure for themselves and their art in public places. The stickers communicate the artist's style and creativity, have a strong aesthetic component and are often accompanied by the author's name or alias.
- **Tags:** this category of stickers is named after the graffiti style of the same name. Tag stickers, like graffiti, are a stylized signature showing others that "I was here" (Dovey et al., 2012). Tag-style stickers are often illegible to an uninitiated observer and are directed at other taggers who use graffiti and/or stickers to put their signature in as many places as possible.
- **Marketing:** I considered a sticker to be part of the Marketing category if the emitter of the sticker sells products or services: restaurants, cafes, tattoo parlors, clothing stores, skateboarding, etc.
- **Events:** is the category of stickers promoting various events (such as film festivals, concerts, educational events, etc.)
- **Ads:** Ad stickers differ from those in the Marketing category by their simple, strictly functional appearance, and by the fact that the emitter is in most cases an individual and not a business (renting and buying apartments, transporting furniture, etc.)
- **Groups:** this category includes stickers promoting various groups whose members share a common passion. Without being artist collectives, ultras groups, or having a commercial or political message, these stickers have as emitters communities looking for new members with common interests (for example, people passionate about hiking, rollerblading, car tuning, amateur theater, etc.).
- **Other:** the category of stickers whose emitter or purpose of communication could not be identified, or which do not fall into one of the other categories.

I must also mention that I considered these categories to be mutually exclusive in my analysis but there may be greater permeability between them. An artist who exhibits his art in public spaces can do so in order to find buyers or customers, an event can also have a political character, while someone who is passionate about hiking can also be a nationalist ultra. However, I believe that the categories identified are sufficiently distinct to justify discussing them separately.

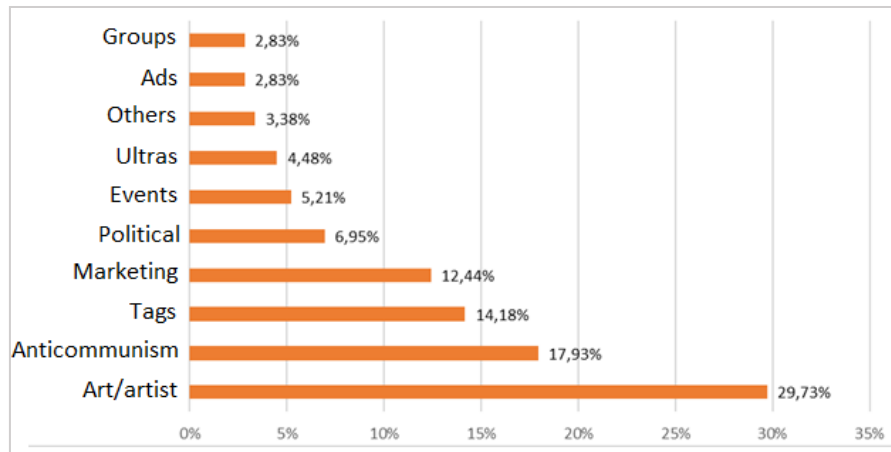


Figure 2. Sticker distribution in categories of stickers

Anticommunism

I choose to start the discussion with the anti-Communist stickers because, as we have seen, they numerically dominate the other sticker models in our analysis when counted individually (not taken in categories). Considering the sticker a sign which communicates meaning in the semiotic space of the city, I have analysed the two components that, according to Ferdinand de Saussure, make up the sign: the signifier and the signified.



Sticker 2. 'Better dead than a communist'

At the signifier level we have the elements that actually make up the content of the sticker: the hammer and sickle, symbols of communism, framed in a red circle and cut

diagonally by a line signifying "forbidden". On the margins of the sticker appears the text "*Mai bine mort decât communist*" ("better dead than a communist"). To investigate the signified, that is, the image or meaning to which the signifier points to, we can start from this very text on the sticker, which is part of the lyrics of an anticommunist song.

The song, known as "*Imnul golanilor*" ("Hooligan's anthem"), was composed by Cristian Pășurcă and has its origin in the anticommunist demonstrations started in University Square after the 1989 Romanian Revolution (Dabija, 2007). On April 22nd 1990, PNȚCD² leaders organized a demonstration in response to FSN's³ decision to participate in the first electoral elections organized after 1989. After the end of the rally, some of the demonstrators occupied University Square, thus starting a large anticommunist protest that would last for 53 days and gather tens of thousands of people every evening (Iancu, 2020). Ion Iliescu, then interim president, called the protesters "hooligans" and the term immediately got appropriated by the movement.

The protesters had a number of demands, including the establishment of independent radio and TV stations, the removal from leadership positions and the denial of the right to candidate for three consecutive legislatures for the people who were part of the communist nomenclature (Cesereanu, 2003). After the May 20th elections, however, when Ion Iliescu was elected president with 85% of the votes, the movement in University Square gradually lost its momentum and ended entirely following the first mineriad of June 13th-15th, 1990 (Cesereanu, 2003).

Despite its apparent defeat in University Square, anticommunism becomes the dominant ideology during the transition to capitalism, having the role of justifying and legitimizing neoliberal hegemony, the class interests of the winners of the transition and the dismantling of the welfare state (Chelcea & Druță, 2016; Poenaru, 2017). Criticism of transition policies is minimized and attributed to the nostalgia of the working class, which is accused of inadaptability to the new historical context (Poenaru, 2017, p. 195). Imposing nostalgia as an explanatory factor for the impoverishment of the working class offered an ideological surplus to the privatizations of communist industry and the dispossession of this segment of the population (Poenaru, 2017). Social demands are denied and their supporters are accused of being communists, undemocratic, obsolete, or at best, naïve (Chelcea & Druță, 2016, p. 526). Anticommunism thus becomes common sense, taken for granted knowledge, as Florin Poenaru (2017) observes, and any challenge to anticommunist ideas means insanity.

Invoking the traumas of the communist past during the transition period has produced in post-socialist countries one of the purest forms of neoliberalism, even drawing praise from western economists who see these countries at the forefront of liberal economic reforms (Chelcea & Druță, 2016). What this meant, in fact, was cutting welfare spending significantly below the level of countries with a long capitalist history, withdrawing the state from the real estate market, privatizing utilities, adopting a flat tax

² *National Peasant Christian Democratic Party*, a political party banned during the communist era.

³ *National Salvation Front*, a political body who took interim power during the revolution, then formed into a political party.

rate and turning some social democratic leaders into pro-business advocates in order to distance themselves from their communist past (idem). Anticommunism is used to delegitimize any left-wing or progressive politics, thus protecting neoliberal hegemony, argues Poenaru (2017). Any radical project for emancipation will necessarily lead, according to pro-business arguments, to a form of totalitarian domination and control (Žižek, quoted in Chelcea & Druță, 2016, p. 525). Attempts to challenge postsocialist neoliberalism are denounced as dangerous and unacceptable, leading back to totalitarianism (idem, p. 526).

In Romanian politics, anticommunism had its most visible manifestation in December 2006, when then president Traian Băsescu officially condemned the communist regime. Although a purely symbolic act, it marked the becoming of anticommunism into state ideology (Poenaru, 2017, p. 142). Thus, the writing of communist history under anticommunist domination does not aim to understand and investigate the past, but only to control and forget it (Poenaru, 2017, p. 149). Historical research starts with an a priori conclusion – communism was a criminal regime – and then it aims to strengthen this conclusion and establish guilt, having from the very beginning a predominantly moral valence (idem). For example, Florin Poenaru (2017) argues that the museum of communism reduces communist society to a vast spectacle of death and terror, meaning that the museum does not try to present the past in all its complexity, but instead seeks to justify the present from the perspective of the ideology of anticommunism (p. 203).

For younger generations, anticommunism manifests itself through phobia of equality and any form of social justice (Poenaru, 2017, p. 211). The use of nonracist language is seen as a limitation on freedom of expression, similar to communist censorship (Chelcea & Druță, 2016). Women's rights, especially reproductive rights, pose an existential threat to family and tradition according to the Catholic Church of Poland (idem). The country's president, Andrzej Duda, equates 'LGBT ideology' with communism (EURACTIV, 2021) while a bishop of the Catholic Church warns that "*gender ideology poses a more serious threat than nazism and communism combined*" (Sierakowski, 2014). The ruling PiS party seeks also to erase Poland's communist legacy by renaming streets named after former communists and removing hundreds of monuments to Soviet soldiers who fought the Nazis (Luxmoore, 2018).

Back in Romania, *Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor* (AUR) party "*openly declares itself against any form of contemporary Marxism*", which it further identifies as "*political correctness, gender ideology, egalitarianism or multiculturalism*" (AUR, 2020). The parliament voted in 2020 on a draft law that would have banned any references to gender identity in schools and universities (Meseșan, 2020). In addition to anticommunism fighting the evils of political correctness, Poenaru (2017, p. 213) also notes that in recent years far-right anticommunism, which glorifies the cult of "prison saints" (prisoners who died during their detention) and condemns communism for its repression against the legionnaire movement (an interbellum fascist organization), has become more vocal and visible. The presence of this type of anticommunism has helped to relegitimize key figures and themes of the Romanian legionary movement in public and popular culture.

To better understand the anticommunism in our stickers, we need to investigate further who are the emitters of these messages. Because the stickers do not feature an

author, I started by searching for the slogan online and thus arrived at the *Uniti sub tricolor* Facebook page⁴. The page's description, with almost 30.000 likes, tells us that *Uniti sub tricolor* is “an ultras group that independently supports the Romanian national team”. However, if we take a look at the page's content we can easily notice interest in topics other than football: graffiti and murals promoting the group or various nationalist and anticommunist messages, commemoration of historical events (such as the birth of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the Treaty of Trianon, the Great Union, the Revolution, the University Square protests, and others), as well as various legionary fighters and ‘prison saints’.

I will try here to sketch a timeline of Facebook posts relevant to understanding the anticommunist stickers and messages promoted by the *Uniți sub tricolor* group. A good place to start is the post from September 29th 2019, when the group announces that “activities related to this commemoration [of the Revolution] have already begun, so today is the first day we went out in Bucharest to start an ample display campaign for the memory of the Heroes fallen in the Revolution, an action which we will carry out weekly until the end of the year”. We learn from the same post that the group has printed over 10.000 stickers with the message “Eroii nu mor niciodată” (“Heroes never die”, Sticker 3). Clearly, the timing is essential here: the commemoration takes place 30 years after the 1989 Revolution. We also learn that these stickers, the second most common in our analysis, are displayed as part of a campaign taking place weekly. Thus, displaying these stickers is part of a conscious effort undertaken in order to communicate a message in the public space by putting a large number of stickers over a period of several weeks. Concluding the Facebook post, the group appeals to their audiences to “follow our example, cherish our heroes and not leave them in the mists of oblivion”.



Sticker 3. ‘Heroes never die’

Probably the event with the most public exposure takes place on December 21st 2019, when the group *Uniți sub Tricolor*, together with *Honor et Patria*, organize the ‘March of Heroes: 30 years since the Revolution’, followed on the same evening by the ‘Heroes never die!’ concert. The march starts in Victory Square and ends in University Square, participants

⁴ All posts are publicly available at: facebook.com/unitisubtricolor2013 (Accessed June 2, 2021).

sing the national anthem and “hooligan’s anthem”, they display and shout messages about freedom, heroes and Ion Iliescu. The concert brings on stage artists from the Romanian hip-hop scene and mentions it has a charitable purpose, the proceeds being donated to the “Memorial of the Revolution” Museum in Timișoara. The group marks the end of the year with a verse from the night of the concert: „*Ridică-te Gheorghe, ridică-te Ioane!/ Ridicați-vă bravi români, iubiți-vă țara și prețuiți valorile naționale*” (“*Rise up, Gheorghe, rise up, Ion!/ Rise up brave Romanians, love your country and cherish your national values*”). The lyrics are adapted from Radu Gyr, commander of the legionary movement, initially sentenced to death by the communist regime for the lyrics of the poem „*Ridică-te Gheorghe, Ridică-te Ioane!*” and later released through the general amnesty in 1964 (Iancu, 2018).

In February 2020, anticipating 30 years since the start of the anticommunist protests in University Square, *Uniți sub tricolor* starts a new campaign, launching the sticker model “*Mai bine mort decât comunist*” (“*Better dead than a communist*”). A pack of 100 stickers sells for 10RON for anyone who wants to go out “*to display with us [...] to spread the message*”. The campaign continues until June, when the group will commemorate the first miners’ strike and the end of the demonstrations in University Square.

Between the commemoration of the Revolution and the University Square protests, the ultras group travels in memory of the anticommunist resistance and important legionnaire characters. For example, the group appears paying homage at the grave of Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu, a legionary fighter, and on May 14th 2021, on the National Day of Honoring the Martyrs of Communist Prisons, they display in front of the Pitești Prison Memorial lyrics written by Valeriu Gafencu, a Romanian legionnaire who died in the prisons of the communist regime, which is why the group remembers him as one of the “prison saints”. In fact, no text commemorating such characters mentions “legionnaire”, preferring instead “hero”, “martyr” or “fighter” against communism.

Another ultras group that participates in displaying anticommunist messages, also an organizer of the *March of Heroes*, is *Honor et Patria*⁵. On their Facebook page, with almost 16.000 likes, we learn that on March 4th 2020, only two weeks after the start of the display campaign, 40.000 stickers with the message “*Mai bine mort decât comunist*” (“*Better dead than a communist*”) were already distributed throughout the country and a new series was already in production. *Honor et Patria* shares the same interest in commemorating various historical events and figures, writing graffiti, displaying anticommunist and nationalist messages, etc., but we can also notice that, unlike *Uniți sub tricolor*, this ultras group explicitly denounces forms of social justice and institutions or groups that promote them: feminism, LGBT rights, antiracist actions, Roma activism, *Black Lives Matter* movement, etc. For example, in a June 23rd 2020 post about players taking a knee in solidarity with BLM protesters before the start of the football game, the group warns that “*What's happening these days has nothing to do with ‘racism’, nor with police abuse, instead it's a battle whose stake is the very survival of European civilization as we know it*”.

⁵ All posts are publicly available at: facebook.com/honoretpatria (Accessed June 3, 2021).

Probably the post best symbolizing the equating of anticommunism with the fight against any left-wing politics or with progressive valences appears on the *Honor et Patria* page on December 24th 2020, when the picture of a graffiti with the '89' design placed next to a traffic sign is accompanied by the caption "*Forbidden to the left*".

In addition, I would also like to briefly mention the nationalist group/shop *Radical Entourage*, with just over 4000 likes on Facebook⁶. Most posts promote t-shirts and hoodies sold by the group, but on May 24th 2021 they announce that the group is working on "*a song dedicated to our homeland*", and for the music video they are collaborating with "*groups with whom we resonate in terms of values and mentality*" (including *Uniți sub tricolor* and *Honor et Patria*). The title of the song is "*Legământ*" ("*Covenant*"), but I would like to briefly present the most popular song on the group's YouTube channel: *Euphonic – Radical*, with over 50.000 views⁷. The music video for the song shows nationalists lighting torches, displaying flags and putting up stickers, praying and throwing incendiary bottles at a hammer and sickle graffiti. I do not intend here to do text analysis (as it is not even necessary), but some lyrics are especially relevant: "*a crooked society like the leftist doctrine...*", "*We have as role models Saints who died with the cross in their teeth*", "*Green are our shirts ...*", "*This is the land of Codreanu, Gheorghe and Ion*". We see then how *Radical Entourage* explicitly says what other groups suggest: they are nationalists glorying the legionnaire movement in Romania.

Let's highlight some conclusions: firstly, the temporal and spatial dimensions are important for explaining the large number of anticommunist stickers. The "display campaigns" initiated by these groups commemorate 30 years since the Revolution, respectively 30 years since the protests in University Square. This space has strong symbolic importance for anticommunist movements, as we can also tell by the fact that it was the destination of the *March of Heroes*, so it is reasonable to say that the Square attracted the display of several such anticommunist messages. As the route I followed during data collection passed through University Square, it partly explains the overrepresentation of these stickers in the analysis.

Secondly, the dominant presence of anticommunist stickers is also a result of an organized effort to put up as many stickers as possible during several "display campaigns". The campaigns ran from September 2019 to mid-2020⁸, supported by several ultras and nationalist groups, as well as their sympathizers who were able to buy sticker packs and participate in displaying anticommunist messages on their own, or together with the original emitters. If the sticker landscape is fragmented into a large number of different sticker models which generally appear in small numbers, the two anticommunist stickers come from a large number of different emitters who contributed to the displaying of only two messages.

⁶ The Facebook page quoted here has since been removed because some posts had violated Facebook's terms of use. The group's new page is publically available at: [facebook.com/AnturajRadical](https://www.facebook.com/AnturajRadical)

⁷ The song can be accessed at: <https://youtu.be/dZdHnO-w3qg>

⁸ That is not to say that the groups have stopped displaying these stickers since. While some of the models have slightly changed their appearance, the messages are the same or even more radical and openly fascist.

Finally, it should also be noted that it is impossible to completely reconstruct the physiognomy of these groups starting only from stickers, which is why I tried to contact four such groups for in-depth interviews, but received no response (although they read my messages). However, anticommunist stickers are important insofar that they represent an intellectual product of the groups discussed through which they communicate their ideology in public space. Thus, displaying these stickers does not have a purely commemorative purpose (if it were, in any case, possible), but instead aims to propagate far-right anticommunism in the public space, the ideology adopted by these groups. In other words, the anticommunist stickers, as an intellectual product of ultras and nationalist groups, communicate the opposition against any left-wing politics or forms of social justice, the promotion of extremist, nationalist and ultra-religious ideas, as well as the attempt to relegitimize key figures and themes of the Romanian legionnaire movement.

Political

In the 'Political' category, I included stickers that communicate a politically charged message, accounting for 7% (76) of all stickers. The most common sticker model in this category is Sticker 4 (18 appearances), and if we count together all stickers with messages about Bessarabia becoming part of Romania, we get 37% of all stickers with a political message. It is useful to repeat here some observations gained from the analysis of anticommunist stickers.



Sticker 4. 'Bessarabia is Romania'



Sticker 5. 'For Romania. For normality'

For example, in order to explain the content of Sticker 4, the timing is again important: 2018 marked the centenary of the Great Union (when Romania gained the most territories, including today's Republic of Moldova and parts of Ukraine), so it is expected that more such stickers were displayed during that period. As we noticed from the Facebook pages of the ultras and nationalist groups discussed earlier, they are also emitters of messages about the union with Bessarabia (for example, through the

ubiquitous graffiti “*Basarabia e România*”), so stickers are just another medium through which these groups promote their nationalist ideology. A more recent factor that could also explain the presence of unionist messages in the public space is the establishment of the “Alliance for the Union of Romanians” (AUR) party, which explicitly supports the union with the Republic of Moldova as part of their governing program (AUR, 2020). Because the party gained seats in the parliament following the 2020 elections, it was able to give political legitimacy to this goal, thus encouraging nationalist groups to continue displaying such messages and other variations on the same theme.

Let’s note, however, what is also absent: while Sticker 5 (see above), supporting the 2018 referendum to amend the constitution against same-sex marriage (although same sex marriage or civil partnership were already impossible under Romanian law) appears 11 times in our analysis, we have only one sticker encouraging the referendum’s boycott. In fact, stickers communicating a left-leaning message appear in a crushing total of six, or just 0.5% of the 1093 stickers analyzed. Considering that anticommunist stickers, which dominate numerically, as well as the nationalist stickers come from the same few ultras, nationalist and far-right groups, one might ask: where are the “neo-Marxists” these groups are fighting?

I am not suggesting here that the lack of left-wing stickers necessarily means the complete absence of such movements, but in order to explain the huge difference in public signifying between groups it is necessary to return to the argument mentioned earlier: in post-socialist countries, neoliberal hegemony produces the vocabulary and space in which ideas can be formulated, and thus it is decided which ideas are legitimate and which are communist, dangerous, irrational and totalitarian (Chelcea & Druță, 2016; Poenaru, 2017). The semiotic landscape of stickers reflects the dominant ideology in which stickers are produced and displayed, and the absence of stickers associated with left-wing groups is the result of the demonization of redistributive, progressive politics and social justice, as well as the unchallenged efforts of far-right groups to impose their ideas on the public space.



Sticker 6. ‘Anti- transphobic action’

Almost unchallenged, as we can see with Sticker 6. Putting one sticker over another is, in Reershemius' (2018) terms, a form of dialogue. The sticker over which it was displayed is not chosen by chance, nor is it a result of lack of physical space, instead it signifies the attempt of one emitter to cover, literally and figuratively, the message communicated by another emitter. In other words, it represents the ideological struggle and conflict over meaning between different groups with different ideas and interests (Gottdiener, 1986). In this case, one of the six leftist stickers challenges the dominant message in Bucharest's sticker landscape.

Ultras

Stickers in this category are displayed by ultras groups, fanatical supporters of various football teams, and show membership in such groups or support for a particular team. Let's note their altruism: although the anticommunist and nationalist stickers, whose emitters are, as we have already seen, these same ultras groups, make up about 20% of the total analyzed stickers, the stickers promoting the groups themselves (such as *Honor et Patria*, Sticker 7, or *Uniți sub tricolor*, Sticker 8) account for only 4.5%.

Vigsø (2010) is of the opinion that these stickers are intended to demarcate territory and provoke opposing groups, but my analysis partly contradicts this argument. I noticed that there is collaboration, not antagonism, between some ultras groups during displaying campaigns of anticommunist and nationalist messages, as these ideas are supported by several such groups. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that some of the 'Ultras' stickers are displayed by fans of teams from other cities or from abroad. In this case, the stickers are indeed displayed for the purpose observed by Vigsø (2010), i.e. marking the presence in space of ultras groups travelling to support their favorite team.



Sticker 7. Honor et patria



Sticker 8. United under the flag

Art/artist

The Art/artist category is the largest category in our analysis, accounting for nearly 30% (325) of the total 1093 stickers counted. However, unlike anticommunist stickers, which make up 18% (196) of the same total, the Art/artist stickers are more likely to go unnoticed. While the category of anticommunist stickers is made up of only two different sticker models appearing in large numbers, in the Art/artist category we find various artists displaying a relatively small number of stickers in the public space (this observation is generally true for the other categories as well). What it means, in effect, is that each artist competes for visibility in a highly diverse and heterogeneous landscape, so that each sticker is less likely to be noticed unless displayed in a large number. From this perspective, it echoes Lachmann's (1988) idea of tags graffiti in the New York City subway, whose emitters are more likely to be recognized if they display their tags more often (again, this observation is true for the entire sticker landscape).

However, we have a dominant emitter in this category as well: Sticker 10 (below) is the third most common sticker model in the analysis, right after “*Better dead than communist*” and “*Heroes never die*” (see Figure 1). On its own, Sticker 10 accounts for 3.5% (39) of all the stickers analyzed. The “@” symbol on the sticker usually suggests an Instagram or Twitter account where the artist can be found. Sure enough, I found the artist's Instagram page where he posts, almost without exception, only his work: tattoos, pencil drawings, oil paintings, including the design used for the sticker here discussed. The account name is easily legible on the sticker, suggesting that the artist uses stickers to promote his work and name in public space in order to gain new followers for his page.



Sticker 9. Art sticker



Sticker 10. Art sticker

Let's contrast this, for example, with Sticker 9 which also shows the artist's online account, but is hardly visible in the corner of the sticker. This in itself doesn't have to mean that the emitter isn't interested in promoting their name, but it can suggest that they're more interested in using stickers as a form of street art. In other words, to privilege the

aesthetic function of the sticker over promoting one's name by adding the artist's own perceived visual value to the public space. In the case of stickers in this category which aren't claimed by an artist (meaning they do not have the name or alias of the artist visible in the design), the aesthetic function appears to be the sole purpose of the display. On the other hand, these unclaimed stickers can also act as Tags, i.e. to be decoded only by other artists participating in sticker display, and not by an uninitiated crowd.

Tags

The „Tags” category of stickers is the third most numerous in the analysis, accounting for 14% (155) of all stickers displayed in downtown Bucharest. The category's name reflects the translation of tag-style graffiti into stickers, which Dovey et al. (2012) define as a quickly written signature with the main purpose of putting a name in a place and communicating “I was here”. From Lachmann's (1988) interviews with New York taggers, we learn that these signatures are mainly displayed to be seen by other taggers, each recognizing the other's signature. Thus, such stickers represent a continuation of the competition over claiming space, in which graffiti tags are complemented by sticker tags, and both must appear as much as possible in order to be recognized by other emitters and receivers participating in the same competition (Lachmann, 1988).



Sticker 11 & Sticker 12. Tags



Sticker 13. Tags

Marketing

Marketing stickers are used by emitters to promote businesses. These stickers account for 12% (136) of the total 1093 stickers. Reershemius (2018) believes that stickers can be used for marketing if they address subcultures since he considers the sticker a communication medium specific to them, an observation confirmed only in part by my own analysis. For example, Sticker 14 promotes a fashion store selling brands generally popular with younger audiences and especially with the skateboarding subculture: Vans, Stüssy, Carhartt, Jordan, etc. Tattoo parlors also use stickers for promotion, as well as stores selling

products based on CBD (a substance found in the cannabis plant), both of which are practices usually associated with marginality (or deviance).

On the other hand, we find stickers displayed by restaurants (Sticker 15), coffee shops, music stores, videogame rentals and other businesses that are not necessarily part of the ethos of a subculture, but use stickers in public space to gain visibility. It is also interesting to note that both *Sneaker Industry* (Sticker 14) and *Burgr Factory* (Sticker 15) are located in the University – Romană area, so the presence of a sticker could suggest proximity to the business displaying it.



Sticker 14. SNKRIND



Sticker 15. Burgr Factory

Events

This category makes up 5% of the total, counting here stickers promoting various events taking place mostly in Bucharest. Most of the events belong to the field of art, such as movie releases (Sticker 17), concerts and music festivals, comics festival (Sticker 16), etc. We can put this observation in dialogue with the large category of “Art/artist” stickers, suggesting that there is, after all, a vibrant cultural scene in Bucharest which attracts various artists and artistic events (certainly more than in smaller cities such as my hometown). We can also add that these events sometimes offer stickers to the participants, so some of the stickers analyzed in this category may have been displayed by the participants themselves and not by organizers.



Sicker 16. Comics Fest



Sticker 17. Touch me not

Ads

The “Ads” category (2.8%) comprises stickers with a simple, strictly functional appearance, lacking in any complex graphical elements, whose message is formulated briefly, telegraphically, similar to personal ads in newspapers. These stickers are also different by the fact that the emitter generally offers the possibility to continue communication by calling a phone number, unlike the other stickers that invite us, directly or indirectly, to search for the emitter online. Thus, these stickers could suggest that they are used as an alternative for people who are not familiar with online communication or online marketplaces (or simply prefer not to use them).



Sticker 18. Buying books



Sticker 19. Matrimonial message

Groups

Stickers in the “Groups” category (2.8%) are displayed by groups whose members are attracted by a common interest, hobby or passion. We count here groups which do not

form artist collectives, ultras groups, do not have an (explicit) political message and do not promote a business. In other words, they are groups looking for new members who share the same passions. For example, *Pirații Muntelui* (Sticker 21) is a mountain hiking group, and *Tunedside* (Sticker 20) is an online community with nearly 22.000 followers on Instagram that “tells unique stories about great cars”.



Sticker 20. TunedSide



Sticker 21. The Mountain Pirates

Conclusions

The *flâneur* has walked enough, he has seen everything he set out to see and now he is returning home. I have shown in this paper how walking produces not only blunted soles but also knowledge. Ethnography by walking helped us to better understand the groups competing for meaning in the urban space, through the investigation of the stickers covering the city center. In this research, stickers were considered an urban semiotic element through which different groups communicate competing meanings and ideologies.

Researching the sticker as a means of communication, I found out that the semiotic landscape of Bucharest stickers is numerically dominated by two anticommunist stickers which propagate, in fact, far-right ideology and Romanian legionnaireism in the public space. This result must be understood in the postsocialist context, in which anticommunism has been used to legitimize neoliberal policies, while at the same time demonizing leftist policies, social demands and emancipatory ideas. The emitters of anticommunist stickers are groups that openly oppose forms of social justice, from feminism to anti-racism, and glorify, explicitly or impliedly, the legionnaire movement and its key members. The same groups also display stickers with nationalist messages, especially aimed at the union of Romania with the Republic of Moldova, as well as other stickers promoting the groups themselves. The stickers of these nationalist and far-right groups are displayed in an organized and constant effort to propagate their ideology in the urban space, representing also a two-way means of communication: online communication, from Facebook pages and Telegram groups, manifests itself in the public

space through stickers (and graffiti, marches, concerts, banners, flags), but stickers too can lead from a metal pole back online, in the community.

Not all that is glued to the city, however, is anticommunism and nationalism. I showed in my analysis that a large part of stickers come from artists who exhibit their work and name in the public space, or use stickers as a form of street art through which they add aesthetic value to the urban space. The stickers also promote various businesses, from tattoo parlors to restaurants, as well as art events, and more, taking place in Bucharest. Other stickers are displayed by groups looking for people with the same hobbies and passions, while some individuals use them for apartment rental ads or to search for an Asian spouse. Some stickers are only meant to be decoded by an initiated audience, and finally, there are stickers I could not find out who or for what purpose displayed them.

Thus, by researching the semiotic landscape of stickers, we are able to sketch a physiognomy of the groups competing for meaning in urban space. Stickers are a medium accessible to a large number of different emitters and are used, as we have seen in this paper, to communicate messages as diverse as possible (albeit in unequal proportions). Stickers are displayed in bus stops, on traffic signs, lighting poles, walls, windows and benches; they are displayed in the center, in Grozăvești, in Titan and in Berceni; they are displayed in trams, in the subway, in schools and colleges. The sticker has an emitter and a purpose, it communicates *something* to us, and in this paper I have shown that by investigating the sticker we can better understand the meanings of the city.

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