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1. INTRODUCTION

Stickers are a common sight on city streets, adorning street furniture and walls around the world. They serve a range of purposes, including advertising, graffiti, and street art. Many stickers, however, are dedicated to resistance; they promote protest marches or rallies, radical or subversive opinions, and protest groups and social movements. From “Refugees Welcome,” to “Stop Immigration, Start Repatriation,” the range of views expressed on protest stickers represent a broad political spectrum. Cheap to produce and easy to distribute, protest stickers are a common tactic in the repertoires of activists across the global north. Despite geographers devoting considerable attention to resistance over the past few decades (see, for example Nicholls, 2007, 2009; Nicholls, Miller, and Beaumont, 2013; Pile and Keith, 1997; Routledge, 2017; Sharp et. al, 2000), protest stickers have been neglected. In this article, I shall explore the geography of protest stickers, defining what they are and arguing that they deserve significantly more scholarly attention by highlighting what they can contribute to our understandings of resistance and public space.

The popularity of protest stickers amongst activists in a broad variety of contexts is sufficient to justify further investigation, but they can also make important contributions to understandings of how public space is used and negotiated. Public space in its purest sense is space which everyone has a right to access (Blomley, 2009). However, few spaces are truly public as legal, moral, and social force is used to exclude people according to a range of characteristics such as economic status, race, age, disability, or gender. Even imperfect

public spaces are constantly under threat from authorities who seek to restrict and limit them (Low, 2000; Mitchell, 2003). For Don Mitchell (2003), public space is integral to people's ability to express and claim the right to the city, which David Harvey (2003; 939) defines as "not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart's desire." In this way, putting up protest stickers is claiming the right to the city; it is using public space in the city to express a desire for change, as well as altering the city, albeit temporarily. The right to access and use public space is currently under increased threat from developments such as Privately-owned Public Spaces (POPS) (Németh and Schmidt, 2011) and facial recognition technology (Dearden, 2019). Therefore, it is important that scholars of both cities and politics of resistance focus efforts on understanding how public space is changing. Protest stickers engage with public spaces in a direct manner which makes them ideal for this task.

Research on topics which share similarities with protest stickers is plentiful, including: bumper stickers (Bloch, 2000a, 200b; Case, 1992; Endersby and Towe, 1996); political street art and graffiti (Awad and Wagoner, 2017); adhesive street art (Walde, 2007); culture jamming (Carducci, 2006; DeLaure, Fink, and Dery, 2017), yarn bombing (Mann, 2014; Moore and Prain, 2009); and protest banners (Crossan et. al, 2016; Mansfield, 2004). However, despite their ubiquity the academic literature on protest stickers is limited. Vigsø (2010) attempts to provide a comprehensive overview, arguing that the primary purposes of what he terms 'extremist stickers' are a confidence boost for the activist and a form of territorial space-claiming. Ritchie (2019) has analysed the visual, symbolic, and material interventions in the Scottish landscape by supporters of Scottish Independence between 2014 and 2016, including flags, graffiti, and protest stickers. She argues that these

interventions politicised the landscape. The conclusions of both of these studies highlight the importance of geographical concepts and approaches to the analysis of protest stickers. It is also important to acknowledge the work of Catherine Tedford, who has a research blog dedicated to stickers (stickerkitty.com). Other studies that have considered protest stickers, however briefly, include Dragičević-Šešić (2001) and Merrill (2020). There is significantly more work to be done, however.

Since 2014, I have been photographing protest stickers wherever I go. This includes multiple cities and towns in the United Kingdom, as well as further afield including Europe, North America, and Australasia. The result is an archive of more than five thousand images spanning six years and fifty three locations. The arguments made in this paper are the result of analysis of this extensive database. The remainder of this paper is split into five sections, in which I examine in more detail what protest stickers are, why activists use them, how their messages are conveyed, how they circulate, and where can be found. I conclude by proposing an agenda for future research on protest stickers with four key areas, and inviting others to aid me in addressing these lacunae.

2. WHAT ARE PROTEST STICKERS?

You have almost certainly seen stickers as you move through urban space. Small, self-adhesive pieces of paper, plastic, or vinyl, they are commonly attached to walls and street furniture such as lampposts, phone boxes, junction boxes¹ and rubbish bins. Some are a

¹ The green or grey boxes that are used to connect houses to broadband cables, phone lines, and electricity supplies.

form of guerilla advertising. They are also used by street artists, and graffiti writers and gangs use them for tagging. Supporters of sports teams, particularly football, use them to demarcate their presence around their home ground and when they travel for away games. The other significant purpose of stickers is protest. Ranging from the hand drawn to the professionally printed (see Figure 1), protest stickers are used to express opinions on a whole range of topics including electoral politics, immigration, animal rights, vegetarianism and veganism, gender, sexuality, healthcare, worker's rights, anarchism and (anti-)fascism. They can be found in cities and towns across Europe, North America, and Australasia. Self-adhesive stickers were invented in the 1920s, but they were first used to express political opinions in the early 1970s. Groups involved in student, peace, and anti-nuclear power campaigns started selling stickers as a way of raising funds and for supporters to express their support (Vigsø, 2010). Since then, stickers have become a ubiquitous tool for social movements, protest groups, and even mainstream political parties.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

Figure 1. Two anti-Brexit stickers. The sticker on the left is hand written (found in London), whilst the sticker on the right is printed (Brighton) (Source: Photos by author, 2017).

The broad geographical spread of protest stickers and the wide range of issues they address indicates their popularity with activists; they are a staple of contemporary repertoires of protest. Their advantages are clear; protest stickers are quick and cheap to produce and are easy to disseminate. A single activist can put up a large number of stickers in a short space of time, and they do not require specialist equipment. The risk of getting caught is low, and

if you are then punishments are minor.² Protest stickers are ephemeral, however; they can be removed or obscured by human hands and the weather, and there is no guarantee how long they will remain in place (see Figure 2). Other challenges include the inability to convey complex information or detail, and the fact that they may be ignored or go unnoticed by many of the people who walk past them.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Figure 2. An anti-fascist sticker in Egham, Surrey. The first photo was taken on 16th of November 2017, and the second just a few weeks later on 30th November (Source: Photos by author, 2017)

Many of these advantages and disadvantages stem from the materiality of protest stickers. In recent years, there has been growing awareness of the use of material objects by activists and protesters to convey political messages (see, for example, Brown and Yaffe, 2018; Crossan, et. al, 2016; Navickas, 2010). Anna Feigenbaum (2014) has called for increased attention to be paid to the role of material objects in activist communication. The study of protest stickers is one way in which Feigenbaum's call can be answered; the materiality of protest stickers affects how their message is communicated. The material the stickers are made from and the quality of the adhesive used has an impact on their ability to withstand

² This does depend on the nature of the message the stickers are promoting, however. In Grimsby in September 2019 Nathan Worrell was sentenced to two and a half years in prison after being found guilty of eight charges, including possessing, publishing, or distributing material to stir up racial hatred. Protest stickers were among the material he possessed and distributed (Naylor, 2019).

the weather and attempts to interfere with or remove them (see Figures 2 and 3). Stickers' materiality also makes them easy and cheap to produce, distribute, transport, and install.

3. WHAT ARE PROTEST STICKERS FOR?

The purpose of protest stickers and the intentions of the people who produce and/or put them up are just as diverse as the causes they promote. Different people may even have different motivations for putting up the same sticker. They are sometimes used to advertise specific events, such as meetings, rallies, or protest marches. They can be an expression of solidarity; for example, the recent unrest in Hong Kong has led to stickers in the UK calling on the viewer to "Stand with Hong Kong." Stickers are also a way of expressing support for a group or cause on a collective rather than individual level. Unless an observer witnesses a sticker being posted, which is rare, it is impossible to associate that sticker with a specific individual. As Vigsø (2010; 43) argues: "[t]he stickers appear in public space as a sign of activism, but the activist remains faceless, a collective rather than a number of individuals."

Many protest stickers are attempts to persuade; they call on the viewer to take action, such as "Go vegan," "Vote Planet Earth," "Make racists afraid again," and "Boycott Israel." Others are a public declaration of an opinion or situation. Examples of this latter kind include: "Trans rights are human rights," "Refugees welcome," and "Fuck Fast Fashion." In a similar manner to graffiti tags, these stickers declare the presence, or existence, of an individual or group (Vigsø, 2010). Endersby and Towle (1996) argue that the ability of bumper stickers, button badges, or signs to alter opinions is limited, but they serve other functions for the

individuals who display them, such as reinforcing a sense of collective identity. I argue that this point also applies to protest stickers (see section 4 for further discussion).

Whatever the purpose of each individual sticker, collectively they represent a democratic method of participating in public debates. Protest stickers often relate to the most controversial contemporary issues—2020 has seen the emergence and proliferation of stickers about COVID-19, for example. Sometimes this participation is literal; people interact with stickers by writing on them or altering or obscuring their message by partially or completely removing it (see Figure 3). They can also be used to cover up graffiti or other stickers that the poster disagrees with; layering conflicting opinions upon each other to create a palimpsest of resistance. Ritchie (2019; 17) describes this literal interaction as “sticker wars” or “visual debate,” but even stickers which are not altered, removed, or covered up represent a form of participation. Having a voice in public debates such as how best to respond to the threat of COVID-19 is usually reserved for those deemed worthy of media coverage, or who can afford advertising. As an inexpensive and low-risk method of declaring your presence and expressing an opinion or demand in public space, protest stickers expand the ability to participate in public debates far beyond this privileged minority. In this way, protest stickers reinforce arguments about the significant role of public space in the functioning of democratic societies, as without them “social and cultural conflicts are not clearly visible, and individuals cannot directly participate in their resolution” (Low, 2000; 240; Mitchell, 2003). Some may question the relevance of public space to democratic debates in the face of the rise of social media, but I argue that social media and other communication technologies complement and influence the expression of dissent in public space, rather than replacing it (Juris, 2012; Neumayer and Stald, 2014;

Theocharis, 2012). Protest stickers are a concrete mechanism through which individuals and groups can claim their right to the city.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

Figure 3: An anti-Brexit sticker that has been altered to convey a pro-Brexit message in Hull, East Yorkshire (Source: Photo by author, 2019).

4. HOW DO PROTEST STICKERS WORK?

Protest stickers are material objects, but they can, and should, also be analysed from a visual perspective. They use text, images, or a combination of the two to communicate their messages, with varying degrees of success. As such, it is important to engage with literature on visual methodologies in order to fully appreciate protest stickers. Gillian Rose (2016) advocates a critical visual methodology that takes the power relations embedded within images seriously. Figure 4 shows an example of a sticker that relies on both text and an image. The sticker is referring to the so-called European migrant crisis. It is arguing the cause of Britain's problems are not refugees—some of whom risk their lives attempting to cross the English Channel in small boats—but the rich elites governing the country. The background image is a well-known photograph of the Bullingdon Club, an exclusive dining club at Oxford University, taken in 1987. The Club has become synonymous with wealth, privilege, and inequality in Britain. The image features two men who would go on to become Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron and Boris Johnson. It is clear from the

combination of this image and the text that the sticker is implying that it is the privileged elites personified by the Bullingdon Club that are the 'enemy,' not migrants.

[Insert Figure 4 here]

Figure 4. This sticker criticising the dominant narratives surrounding immigration in Britain was found in Leeds (Source: Photo by author, 2019).

The significance of symbols to resistance is well established (Awad and Wagoner, 2020; Liao, 2010). Protest stickers can function as symbols in themselves (such as the yellow 'Bollocks to Brexit' stickers in Figures 1 and 3), but many also include symbols and emblems in their design. For example, stickers produced by anti-fascist groups commonly feature one or more logos that are instantly recognisable to those who are familiar with left-wing activism (see Figure 5). The reason for this may be partially explained by the stickers' materiality. Protest stickers are small, often no bigger than a credit card. It is challenging to convey sometimes complicated messages within such limited space. As such, it can be argued that many stickers include symbols or slogans that have extensive meaning and connotations associated with them in order to communicate information efficiently. This point highlights the necessity of considering the materiality and visual characteristics of protest stickers in tandem; they should not be separated.

Another possible explanation for the use of symbols in protest stickers relates to the role of symbols in the construction and maintenance of collective identity (Awad and Wagoner, 2020). Pyrooz and Densley (2018) argue that anti-fascist symbols, along with black clothing

and masks at protests, are how anti-fascists identify themselves as a group, separate from other activists and organisations. The potency of a protest symbol is influenced by the viewer's ability to understand it (Liao, 2010), so the use of logos may also serve to alienate those who cannot decipher them. This may be a disadvantage for protest stickers which are trying to persuade or inform, but it could also be a deliberate tactic to communicate only with those who are already 'in the know.' If the viewer cannot interpret the symbols, then they are not part of the intended audience for the sticker. Even stickers that do not use symbols and logos can require some contextual knowledge to interpret, as the sticker in Figure 4 demonstrates. If the viewer did not know about the Bullingdon Club or attempts by migrants to cross the Channel by boat, then they may not be able to decipher the sticker's message. Whatever the purpose of the inclusion of symbols, slogans, or images in a protest sticker, there is no guarantee that the viewer will interpret the sticker in the way that the producer of the sticker intended.

[Insert Figure 5 here]

Figure 5. Two stickers incorporating common anti-fascist logos. Both stickers were found in London (Source: Photos by author, 2015)

In this section I have demonstrated the need to take the visual characteristics of protest stickers into account, alongside their materiality. However, this discussion also highlights the importance of understanding the motivations of those who produce and put up protest stickers, as well as how they are interpreted and understood by audiences.

5. THE CIRCULATION AND LOCATION OF PROTEST STICKERS

In the most recent edition of *Visual Methodologies*, Rose (2016) added a fourth 'site' to her framework for visual analysis; the sites of production, the image itself, and the audience have been joined by the site of circulation. Rose argues that it is important to think about how and where images move, and how they might be altered by these processes. How stickers circulate varies; they can be carried by an activist, sent by post, or the design can be emailed or downloaded from a website and the stickers printed in the new location. Protest stickers are sometimes sold in order to raise money for other campaign activities, or their designs are made freely available for anyone to print and distribute (Vigsø, 2010).

Through such varied means of transport, some stickers can be found in multiple cities in the Western world. The florescent yellow Bollocks to Brexit sticker (Figures 1 and 3) has multiple iterations which have been found in many towns and cities in the UK since 2016 and can even be spotted further afield, for example in Berlin. Even stickers relating to local issues can travel significant distances. The Hillsborough Justice Campaign produces stickers calling for a boycott of *The Sun* newspaper because of its prejudiced coverage of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, in which 96 Liverpool football fans died. In 2016 I found two such stickers at the viewing gallery at the top of the Rockefeller Building in New York City, more than 3000 miles from the community affected. These examples demonstrate how protest stickers can travel significant distances, sometimes appearing in places that have little obvious connection to the original cause.

The volume and content of protest stickers vary between different towns and cities. Despite this local variation, it is possible to identify certain trends. There tend to be more in urban areas than rural ones, and the larger the city, the higher the number and variety of stickers you are likely to come across. Stickers are less frequent in residential areas than city centres and commercial areas. Some types of protest stickers are more common in specific areas; stickers relating to student politics tend to be concentrated in and around university or college campuses, for example. These patterns likely reflect the places which activists move through or spend time in frequently, as well as decisions about where a sticker might reach the biggest audience.

Regardless of how stickers circulate, they all have to be stuck somewhere. This deliberate placement in public space sets them apart from other forms of protest ephemera such as leaflets, badges, and placards, which are all distributed, displayed, and located in different ways. Someone made a decision to stick *that* sticker to *that* lamppost. Often, a sticker's placement on a specific junction box or rubbish bin appears random, but sometimes its location can enhance or even change its meaning. For example, I have found stickers criticising McDonalds outside branches of the fast food chain in London (2015) and Manchester (2016). This is an example of a "context-appropriate" sticker, a term borrowed from the analysis of bumper stickers, where the content refers to the location (Smith, 1988; 148). Context-appropriate stickers are literal examples of the way in which protest stickers draw places into political debates. In her analysis of pro-independence signs, posters, graffiti and stickers before and after the 2014 Independence Referendum in Scotland, Ritchie (2019; 10) argues that "these displays claimed places for a cause, creating a politically hostile or friendly space, depending on inclination." The accessibility of protest stickers

means that almost anyone can use them to claim a location for a cause, whether they are the legal owner of the space or not. In this way, spaces can be drawn into political debates and used to claim the right to the city. This links back to Harvey's (2003) argument that the right to the city is not just about being able to access the urban space, but also to change it; protest stickers allow individuals and groups to alter the city, albeit in an ephemeral, ad-hoc manner.

6. CONCLUSIONS: THE POTENTIAL OF PROTEST STICKERS

Sometimes satirical, often humorous, and frequently angry, protest stickers are creative interventions in public space that politicise the urban landscape and claim the right to the city. Based on analysis of more than 5000 photographs of protest stickers taken in fifty-three locations over six years, this paper has explored what protest stickers are and their key material and visual characteristics. I have argued that protest stickers circulate around the Global North through a variety of methods, and are used to serve a range of purposes.

A ubiquitous but overlooked method of political participation in urban space, protest stickers deserve more attention from academics, particularly those with an interest in public space and the politics of resistance. As such, I propose a future research agenda with four main areas. Firstly, there is only so much that the stickers themselves can reveal about the motivations of those who use protest stickers; the people who produce, distribute, and put up stickers have to be included in conversations about them. This includes the need to better understand 'stickering' as a practice. Second, the reception of protest stickers warrants further attention. The efficacy of the stickers that attempt to persuade the viewer

is questionable; it is unclear how many people would change their opinion or behaviour based on protest stickers. We need to know more about how people respond to stickers in public space. How many people notice them? How many people stop and read them? How many people reflect on the messages they convey? How many people are actually persuaded by them? The third area which requires further research is the frequency and distribution of protest stickers across different towns and cities. The trends I have identified in this paper are based on qualitative observations; systematic quantitative research could reveal more specific patterns. The final area which needs to be addressed is the lack of data on non-Western cities, which leads to questions about whether or not protest stickers are such a common tactic of resistance beyond the Global North. My archive of photos is extensive but reflects my patterns of mobility which although privileged, are partial, and does not include Africa, South America, or Asia. This is perhaps the most urgent lacuna, particularly in the light of increasing awareness of bias towards the global north within academic knowledge and publishing (Collyer, 2018). I believe that geographical approaches are some of the most appropriate for understanding protest stickers, but I have no doubt that other disciplines also have valuable contributions to make. Therefore I invite other researchers, from within Geography and beyond, to help me address these lacunae.

Small and ephemeral, it is not hard to see why protest stickers have been overlooked by scholars. However, as this article demonstrates, they are significant to our understandings of resistance and public space. Protest stickers are direct interventions in public debates, urban space, and cultures of resistance. They are a demand, rather than a request, for the right to the city. Scholars of resistance cannot ignore that demand any longer.

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