



Public relations and historical sociology: Historiography as reflexive critique



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ABSTRACT

The essay focuses on thinking about thinking about PR history. The space between history and sociology encompasses theoretical and conceptual frames and can be drawn upon to consider PR in time, across times and between times. It reflects upon the purposes and practices of historical sociology and foregrounds themes relevant to public relations, its histories and methodological approaches. The paper, which is methodological at the strategic rather than the technical level, argues that public relations historians can usefully engage with theoretical issues and problems delineated in historical sociology and historical theory. Evolutionary, functionalist and typological approaches and the cultural logics of historical periodization are discussed and contextualized.

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1. Introduction

This article aims to problematize the strategic choices and processes of historical work and historical theorizing in relation to public relations. The form of problematization is derived from the 'interfacial political theory/cultural studies [that] involves critical reading and theoretical interrogation of [accepted] practices' (Dean, 2008: 755). The essay is located within the humanities tradition (drawing on historical theory, and historical sociological sources, and political science) to explore and discuss ideas, and builds on similar work that has engaged discursively with paradigmatic issues in history such as Brown (2006), Vos (2011), Bentele (1997, 2004, 2013), L'Etang (1995, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2010). The aim is neither a critique nor a catalogue of existing histories, nor does it seek to build a particular theoretical or global approach to PR history. Instead, the intention is to focus on strategic level methodological choices that be realized by reflection on historical sociology and historical theory.

Historical sociology is a useful source from which to develop PR historical projects beyond narrative and presents opportunities for theoretically diverse critical insights, alternative conceptualizations and constructs of public relations, its histories and its historical thinkers. Such self-reflection is not indulgent, but an important aspect of historical writing. Because history writing entails not only interpretation and description but also explanation, it is reflexivity (Brincker & Gundelach, 2005; Holland, 1999), that becomes essential 'in the moment' of literary creation as the habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) and 'thought styles' (Fleck, 1979/1935) of public relations scholars (many of whom have worked in public relations practice) influence their approaches and theoretical dispositions. Analysis of the logics of historical explanation in public relations demonstrated the dominance of societal and actor-centred functionalist explanations that legitimated the practice uncritically in tandem with progressivist and evolutionary influences (Vos, 2011).

Since public relations inhabits dialectical societal spaces and is concerned with change agents and change processes, PR histories necessarily raise questions that demand interrogation from social theory and political science and engagement

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with paradigmatic influences from these broader fields. This ambitious scope can be more readily realized when refracted through the lens of historical sociology to reference structural/processual dynamics and social theory. Since a number of social theorists have explored evolutionary change, and public relations activities typically emerge at points of emerging change, transformations and contestation, the intersection of history and sociology provides a space to explore public relations as an historical and sociological phenomenon in multiple political and cultural contexts, for example: nationalism, national identity, nation branding and public diplomacy; institutionalization; professionalization in 'professional society' (Perkin, 1989); social movements and activism. The argument presented here is that the emerging genre of public relations history and historiography can usefully engage with historical sociology, historical theory, social and political theory to generate more reflexive insights to contextualize PR histories, PR history writing, the PR academic discipline, and PR in socio-cultural contexts.

2. History and theory

History deals with non-existing past realities and anonymities (Partner, 2013: 2; van der Dussen, 2013: 45) and the challenges of history-writing cannot be under-estimated (L'Etang, 1995, 2004, 2008a, 2008b). The definition of a field of inquiry or a historical subject, topic or theme is underpinned by epistemological and ontological assumptions and, as in all humanistic research, the subject position of the author. The motivation for historical research is important, for example whether authors are 'achieved' or 'ascribed' insiders or outsiders taking a particular political, intellectual or moral stance (Smith, 1991: 156–168). For example, in public relations the fact that a public relations historian does or does not have professional experience in public relations (and whether that is in consultancy or in-house) matters because it raises challenges with regard to detachment and involvement. The values and assumptions of PR history writers are significant and need acknowledgement (as was the case in Olasky's classic pro-business PR history (Olasky, 1987), likewise inherited disciplinary, occupational and socio-cultural conscious and unconscious burdens of the past for example, functionalism, propaganda, US Progressivism, colonialism).

Historical scholarship is subject to ideological and political influences and as with all literary and linguistic communication is necessarily interpretive. Pre-suppositional choices that underpin historical scholarship are central to the interpretation of historical sources and texts. History is important to the politics of the PR discipline so the articulation of historical and sociological paradigms and themes in relation to those in the public relations discipline is significant. As a reflexive practice, public relations history demands not only self-awareness with regard to historiographical debates and issues. History has been 'traditionally located within the humanities for a reason', and PR history writing demands historical consciousness but also historical imagination (van der Dussen, 2013) and sensitivity to the notion of historicity – reflections and actions informed by history. Historical consciousness and imagination are concepts that brought into play both the experiential and the universal features of history as a necessary aspect of constructed realities (Collingwood, 1974).

Societal structures and politics shape national, cultural and institutional contexts and within them, power relations, dominance and hegemonic tendencies. Paradigms such as historical realism, structuralism, structuralist Marxism, deconstruction and modernization theses provide contexts for understanding power dynamics such as interlocking forces (Althusser, 1971) that constrain or facilitate occupational, professional and practitioner agency and communication power (Castells, 2009). Ideological componentry and assumptions are not only relevant in terms of the relationships for example between PR capitalism, democracy, commodification, but in terms of the historical use of such categories; their consequential ideological or rhetorical deployment vis a vis PR; and their overall explanatory value. Dialectical relations between past and present throw up discontinuities, genealogical similarities and challenge notions of historical objectivity. In drawing together these insights, one can appreciate that history operates as discursive patterns of values, narrative, social theory and explanation (Hall, 1992). It also operates as an heuristic device that allows categorization the deployment of which generates insights about ongoing and changing cultural and creative practices (Rigney, 2013: 184) bearing in mind, on a cultural account, PR's role as cultural service provider. History thinking and writing is interpretive and rhetorical, an argumentative process, not a catalogue. Archives may be sources, but without broader level theoretical interpretation they are simply partial fragments of past human activities.

3. Theorizing history in societal contexts: framing PR historical research

The relationship between theory and history frames historiographical reflection and analysis. Philosophy of history has tended to assume rather than interrogate history in the exploration of ideas such as historical cycles, spirals, dialectical encounters, upheavals, or what counts as true information about past reality (Partner, 2013: 2). Historiography is paradigmatic, for example nationalist, statist, institutional, progressive, subaltern, and postcolonial. Historiography itself is a product of the professionalization of memory, collective and societal memories and archives and memorialization that is engaged in agentic legitimacy and identity projects as opposed to the history of everyday life (Giesen & Junge, 2003: 332). Historical theory is not a 'theory of history' or unified system but,

'A coherent yet flexible framework which supports analyses of historical knowledge, and assists our understanding of what kind of knowledge we can have of the past, and precisely how that knowledge is constructed, assembled and presented. In this sense of a framework of conceptual instruments for examining our knowledge of the past, theory

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