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Medieval propaganda, *longue durée* and New History: Towards a nonlinear approach to the history of public relations



Jordi Xifra^{a,*}, Maria-Rosa Collell^{b,**}

^a Department of Communication, Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona, Spain

^b Department of Linguistics and Communication, University of Girona, Spain

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a new perspective on the historical approach to public relations by drawing from the work of French medievalist Jacques Le Goff, who was the principal representative of the Nouvelle Histoire (New History) French historiographical movement. Based on the notions of mentality and *longue durée*, which Le Goff inherited from the *Annales* movement, we propose that a nonlinear approach to the history of public relations will help to extend its time scale back to the beginnings of civilization. This seeks to overcome the historical boundaries usually established between the prehistory (or proto-history) and the history of public relations as a profession.

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1. Introduction

According to Bentele (2012), public relations historiography must be embedded within a theoretical framework of social history, national histories, and world history, because the history of public relations cannot be considered independently from different forms and structures of societies, political and economic systems, and the structure of the public sphere. Uninfluenced by the Habermasian notion of public sphere, other public relations scholars have insinuated different forms of what today is known as public relations into different historical ages: Antiquity (Brown, 2003), Middle Ages (Watson, 2008), and the Early modern period (Heath & Coombs, 2006). Along similar lines, this article suggests that the perspective introduced by the *Annales* movement may be useful in researching the history of public relations prior to the consolidation of capitalist in its modern form. Indeed, this historiographical movement deals primarily with the pre-modern world, prior to the French Revolution, and shows little interest in later topics.

The *Annales* movement – founded by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch – is a group of French historians associated with a style of historiography developed by French historians in the 20th century. It is named after its scholarly journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, which, along with many books and monographs, remains the main source of their scholarship. The movement was highly influential in setting the agenda for historiography in France and numerous other countries, especially regarding historians' use of social scientific methods, and for emphasizing social rather than political or diplomatic themes (well known as the “history of mentalities [*histoire des mentalités*]” approach). Later in the century, the New History movement [*Nouvelle Histoire*], was the historiographical trend launched by Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (1974). It corresponded to the *third generation* of the *Annales* movement and first appeared in the 1970s.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 935 42 14 84.

** Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 972 41 97 00.

E-mail addresses: jordi.xifra@upf.edu (J. Xifra), mrosa.collell@udg.edu (M.-R. Collell).

The New History is a variant of the history of mentalities established by the founders of the *Annales*. It attempts to establish a history of societies' collective representations and mental structures. These historians undertook the task of globally analyzing vast systems that are coherent in their social and economic organization and covered by a system of homogeneous representations. This methodological perspective expanded the field of history and increased interest in long-term (*longue durée*) phenomena.

The concept of *longue durée* was coined by Fernand Braudel (1902–1985), who argued that different historical processes operate at different temporal rhythms or levels (Braudel, 1958). Briefly, Braudel discusses three hierarchical levels of temporal change. The first, events, concern the individual actions that Braudel calls “traditional history” (1958, p. 731): kings, battles, treaties, and the like. Braudel (1958) uses the term, conjuncture for two intermediate levels of historical duration and calls the study of conjunctures “social history, the history of groups and groupings” (p. 740) and he divided conjunctures into two kinds: *intermediate term conjunctures*, which include wage and price cycles, rates of industrialization, and wars; and *long-term conjunctures*, which refer to secular changes like long-term demographic movements, the changing dimensions of states and empires, the presence or absence of social mobility in a given society, or the intensity of industrial growth.

The *longue durée* notion strongly influenced 20th century European historiography. Basing their historical analyses on Braudel's historical rhythms, Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, the leaders of the third generation of the *Annales*, specifically developed and applied this division of time levels in their research, simultaneously updated of the concept of mentalities. While Nora has focused his research on the collective memory (Dosse, 2011), Le Goff is a world-renowned medievalist and an eminent scholar of propaganda in the Middle Ages (Rubin, 1997). The purpose of this paper is to analyze how the contributions of Jacques Le Goff – and, by extension, the New History movement he led – help develop public relations historiography.

2. Jacques Le Goff, medieval propaganda, and history of mentalities

Le Goff's work focuses principally on the history of mentalities in the Middle Ages, though it ranges from antiquity to the present (Dover, 2010). Combining Marc Bloch's idea of mentalities and Fernand Braudel's notion that mental structures changed at a slower pace than material structures over the *longue durée*, Le Goff (2004) expanded the historian's field with new topics and questions. The opened up hitherto unexplored areas of human behavior and social groups such as banking, merchants, teachers, academic expenses, and dreams. In the 1970s–1980s, using the anthropological notion that perception, values, and experience are culturally constructed, Le Goff considered the collective psychology of medieval social groups. Aiming to reconstruct the ways of thinking and feeling of medieval people (Dover, 2010), Le Goff theorized such aspects as gestures, images, myth, representation, imagination, and sensibility.

From a public relations perspective, Le Goff (1994) situates the history of propaganda as part of social history, cultural history, the history of the imaginary and the history of the symbolic, without which “a true political history is not possible” (p. 519). For Le Goff (1994), although propaganda institutions, such as the chancelleries, preaching (not necessarily religious), orators, and heralds of arms, did exist in the Middle Ages, this period should be considered as “pre-propagandist or of diffuse propaganda” (p. 520). This offers a valuable addition to Lamme and Russell's (2010) argument for not assigning pre-20th century public relations to the role of mere antecedents to US corporate public relations. In fact, studying medieval propaganda means accepting a typology of forms without today's boundaries between instruments of persuasion.

Jacques Le Goff established the main features of medieval propaganda within the context of the history of mentalities. In *Annales* historiography, mentalities are defined, following Emile Durkheim's work, according to ways of thinking, feeling, imagining and acting consciously or unconsciously, individually or collectively. Thus, human activity, from personal words or gestures to the large scale acts of a social group, forms part of the field of study addressed by the history of mentalities. Accordingly, this includes propaganda and its effects on publics, information flow throughout history, and reputation building. In addition, public opinion and many other themes (such as time, space, power, money, justice, body, madness, private life, or death), appear among the themes found in the history of mentalities. These are addressed by Jacques Le Goff throughout his works, and he pays close attention to social imaginary building (e.g., Le Goff, 1981, 1999).

3. Propaganda and Le Goff's features of medieval propaganda

Until the 16th century “*propaganda* (with related forms) was a Latin term used only in a biological frame of reference, referring to the reproduction of plants and animals” (Fellows, 1959, p. 182). Jowett and O'Donnell (2012) – who consider propaganda as a strategic communication – state that

the use of propaganda has been an integral part of human history and can be traced back to ancient Greece for its philosophical and theoretical origins. Used effectively by Alexander the Great, the Roman Empire, and the early Christians, propaganda became an integral part of the religious conflicts of the Reformation. (p. 80)

From the same standpoint, Sturminger (1960), Ellull (1967) and Welch (2013) establish the origins of propaganda in ancient Greece. Academics from other disciplines, such as Assyriology, consider that propaganda was the main activity of power elites in early Mesopotamia (e.g., Postgate, 1992; Reade, 1979) and they approach to as a communication form managed in order to serve “to sustain the power of a monarch” (Postgate, 1992, p. 293). In similar fashion, in his little book on the history of propaganda, Ellull (1967) argues that it has long existed in the political and ideological world as a comparable

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