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The development of public relations in dictatorships – Southern and Eastern European perspectives from 1945 to 1990

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ABSTRACT

The progressive version of public relations history present it as a by-product of pluralist political systems or a democratic dividend. It has been claimed that public relations thrives within open media systems and market economies but struggles in highly controlled governmental systems (dictatorships, juntas, and closed economies). This paper considers how political history and political systems affected the formation of public relations practices in regions of Europe that, after 1945, were under military dictatorships (Spain and Portugal), a military junta (Greece) and were contained in the Soviet bloc. Using comparative history methodology, the notion that public relations operates solely in democracies is challenged, although it is conceded that practice thrived in post-war Western Europe but struggled to develop in parts of southern and eastern Europe.

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1. Introduction

It has been customary in the progressive version of the history of public relations to present public relations as either a by-product of a pluralist political system or a democratic dividend (Bernays, 1965; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Public relations, it is argued, thrives within open media systems and market economies but struggles to be operationalized in highly controlled governmental systems (dictatorships, juntas, and closed economies). This paper will consider how political history and political systems affected the formation of public relations practices in regions of Europe, after the end of World War II in 1945, that were under military dictatorships (Spain and Portugal), a military junta (Greece) and part of the Soviet bloc.

Using a comparative history approach, the notion that public relations operate as an effective method of persuasive communication solely in a democracy will be challenged, although the paper concedes from the outset that public relations practice thrived in post-war Western Europe but struggled to take off in parts of southern and eastern Europe. Nonetheless, it was in existence in some of these countries and had sufficient standing to expand rapidly when the dictatorships broke down and the Soviet bloc collapsed. So, the research question will be to identify the conditioning factors that allowed public relations to emerge in nondemocratic contexts. This considers Rodríguez-Salcedo's proposition that "the historical

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development of public relations [in Europe] does not respond to any dominant pattern, but rather to a certain historical and cultural context” (2015, p. 213).

The article will consider the formation of public relations institutions and practices in Spain, Portugal, Greece and countries of the former Soviet bloc, notably the German Democratic Republic, but also including Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Within the historiography of Eastern Europe, there is a divide between those who consider that public relations are a ‘democratic dividend’ (Ławniczak, 2005; Boshnakova, 2014) and advocates of antecedents and established practices that could be traced back to the 19th century and were very evident across the last century (Bentele & Muhlberg, 2010; Hejlova, 2014; Szondi, 2014). Russell and Lamme have recently suggested ways to qualify precedents that can be considered part of public relations history before the 20th century (Russell & Lamme, 2016). In accordance with public relations scholarship, research should be “grounded in the idea that PR occurs in the context of other change” and includes “broader societal, cultural, and institutional frameworks” (Lamme & Russell, 2010, p. 356).

After analyzing the histories of the formation and expansion of public relations in more than 70 countries, Watson (2015) proposed this hypothesis: “The generalization is that PR thrives in democratic environments in which there is a relatively open economy” (p. 15). Generalizations, of course, include exceptions and variations. This article will make a case that public relations were able to operate, within political limits, in the countries under review. In the instance of the German Democratic Republic [East Germany], an alternative version that was titled as ‘socialist public relations’ was actively developed and operated until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The countries to be examined are (in order) Spain, Portugal, Greece, and former Soviet bloc nations such as German Democratic Republic [now Germany] Bulgaria, Croatia, (former) Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovenia and Ukraine.

2. Comparative history

In this paper, the comparative history methodology is applied as it offers an opportunity to compare and contrast the development of public relations across the countries under review. This methodology has been discussed at public relations academic conferences but has not been enacted beyond discussions of historiography where the Annales model of history and the *longue durée* [long term] has been advocated by Xifra and Collel (2014) and McKie and Xifra (2014). The Annales approach and its successor Total History movement are dense forms of historical comparison in a technocratic form, often considering centuries, rather than the decades considered in this article. Comparative history “opens up the possibility of a new line of analysis”, according to Tosh (2015, p. 139) who further argues that “comparisons can have an important bearing on historical understanding” (p. 137) and that this research approach is “an essential means of deepening our understanding of the past” (p. 138). The medievalist Chris Wickham goes further in support of comparative history:

The key point is that comparison is essential. I don’t think you can properly do history without it. Some of this comparison is chronological, and historians are used to it simply because that they recognise that they study change, and thus know they have to confront before vs. after. But for me the crucial issue of comparison is geographical: why things happen in different ways in different places. You cannot get away without confronting this in history, or, if you do, you are weaker for it. (Wickham, 2005, p.2)

Within the limited length of a journal article, it is not possible to present the density of this methodology. However, the authors’ aim is to offer this introduction to comparative history and encourage others to adopt this approach in future research.

2.1. Spain in the mid-to-late Franco era

The political and social context in the mid-to-late period of the Franco dictatorship shaped the emergence and early development of public relations in Spain. The country had not taken part in the First World War, suffered a civil war between 1936 and 1939. This was followed by the installation of the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco that lasted 35 years; as a result Spain did not intervene in the Second World War either. The precarious economic conditions, along with the international isolation and blockade of major Western powers, forced Franco to introduce changes. Thus, from the 1950s onwards, the country made economic and military agreements with the United States and, in less than a decade, Spain introduced some economic reforms and press law reform in 1966 which gave an opportunity for agency public relations to emerge.

Although the precedents of Spanish PR have not been extensively explored (Reina, 2015; Reina Estévez & González España, 2014a, 2014b; Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2008), it is clear that the term public relations was first found in press and some advertising handbooks of the 1940s and 1950s (Reina, 2015, 2016; Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2008). However, the practice of public relations came almost ten years later. The first public relations campaigns took place in the mid 1950s (Gutiérrez García & Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2009; Noguero, 1994, 1995; Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2008, 2012, 2015; Rodríguez-Salcedo & Xifra 2015) although they were not named as such until the end of the decade (Gutiérrez García & Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2009; Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2008, 2012). Any previous activity was known as “educational industrial advertising” or “social/prestige advertising” or even propaganda (Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2008).

In this context of limited government public information campaigns, reduced political control and a gradual opening of the economy, Joaquin Maestre and Juan Viñas established in Barcelona in 1960 the first firm devoted to public relations

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