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PERSPECTIVES ON PUBLIC
RELATIONS HISTORY*Ron Pearson (*Deceased*)

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If all writing about the past is partly an effort to understand the present, a confusing and contradictory present would seem to call more insistently for historical analysis and explanation. This is particularly true for the profession and academic discipline of public relations. In spite of a consensus about the role of public relations in contemporary organizations—a consensus evident in the many definitions of public relations that stress its role as a management function—a long list of difficult questions about the profession remains. To what bodies of theory can public relations legitimately lay claim? Is there, or can there be, something called public relations theory? Is public relations a profession? Should the practice of public relations be regulated, licensed? What kind of education is required for the practice of public relations? Does the public relations curriculum belong in journalism departments, schools of business, schools of public affairs, or in a department all its own? To what set of values should public relations adhere? What makes the practice of public relations legitimate? In whose interest should public relations be practiced? What constitutes ethical public relations practice? None of these questions is superficial. The fact that they have provoked discussion for most of public relations' history in the 20th century is part of the context within which any practitioner or scholar of public relations interrogates that history. The need to find answers is an important part of the historian's motivation.

Burke (1957) suggested that all writers, including those who write history, write to work through personal problems. And Wise (1980) argued that a text of historical scholarship needs to be understood as a personal response on the part of its author to contemporary situational exigencies, just as the primary recorded texts of historical actors need to be understood as situationally conditioned. Similarly, Berkhofer (1969) emphasized that the situationally conditioned viewpoints of historical actors and historical scholars must be rigorously distinguished. Both the writer of history and the reader of historical texts must be careful to make this distinction.

When historical explanations differ, it is not merely because historians have access to different facts. There are no brute historical facts, only historians' interpretations of them. Indeed the so-called brute facts of history are often the interpretations

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of others, including historical actors themselves. No single, obviously correct public relations history exists; rather, there are a plurality of public relations histories. Indeed, this doctrine can be seen as a main conclusion following from the themes of postmodern rhetorical theory.

The principal themes of rhetorical theory are intimately related to the themes of philosophy. Taking a postmodern view, Baynes, Bohman, and McCarthy (1987) summarized these themes as (a) a concern with the concept of reason, (b) a scepticism about the concept of the human subject, (c) a scepticism about epistemology, and (d) a fascination with language. All of these are intertwined, and if they can be related to one, single, overriding concern, it is a wariness of the idea of foundationalism, the view that there is one, single reality "out there" that human minds, with varying degrees of accuracy, are able to picture, and that is the final arbiter of truth. One of the most vigorous attacks on this view is by Rorty (1979), who challenges the notion that the mind mirrors nature because it supposes that there are invariant, ahistorical rules—the methods of historical scholarship, for instance—for making in the mind an accurate and complete representation of reality. Rorty denies that these invariant rules exist.

Postmodern philosophy is sceptical about conceptualizing reason in a strong sense as that powerful searchlight, which is the same for all peoples in all times, used by the mind to illuminate reality, historical or otherwise, and see it for what it really is or was. Instead, reason is seen as much more contingent and conventional and bound up always with particular, historical views of what counts as rational. At the same time, these philosophers are not satisfied with the Cartesian (modern) concept of man as atomistic and autonomous, standing against the world and peering into it. Instead, relying on insights from phenomenology, many contemporary philosophers are more apt to eschew a subject/object dualism in favor of a view that stresses the mutual dependence of both, such that each plays a role in constituting the other. On this view, human consciousness is seen as having an intrinsically social character and, because the mind cannot be distinguished radically from the body, rationality must take into account feelings and desires.

The historian can no more escape that bit of him or herself that is always in things than he or she can experience a pure interiority empty of the things of which he or she is conscious. It is seen as more realistic to view knowledge as interpretation rather than representation. Once interpretation replaces representation as the dominant metaphor for how we know, then the data of experience are less well described as an experience of things as they are than as an experience of meaning. For one cannot properly be said to interpret a thing; rather one interprets what the thing means. As a result, language, symbols, and rhetoric should move to the forefront of our epistemologies.

Thus, studying public relations historians and their histories can reveal much more about their attitudes and philosophical perspectives than it does about precisely what happened in the past. These historians come to historical texts with different philosophies of history, different social, political, and moral philosophies, and even different assumptions about epistemology and ontology. Wise (1980) used the term *explanation form* to denote the framework of ideas and philosophical assumptions a historian brings to his or her work and he suggested that often one

dominates as the master form. Outlining these perspectives and identifying these explanation forms is one valuable way of mapping the terrain within which arguments about public relations occur and of uncovering the sometimes unarticulated philosophies of public relations that are extant in management and public relations literature.

By identifying a range of perspectives that historians take toward public relations' history, this chapter argues the claim that there is no single, privileged interpretation of public relations' past. The historical texts discussed are selected purposefully to represent this range of perspectives. Studying these historians reveals much about contemporary discourse on public relations and suggests that this discourse is complex and many-sided.

The chapter begins with Hiebert's (1966) biography of Ivy Lee, a practitioner who is often called the father of public relations. Hiebert's approach to public relations history reveals one important perspective. To set it in relation to others, this section reviews explanations of public relations' evolution by the British historian Pimlott (1951), the American business historian Tedlow (1979), the Marxist communication theorist Smythe (1981) and Olasky (1987), the conservative American historian of public relations. After treating each historian singly, a final section draws conclusions about historical scholarship in public relations and suggests a model for interpreting it.

PR and the Flowering of Democracy: Hiebert

Following a suggestion of Wise, it is possible to identify in Hiebert's book on Lee a number of paired concepts that together give a sense of the central explanatory framework of the book. These pairs can also be understood as examples of what Barthes (1957/1972) calls symbolic codes, sets of paired signs which produce and organize meaning in a text. These pairs as they are found in Hiebert's book are listed as follows:

fiction, lies	vs.	truth
secrecy	vs.	openness
partisan	vs.	neutral
persuasion	vs.	understanding
image	vs.	reality
propaganda	vs.	education
publicity	vs.	public relations
muckraker	vs.	gentleman of the press

Hiebert acknowledged that categories like these are sometimes difficult to separate in real life but he suggested that Ivy Lee had at least made the distinctions in thought and in public statements, even if he sometimes failed to meet his own rigorous standards. Hiebert found in Lee the articulation of a set of ideal public relations values that are captured by oppositions like lies-truth. These values also represent for both Lee and Hiebert what is basic in the idea of democracy.

In 1921, according to Hiebert, Lee told a gathering at the Columbia University School of Journalism: "We live in a great democracy, and the safety of a democracy will in the long run depend upon whether the judgements of the people are sound. If the judgements are to be sound, they will be so because they have the largest amount of information on which to base those judgements" (p. 317). It was the task of public relations to assist in supplying that information. Hiebert's own introductory commentary unequivocally asserts: "Without public relations, democracy could not succeed in a mass society" (p. 7), and later, in a concluding paragraph: "Ivy Lee and public relations played a significant role in preserving the pluralism of American society by opening channels of communication and allowing opposing groups to understand each other" (p. 318).

Lee hoped at one time to become a lawyer and studied for a semester at Harvard Law School. But he was forced to give up these studies when his money ran out. As the story is told—Hiebert cited Goldman (1948) but Goldman gave no source for this story—Lee arrived in New York City with only \$5.25 after leaving Harvard and, after securing food and lodging, spent his last nickel on a subway ride to the offices of the *New York Journal*. As luck would have it, editor Charles Edward Russell gave him a job.

As a reporter, Lee apparently lacked the cynicism of many of his fellow journalists. He identified with the powerful businessmen he wrote about and generally thought they were good people, although misunderstood. Lee would probably have agreed with the 1908 statement of AT&T president Theodore Vail that if questions about investments, returns, and distribution are clearly and satisfactorily answered, "there can be no basis for conflict between the company and the public" (p. 87), a view that remains as the basis for much current public relations thinking and practice. Gaudino, Frisch, and Haynes (1989), for instance, suggested there remains a strong belief among practitioners—even among those who claim to practice two-way forms of communication—in the myth that "If you knew what I knew, you'd make the same decision" (p. 299).

Hiebert suggested that Lee's move to journalism from law is partly explained by the fact that the two professions have something in common. "Lee saw . . . an opportunity to combine his literary and legal interests; he could use his pen to account for and defend ideas and actions [of business] before the court of public opinion, that great new audience of American readers" (p. 39). But it is impossible to tell from the text whether Lee actually saw this relationship between journalism and law, or whether it is an explanatory construct of his biographer. Hiebert's interpretation suggests that if Lee could not serve justice and democracy as a lawyer, he would have to find another way. Indeed, he would have to invent one.

Hiebert, as much as Lee, is keenly interested in truth, justice, and democracy as ideals that inform the idea of public relations. Hiebert reported that, during his (Lee's) work for the Pennsylvania Railroad, Lee circulated to the press a "Declaration of Principles" to which he planned to adhere as a publicist for the railroad. Hiebert began a passage by quoting part of Lee's declaration:

This is not a secret press bureau. All our work is done in the open. This is not an advertising agency; . . . Our matter is accurate. Further details

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on any subject treated will be supplied promptly, and any editor will be assisted most cheerfully in verifying directly any statement of fact. Upon inquiry, full information will be given to any editor concerning those on whose behalf an article is sent out. In brief, our plan is, frankly and openly, on behalf of the business concerns and public institutions, to supply to the press and the public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about. (p. 48)

There is little doubt that more current public relations could be practiced with the rectitude evidenced in Lee's declaration and that the declaration is laudable. But Hiebert wants this declaration to do a great deal; for, in the paragraph immediately following, he interpreted its significance in this way:

The statement brought about a revolution in relations between business and the public. Where formerly business pursued a policy of "the public be damned," from now on business increasingly followed a policy of "the public be informed."

A few other companies saw the efficacy of Lee's advice. . . . (p. 48)

Within this second passage a contradiction appears. On the one hand Hiebert took Lee's declaration as revolutionary; on the other he allowed that only "a few" other companies followed Lee's advice. In fact, it is still a legitimate empirical question whether the revolution as Hiebert understands it has ever taken place. Certainly the modern corporation wants to be attuned to the values, attitudes, and behaviors of its various publics and often tries to influence those behaviors and to adjust its own policies to what it believes are public expectations. But it is an open question whether this activity is quintessentially democratic. Yet for Hiebert, the essence of the public relations revolution is a flowering of democratic values. In the foregoing excerpts, Hiebert's allegiance to this view of public relations seems to make it difficult for the biographer to separate his own view of what the fledgling profession should be from what it is reasonable to believe about the way public relations actually evolved. In other places in his book, it is plain that Hiebert *did* appreciate that, "too much public relations is Machiavellian, concerned with maintaining power regardless of ethical considerations" (p. 317). But if Hiebert understood this, why did he write about a public relations revolution?

A similar tension exists in another of Hiebert's interpretations of Lee. This one is particularly illuminating because it shows how the same set of facts might be given radically different interpretations. Hiebert described Lee's early journalistic exploits:

Lee's first big scoop of his career came from Grover Cleveland. The president had recently retired from the White House to his home in Princeton. In typical nineteenth century fashion he refused to make any public statements. . . . One evening young Lee organized a group of his fellow students to go to the Cleveland home and serenade the ex-president

with college songs and cheers. Cleveland was moved by the gesture and at length came out onto the front porch where he made a little speech to the students. Lee was in the front row, pencil and pad in hand, and took down every word. (p. 28)

As Hiebert reported the president "was moved," should a reader take this as an instance of Lee's sincerity, of his sincere desire to move others? For on the next page Hiebert said, "[Lee] . . . may not have been humble, but he was sincere. . . . He was the original 'really sincere guy'" (p. 30). Or is it an example of Lee's cunning orchestration of an event—the pseudo-event about which Boorstin (1961) has written—which both Cleveland, and Lee's biographer, took at face value? It is important for Hiebert to support claims about Lee's sincerity and the transparency of his intentions, because Hiebert wants readers to accept that Lee believed that "the truth was the most effective way to flatter the people in a democratic society. . . . a policy of honesty was the most direct means to public approval" (p. 31). Yet it is not obvious that Lee was honest about his intentions with President Cleveland, for he may well have made use of a staged event to encourage the president to give a public statement.

Hiebert seems more interested in the idea he believes Lee articulated and stood for than he is in the man himself. It is Lee's idea, taken at face value as Lee articulated it on many occasions, with which Hiebert is concerned, for the idea, unlike the man, can be rendered purely, simply and powerfully. But the important question for an understanding of public relations historiography is not how wide a gap exists between Lee the man and the idea Hiebert finds in Lee's writing. Rather, it is more important to draw a conclusion about the nature of the explanatory categories Hiebert used to explain the evolution of public relations and to understand why he used them.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, a host of questions surrounds the public relations profession. Most of them have to do with its legitimacy. Hiebert would certainly have been aware of them; he not only taught public relations but practiced it as well. Were he at all concerned about the profession's legitimacy at the outset of his research on Lee, his discovery of the core idea of public relations in the language of democracy would assure him that no profession was more worthy. Moreover, he can show that the view of public relations as democracy in action is not his own construct, but an idea that is part and parcel of public relations' history. Indeed, public relations can be seen as the obvious and predictable response to a set of historical conditions that threatened democratic ideals. On this view, its evolution is natural and explainable as the inevitable evolution of ever-adaptable democratic principles.

Wise (1980) suggested it is important to ask what an historian's explanatory ideas do for him or her, how they act as tools, as a strategic response to a problematic environment. The foregoing analysis suggests, that in the case of Hiebert, his depiction of the history of public relations provided a powerful tool in the debate that was then current, and continues to be current, as to the status of the profession. Moreover, this observation about Hiebert's purpose is not a new one. One reviewer of Hiebert's book (Garraty, 1966) noted:

Hiebert has been so impressed by the novelty of Lee's techniques and his enormous success, and has himself been so captivated by the public-relations mystique, that he fails to come to grips with the moral questions involved in the business or with the fact that his hero, after all, was essentially a lackey. He advances the startling . . . thesis that the public relations business is a bulwark of democracy. . . . That Lee believed this is understandable; that his biographer believes it is an indication of the extent to which he has absorbed his subject's values. . . . In short, he has produced a public relations man's biography of Ivy Lee. (p. 42)

Pimlott's Specialization Theory

One explanation of the evolution of public relations, as has been noted in the foregoing section, sees the profession as an element of maturing democratic ideals. Other explanations, some incorporating the democracy idea and some repudiating it, have been suggested. This and following sections examine some of these explanations to generate a broader perspective on the writing of public relations history against which Hiebert's work can be seen.

Pimlott (1951) introduced a discussion of public relations' evolution by denying that public relations can be explained as a "natural response" to the growth of the mass media; usually such explanations beg the question of why the response is "natural," he said. In making this point, Pimlott made an interesting critical point that any claim about the apparent "naturalness" of a state of affairs is at heart the statement of an ideological position and not the neutral description of "the way things are" that it appears to be. Indeed, Pimlott's position in a way presages the postmodern views described earlier. The attack on foundationalism is also an attack on any effort to privilege one point of view over another based on the claim that the privileged perspective reflects the ways things really are.

Pimlott argued that the quasi-professionalization of the public relations function in the early 1900s—a function that is recognizable in all stages in history in various nonprofessional forms—is an aspect of increasing differentiation of social functions generally. "This in turn was due to increasing wealth, expanding markets, population growth, technological progress—indeed, to all the circumstances which produced the Industrial Revolution . . ." (p. 233). Finally, he made this disarmingly modest statement that suggests he sees nothing revolutionary about the growth of public relations: "There is nothing dramatic about this reason for the evolution of the public relations specialist. Because it is not dramatic it tends to be overshadowed by more colorful theories" (p. 234).

Part of Pimlott's point is that people, leaders of any kind especially, have always been concerned with image. He noted New England businessmen of the mid-1800s attended to their own public relations just as they attended to their own accounting and other aspects of management. For Pimlott, a fundamental reason for the differentiation of public relations as a unique management function is increased complexity in society and increased specialization to deal with it. Here it is worth remarking that an important aspect of Hiebert's explanation is that business had come to be indifferent to its image and thus needed public relations. It is

noted later that Tedlow, even more forcefully than Pimlott, questioned this basic assumption about business' lack of concern for its public image.

Having linked public relations' evolution to a general increase in specialization, Pimlott developed a number of related explanatory propositions:

1. Because of increased complexity and "bigness," it became more difficult for an organization to communicate with the public. Moreover, the "public" came to be understood as differentiated into a number of sub-publics—employees, customers, shareholders, etc. "As the organizations increased in size and the 'publics' along with them, they also became remote, more impersonal, more incomprehensible" (p. 235).
2. It became increasingly necessary to bridge this widening communication gap. As Pimlott put it: "It proved to be more efficient to be open than to be secretive. Employers worked better; dealers were more loyal; stockholders were more contented" (p. 236). He also noted new ideas about business' responsibilities resulted in a need by business to justify itself to society. But Pimlott did not cast this observation in the language of democratic rights and obligations; rather he suggested public relations' evolution can be partly understood as a sound business strategy to increase efficiency and productivity.
3. Pimlott acknowledged the mass media as a major contributing factor in the evolution of public relations, but he avoided the suggestion of technological determinism. Because of the structural changes described here, more demands were made of mass media channels. As media themselves became more complex, it became necessary for organizations to employ experts familiar with them.
4. Finally, it must be noted that for Pimlott, public relations is related to democracy, as the title of his book suggests, but the idea of democracy does not play the kind of fundamental explanatory role that it does for Hiebert. Instead he pointed as well to a wide variety of causes of change—economic, technological, social—and suggested that public relations is a rational, and highly functional, management response to the demands of a changing environment. With public relations, organizations and hence society generally will function more smoothly. Pimlott concluded that public relations' significance for society is twofold—it is highly functional for the smooth functioning of society and supportive of American democratic ideals.

They [public relations specialists] are experts in popularizing information. They play an essential part in "group dynamics" . . . The better the job of popularization, the more smoothly will society function, but also the greater the understanding which the plain citizen will have of his own place in relation to the big and seemingly inhuman groups whose interplay is important for the "dynamics of group behavior." The more that is understood about group dynamics and the working of the mass media the clearer will be the role of the public relations group. . . . And the easier will be the problem—though it will never be easy—of

adapting the mass media to the needs of American democracy and of curbing the excesses of propaganda. (p. 257)

Before leaving Pimlott, it is worth characterizing in general terms the kind of historical explanation he advanced. Pimlott developed the outline of a seemingly neutral, functional explanation for public relations that, on the face of it, does not express an ideological position. Organizations must survive by adapting or adjusting to their environments, and specialized public relations roles allow them to do this. As noted later, Tedlow offered a similar functional explanation as well as debunking one of public relations' most cherished myths.

The Myth of the Boerish Businessman: Tedlow

Tedlow (1979), a business historian at the Harvard School of Business Administration, attacked one of the most revered beliefs of public relations—the belief that business, prior to the coming of public relations, was secretive and insensitive, indeed contemptuous, of public opinion. Relying on a number of examples for his evidence, Tedlow supports two claims: (a) American businessmen since colonial times have been notoriously solicitous of public approval, and (b) only politicians have rivalled them in the use of publicity to further their enterprises.

Tedlow also reviewed and reinterpreted some of the classic evidence for the opposite view, namely, the 1882 statement by William Vanderbilt which appeared on the front page of *The New York Times* in which he was reported to have said “the public be damned,” a phrase that is reported in most public relations textbooks and interpreted there much as Hiebert interpreted it.

Tedlow returned to the primary document to see what the phrase looked like in context. Vanderbilt apparently made his statement in response to a reporter's question. Wondering why Vanderbilt ran one of his railroads at a loss, the reporter suggested that perhaps it was for the public benefit. In part, Vanderbilt is supposed to have replied: “The public be damned. What does the public care about the railroads except to get as much out of them for as small a consideration as possible . . . Of course we like to do everything possible for the benefit of humanity in general, but when we do we first see that we are benefitting ourselves” (p. 5). When taken in context, according to Tedlow, the statement expresses a sentiment still much accepted today—that the primary responsibility of an executive is to a company's shareholders. He argued the statement bears none of the venomous overtones so many public relations historians have read into it. Additionally, he claimed, Vanderbilt denied using the language attributed to him, further evidence of even Vanderbilt's concern for maintaining a decorous public image. Referring to the so-called robber barons generally, Tedlow concluded:

It would be wonderfully tidy to show how these economically proficient but socially insensitive moguls were gradually forced to defend themselves in the public forum by making use of the developing profession of public relations counseling. This is the “scenario” constructed by numerous public relations men who have explored their field's past. Such a sequence

is not without some validity, but history is rarely so one-dimensional and it certainly is not in this case. (p. 3)

Two generally accepted explanations for the evolution of public relations, according to Tedlow, are (a) the appearance of PR follows a changed attitude on the part of business to its social responsibilities; and (b) it arose as a defense against anti-business sentiment. Tedlow accepted that these claims exhibit some degree of truth, but in the case of both he suggested the story of public relations is much more complex and ambiguous. He agreed that corporate liberalism and public relations sometimes appeared together, but noted also that many exponents of public relations were quite conservative and would not likely have accepted social responsibility arguments. He also allowed that there is a temporal coincidence between the beginnings of PR and the hey-day of the muckrakers. But he asked: “Why has not public relations diminished in importance with the decline of anti-business sentiment? . . . why did nonbusiness institutions which were not particularly scrutinized by the muckrakers, such as universities, churches, charities, and the armed services, follow the lead of business and experiment with press bureaus at the time?” (p. 16).

Essentially, Tedlow repudiated what he called the views associated with the Progressive period that saw a conflict between “the people” and “the interests.” He said this picture ignores developments within the business world itself. Key among these developments are unprecedented rates of growth among corporations, increased rationalization and centralization of management, and the need for larger markets. These changes brought with them new management problems to which some of the responses included Taylor's scientific management, the birth of industrial psychology, welfare capitalism, advertising and, of course, public relations.

In his view, causal explanation in this context is more complex than many explanations of public relations' past suggest. Tedlow viewed public relations as one element of management's response to rapid change along a number of dimensions—economic, technological, and social. He interpreted public relations' history in terms of organizations learning how to function more efficiently and effectively in new environments with little recourse to the more ideologically-loaded language of democracy.

PR, the Consciousness Industry, and Capitalism: Smythe

Of the writers considered in this chapter, Smythe (1981) is the only one who has not written a book with “public relations” in the title, yet much of his writing deals implicitly with related issues. He is also one of the few writers who consider public relations from a Marxist perspective, a perspective that is rarely acknowledged in histories and texts that mention “public relations” in their titles. Smythe located the evolution of public relations in the same time frame and within the same set of economic and social changes as do the other authors. Yet his account of the ways in which the evolution of public relations is explained by these factors is radically different.

Smythe developed an explanation of public relations' evolution within what he called a materialist-realist theory of mass communication. Among the key propositions of this theory is the claim that in the core capitalist countries (Western Europe, United States, and Canada) the mass media are not preeminently in the business of producing newspapers, magazines, or television shows. Rather, they (a) produce audiences as commodities that are marketed to business organizations that want to advertise consumer goods, and (b) establish a daily agenda of news, entertainment, and information that defines *reality* for the people. Another way of describing these two mutually reinforcing purposes is to claim that the commercial media (a) mass market the consumer goods and services produced by monopoly capitalism, and (b) mass market the legitimacy of the capitalist system itself. Smythe distinguished mass media content as advertising, on the one hand, and the "free lunch" on the other. The free lunch is the news, entertainment, and information. Advertising is related to meeting the first objective listed here, the free lunch to meeting the second. The profession of public relations is an element of business' effort to influence the content of the free lunch.

Smythe situated the growth of public relations in the latter quarter of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century in the United States—the same time period within which media began to address the twin objectives described earlier. What is of interest in this context is his explanation for these responses on the part of business. According to Smythe, business faced two major problems at the turn of the century. One was a population becoming increasingly hostile toward the practices of big business. Hiebert also described this period of crisis for capitalism, but where he (following Lee) ascribed it to a lack of mutual understanding among business and the public, Smythe said the public understood perfectly—that was the problem. Second was a need that was part and parcel of the "bigness" problem. The larger, "rationalized" business organizations with centralized managements needed larger, rationalized markets. Smythe wrote:

The principal contradiction faced by capitalism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was that between the enormous potential for expanding production of consumer goods and the overt political hostility of the workers and a fair proportion of the middle class . . . In the resolution of the principal contradiction, two problems were identified and solved: 1) The need for an unquestionable conquest by the business system of control of the state and its ideological apparatus. . . . 2) The task of winning the automatic acquiescence of the population to a "rationalized" system of monopoly capitalism . . . (p. 57)

It is the second problem in which public relations can be seen as playing a role, for Smythe also asserted:

The second level was the long-range problem confronting the emerging monopoly-capitalist system. . . . that of establishing institutional relations which would win the acquiescence of the population. . . . this problem

was one of establishing the hegemony of the business system over people as "consumers." . . . It was a problem of establishing domination of consciousness through culture and communication. (p. 57)

Smythe's explanation of the evolution of public relations goes well beyond the core claims of classical Marxism because of the emphasis he placed on the role of consciousness in the maintenance of the capitalist system. At least in the core capitalist countries, capitalism ultimately came to be relatively successful in providing for the material wants of the proletariat, thus reducing the likelihood of the kind of revolution Marx predicted. The "crisis" that would precipitate a new order is not, therefore, an economic or material one, but a crisis of legitimation, or of consciousness. To the extent this is true, public relations can be explained as an element of capital's response. In earlier ages, the response to potential economic crises was the reallocation of material resources—a greater sharing of economic benefits. In current times, the appropriate response takes place in the realm of ideas. Galbra (1983) has also argued that although capital's power was once related to the control and allocation of material wealth, it is now related to the control and distribution of ideas or in capital's ability to persuade.

PR and the Specter of Socialism: Olasky

Olasky's (1987) recent analysis of public relations' history is provocative and is especially interesting when it is contrasted with Smythe's. Both Olasky and Smythe agree that public relations is a strategy that big business uses to control markets and to increase profitability. But whereas Smythe made his analysis from a leftist perspective, Olasky approached public relation history as a free-market conservative.

Echoing Tedlow, Olasky argued that a wrong-headed progressive interpretation dominates the writing of public relations history. For Olasky, the view includes the ideas that public relations has improved steadily since press agency beginnings (the idea of progress) and that public relations practitioners are motivated by a sense of serving the public interest. He suggested that an honest reading of public relations' history, however, reveals no evidence that public relations practitioners are becoming more ethical and professional or that corporations have been operating to achieve anything but self-interest.

The thrust of his historical analysis is that corporate public relations activities have been designed to circumvent free market forces in favor of what he called collaborationism—alliances of large corporations with each other and with government. He described the creation of the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1887 and the ultimate public acceptance in the early 20th century of the idea of "regulated monopolies" for telephone and electrical utilities as public relations triumphs that benefited the regulated industries more than they served the public interest. Olasky sees in the public relations campaigns that railroads and utilities waged in favor of regulation a pitched battle between defenders of free enterprise and market forces and those who favored planning and the use of non-market drive policies to control and regulate. He wrote:

For over a century, many major corporate public relations leaders have worked diligently to kill free enterprise by promoting big government-big business collaboration. Over and over again, many corporate public relations executives have supported economic regulation with the goal of eliminating smaller competitors and insuring their own profits. (p. 2)

Olasky interpreted public relations history in the context of his reading of the United States Constitution. He pointed out that the framers of that Constitution wrote a document to safeguard the private rights of individuals. In the Constitution, Olasky found a philosophy of freedom and individualism that he believes is threatened by the specter of what he calls collaborationism. Moreover, he reinterpreted the contribution of Lee and Bernays, the premier figures in public relations history, to show how their philosophies were supportive of this collaborationism and showed little sympathy with philosophies of individualism.

Olasky's Lee is quite different from Hiebert's Lee. Whereas Lee in Hiebert's biography is portrayed as a champion of democratic ideals, in Olasky he is just the opposite, a master controller and propagandist who was firmly in the collaborationist camp and whose actions served only to reduce individual freedom and choice.

Olasky suggested that Lee's belief in collaborationism explains what had hitherto been difficult to understand, especially when Lee is seen as the champion of democracy in America, namely, Lee's sympathies for Stalin and the communist experiment in the Soviet Union. Olasky suggested that Lee saw "the United States moving closer to the Soviet Union in social perspective. 'The United States started with complete individualism, every man for himself,' and the Soviets have the opposite position, Lee wrote, but 'we have found it necessary to restrict the power of the individual'" (p. 51). Olasky also suggested that Lee saw movement toward a new cooperative social order as natural, inevitable, and progressive.

Lee also had unflattering views of the multitude, said Olasky, views that would have supported his belief that the public needed to be managed and administered for its own good. For Lee believed that rational discourse was lost on the masses and that the cause of collaborationism was better served by communication that played on the imagination and emotions of the public. In this application of Freudian psychology, with its emphasis on the role of the irrational and the hidden as motivators of human action, Lee would presage the views and practice of Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud, and the man credited with first using the phrase "public relations."

In reinterpreting Bernays, and as a result of his own interview with him in 1984, Olasky discovered a philosophy of public relations that holds that, (a) because among the masses emotion is more powerful than reason, and (b) because there is no God watching over the world, (c) therefore, manipulation of these masses through public relations techniques is essential to prevent chaos and ensure public order. Olasky argued that this "rationale for public relations manipulation based on his lack of confidence in either God or man . . . was his [Bernays'] most significant contribution to 20th century public relations" (p. 83). As in Lee, the focus in Bernays is in protecting the whole from the parts, or the state

from the people. Moreover, Olasky pointed out the obvious contradiction in this philosophy:

Because a democratic society is considered to be one in which "the people" in general do rule, and an authoritarian society is often considered one in which a small group of people rule, Bernays was trying to square the circle by arguing, in effect, that we must kill democracy to save it. (p. 84)

Olasky also identified another similarity between Bernays and Lee—the affinity of their ideals with socialism. Whereas Lee's collaborationism led him to sympathize with Soviet ideals, Bernays too was a champion of increased economic centralization along with more economic planning and social control.

Historical Perspectives on PR: A Synthesis

The preceding discussion has compared and contrasted different approaches to the history of public relations and different explanations for the evolution of the new profession. What is initially most interesting about these approaches, however, is not their differences, but what they have in common. For all the historians discussed agree on a number of basic facts. Professionalized public relations is a practice that begins in the last decades of the 19th century and first two decades of the 20th century and arises in the context of significant economic, technological, and social changes associated with that time period. These include:

- a crisis of competition in business that led to monopoly capitalism,
- increased social organization and specialization in society generally,
- increased communication problems among groups,
- the advance of scientific approaches to marketing, management, and administration,
- advances in technology generally, especially in the techniques of mass communication,
- an increase in the general level of education, and
- changes in values, the rise of egalitarianism.

Where the historians differ, of course, is in the way they interpret these and related facts and the way they explain the causal relations among them.

- Hiebert, himself a public relations practitioner, emphasized the democratizing influence of public relations. The ideals driving his analysis are the democratic ideals of an informed and active citizenry. In Lee he saw a larger-than-life champion of these ideals. For Hiebert, public relations is part of the natural evolution of these ideals; the growth of the profession is explained partly by the evolution of democracy and partly by the historical role played by Lee, who saw the need for public relations as a bulwark against nondemocratic forces.
- Pimlott too acknowledged a relationship between public relations and democratic institutions, but he emphasized increased specialization of roles in

society as a key rationale for the growth of public relations. For Pimlott, there is little that is dramatic or revolutionary in the evolution of public relations. Rather, public relations is a useful social role and helps society function more smoothly.

- Tedlow, whose study of public relations was initially part of a doctoral dissertation in American history at Columbia University (his adviser was the same John A. Garraty whose comments on Hiebert were quoted earlier), focused on business efforts to manage change as a key explanatory factor. He discarded some of the basic explanatory myths of public relations' history and develops a functional explanation for the growth of the profession. Public relations evolves as a specialized organizational role because without it institutions would not easily adjust or adapt to environments that became increasingly dynamic and complex.
- Smythe explained public relations as business' response to a situation in which it needed to control the minds as well as the bodies of its publics in order to promote and secure organizational goals—growth and profit. In Smythe, there is no talk of social responsibility or of democracy. The self-interest of profit-seeking organizations in capitalist economies beset by a crisis of legitimacy is the key reason for public relations.
- Olasky focused on the way in which public relations activity threatens what he believes are basic American values—competition and the rights of individuals—values that are often associated with capitalism. With Smythe he saw public relations as a technique of organizations for promoting economic self-interest through the control of markets. But while the Marxist explanation of this phenomenon is that it is a logical and irreversible *outcome* of an ideology of individualism, for Olasky a return to these classic individualist values is the only cure. Smythe saw in public relations the scourge of capitalism, Olasky the spectre of socialism.

By way of effecting some kind of final synthesis or framework within which to view these varied approaches to public relations history, it is worth returning to some of Wise's (1980) considerations on the writing of history. Wise described what can be loosely called the three major paradigms or explanation forms within which American historical research has been carried out, although to his list a fourth category is added to accommodate Olasky. Making use of these paradigms provides one strategy for mapping the different philosophies of history that public relations historians bring to their work.

Progressive historians, who controlled the historical stage from about 1910 to 1950, according to Wise, saw life in America as relatively straightforward and unproblematic. For the progressive historians, said Wise, "Life in America could be made free and open and just if only people willed it so and labored hard to implement their wills. Progressives obligated themselves to lead the way toward a juster, more enlightened society" (p. 83). . . . "Progress was their Master Form, the single key which explains most everything they thought and did" (p. 87).

When Hiebert published his book on Ivy Lee in the mid-1960s, he was about 35 years old. He had grown up and been educated during a time when little seemed

to stand in the way of progress in America; his book came out before the crises and disillusionment that marked the late 1960s. Thus, in spite of the fact Hiebert wrote *Courier to the Crowd* after the period Wise identified with progressive history, his book seems to fit into the mold Wise claimed motivated most progressive historians. Public relations, for Hiebert, is an instrument of progress that, if only people would come to appreciate it, could play a role in making America "free and open and just."

Counter-progressives, on the other hand, tended to be suspicious of the idea of progress and viewed historical reality as much more complex and ambiguous than did the progressives. Wise situated counter-progressive historians after 1950. Pimlott, possibly, and Tedlow would seem to fit into this category. Tedlow especially attacked some of the truisms and assumptions of the "progress" view of public relations and paints a much more complicated and conservative picture of the evolution of public relations than does Hiebert. Olasky, it might be argued, fits this category because of his questioning of the progress view of public relations. Yet his writing is marked by a fervor that makes it appear more ideologically motivated than the work of Pimlott or Tedlow so that it seems helpful to provide a separate category for Olasky.

New Left historians, according to Wise, began writing in America after 1960. "In their picture, America has not been so much an idea as a structure of power. And that power is anything but innocent. The nation has not been misguided in its acts of oppression; it's been cold, and ruthlessly calculating, and has done what it's done to protect and extend itself. To the New Left, America has not been a blunderer, it's been a predator" (p. 94). Clearly, Smythe fits into this category. It could also be argued that the recent analyses of Gandy (1982) are motivated by a similar view of history.

New Right historians is a category Wise does not mention, but one like it seems necessary to classify Olasky's history of public relations. Olasky's neo-conservatism is not captured by any of the other categories. It might be argued that the analysis of Tedlow is a conservative one in that it does not probe the legitimacy of those organizational goals for which the new public relations role was seen to be functional. But Olasky's conservatism is different, for it is marked by a much stronger and more clearly articulated ideology.

These four historical categories are helpful for bringing some order to the various public relations histories discussed above. But it is also useful to employ categories that (a) emphasize logical distinctions instead of historical ones, and (b) suggest the basis for a model that may help ordering some of the assumptions working behind contemporary discourse about public relations. Thus one can identify what might be called a broad *management paradigm* that favors structural-functional explanation and which occupies a middle or central position. The core idea here is that public relations develops as a specialized role (i.e. as a structural innovation in organizations) because it is functional for organizational survival. This paradigm is an important and perhaps dominant one (Trujillo & Toth, 1987) within current public relations theory and one that stresses public relations' contribution to organizational management. The historical analyses of Pimlott and Tedlow especially seem to be made from within this perspective and are supportive of it.

It can also be argued that Hiebert's explanation fits within this dominant management paradigm in that it provides a rhetoric of legitimation for what otherwise is clearly an explanation positing organizational needs, that is, organizational self-interests, as the driving force in the genesis of public relations. Although the historical explanations of Hiebert, on the one hand, and Tedlow and Pimlott on the other, have differences, they serve each other well. But this is not because explanations that emphasize the functional value of public relations are without ideologies; indeed they are not without ideologies, for the needs of these organizations, in the achievement of which public relations plays an important, functional role, are, by and large, the needs of profit-making organizations in a post-industrial capitalist economy. Rather, it is because this latter ideology is made more palatable when reworked in the language of democracy and social responsibility.

Finally, if it is accepted that Tedlow, Pimlott and Hiebert together represent different aspects of a dominant perspective on public relations, it follows that the historical analyses of Smythe and Olasky articulate assumptions that are critiques of this dominant perspective. Smythe, of course, presents a critique from the left, and Olasky one from the right. For the leftist critique, the rhetoric of democracy and social responsibility falsely legitimate those organizational interests served by public relations because they do not take into account the real needs of individuals (for community, for instance) but rather emphasize false needs of individuals for unfettered freedom as consumers. From the right, the legitimating rhetoric is seen as hollow because it fails to recognize the rights of individuals and subsumes them under the rights and needs of institutions. From the left, public relations is seen as serving the private interests of individuals, from the right public relations is seen as threatening these interests.

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