Liberation public relations

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Broadly speaking, critical theory – with its origins in Western Marxism – is a set of theoretical frameworks that consider injustice and oppression in society and suggest how to create possibilities for the freedom and equality of values and people. It analyses and criticises the way people are influenced to think by the capitalist culture, particularly by powerful players that either control the mass media or dominate other communication methods (McKie, 2005). Circumstances can coalesce to liberate the people from this condition. These circumstances can be due to major shifts in the dominant hegemony via a process of social reform and change. Such shifts may involve public relations playing a role in the liberating process since PR professionals "are members of a human community in which communication in all its forms plays a critical role in human inquiry and development" (Stoker & Stoker, 2012).

This chapter will focus on liberation in a societal and political sense, and its effects on public relations practice in two distinct countries: Spain and Australia. It will identify specific triggering events in the nation-building of these countries, including a historical perspective. These events will be analysed and critiqued to determine how they developed and liberated the practice of public relations. Although culturally distinct as nations, similarities can be drawn from a common public relations practice context. Specific events in Australia's timeline include the federation of the Commonwealth in 1901, when the six former colonies formed a new nation (Sheehan & Turnbull, 2012); the attempt by a progressive government to nationalise the finance industry in 1949 (Sheehan, 2011); and the efforts of welfare groups to improve public housing between 1950 and 1970. In Spain the events considered will include the transition to democracy from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s and the development of its political culture (Xifra, 2010). Heath (2005) would identify such triggering events as the "enormous, society defining debates" out of which public relations practice grew – or as this chapter will argue, was liberated under a set of particular national circumstances. In developing this argument the chapter will also seek to refute a claim made by many, and best summed up by Heath (2005), that public relations gained professional and academic status during the twentieth century in the United States and from there it spread to much of the rest of the world. This chapter will further critically argue for a liberation of public relations from such claims, and will discuss the circumstances in which Spain and Australia developed public relations free of US influence and as a reflection of their respective nation’s growth.
The choice of the word “liberation” will also be considered. The connection to Liberation theology is not deliberate but does bring into the discussion certain principles expounded in this area to form a nexus with critical theory. Liberation theology, often branded as Marxist Christianity, shares some similarity with Gramscian thought — i.e., Liberation theology and Gramsci are both determined to persuade people to identify themselves according to their economic status. Expanding on this Liberation theory, public relations has the potential to become a tool of change, of liberation, just as Gramsci proposed in singling out the cultural unity of Christian Europeans. So long as the impoverished of many Western societies thought that their Christian identity was more important, they would readily join forces with Christian elites against atheistic revolutionaries. Changing the culture, for Gramsci, meant inducing people to alter their primary self-identification — i.e. you must consider yourself not as Christians but as poor.

Concepts of nationhood require different thinking by the populace — no longer a colony but a sovereign nation; no longer living under a dictatorship but in a nation in transition to democracy, and ultimately to a democratic state. Events and circumstances in a nation’s development allowed a change in thinking and helped change these conceptions. Public relations played a role in this development.

**Placing PR in a theoretical framework**

For most of the latter part of the twentieth century, public relations theory development was based around the application of various models and paradigms of communication, organisational and management studies. From the 1980s academics began to look beyond these practice applied methods and sought links and recognition with psychology and sociology — but at this time “most studies developed from a largely US-centric literature with a focus on the structural or functionalist perspective” (Sison, 2012, p. 57). Sison arranges the influencing theories of public relations as four steps of a ladder that commences with systems theory, and follows with communication theories; public relations theory (Excellence theory); and then, logically, at the top of the ladder, rhetorical, interpretative, cultural, and critical perspectives. It is clear that Sison sees each step as providing support to a higher level of analysing public relations and understanding its role. She differentiates this final rung stating that “rhetorical approaches focus on how public relations practitioners create, interpret and shape messages”, while critical theory examines power and influence, and finally postmodernism “questions the links between knowledge and power, dissensus and consensus, power and resistance, power and ideology and the representation of minorities and marginalised groups” (p. 58).

This chapter seeks to borrow and develop some of the tenets of Liberation theology as a starting point of discussion, and examine public relations from different perspectives. This perspective hopes to create a critical view of public relations and, as L’Etang (2008, p. 4) writes, to “unpick” the assumptions on which much public relations is based.

In creating Liberation public relations we have accepted the call of other academics to “provide the framework or ‘lenses’ for examining public relations in a critical way” (Macanamra, 2012, p. 420) and also in a postmodernist way that will “break up other theories in a process of continuous renewal” (Holthauzen, 2012, p. 23). In acknowledging the connection between postmodernism and critical theory, Sison (2012) also notes how Holtzhausen differentiates the two by noting the former’s focus on “critiquing capitalist production and social systems from a Marxist perspective” and the latter’s emphasis on “how power is discursively constituted through political and knowledge production processes” (p. 77).

The discussion of public relations as a liberating force must first take into account its role in society. Much has been written on defining public relations, with one author opining that “PR.
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is caught up in a seemingly endless quest to define its identity through locating the essence of its practice” (Galloway, 2013, p. 147). This quest often follows a familiar path – through what are regarded as the ideas and key figures that have shaped public relations. Many academics have “mostly uncritically adopted” (Macnamara, 2012) this dominant view. But citing the works and practices of Bernays, Lippman and Ivy Lee as the definitive worldview of public relations, and using this as the basis for further argument, is flawed. Demetrious (2013) echoes Heath’s earlier statement when she writes that concepts from Bernays’ (1928) Propaganda “provide a valuable insight into the ideas, beliefs, and values to which public relations is anchored” (Demetrious, 2013, p. 14); and that consequently “from the outset public relations was conceptually weak and anchored to a flawed logic that affected its credibility and suitability in democratic society” (p. 14). Her attribution of these statements to how public relations was, and is, practised, ignores its development in different contexts. To maintain that Bernays himself “still retains high standing as the “father of modern PR”” (p. 13) is to once again fall prey to the dominance of the US-centric thinking on public relations and to become a captive of its prevailing PR theorists. L’Etang (2008, p. 328) wrote that “US scholars have always tended to assume the activities referred to as PR have been invented by Americans and then exported elsewhere” but in many cases Western PR academics have been guilty of swallowing this line of reasoning hook, line and sinker! It should be countered that Demetrious is not alone in presenting this pervasively negative view of Bernays’ influence on public relations. In a more recent and deeper view of Bernays, US academics St John and Lamme (2011) present a re-evaluation of the ideology put forward in propaganda.

In focusing on Australia and Spain this chapter deliberately chooses two vastly different nations in terms of their culture and history. It examines the use of public relations as part of nation-building and how the practice of PR was initially employed and considered more as a Liberating activity in the theological understanding of the term.

Situating PR in a Liberation paradigm

At first it may seem incongruous to consider PR in a context usually associated with theology. However, this is not such a new approach and in the past decade it has not been uncommon for academics, when seeking to identify and recognise the function of public relations, to refer to the activities of Christian religions from previous centuries (Tilson, 2006, 2011; Lamme, 2014; Croft, Hartland & Skinner, 2008). Many of these articles seek to expand public relations provenance based on Watson’s (2008) concept of public relations-like activities (“proto-PR”) – such as positioning Eusebius’ fourth-century biography of Constantine as polemical, hagiographic, and a means of promulgating an image of Christian development (Sheehan & Turnbull, 2012). In New Zealand, public relations has gone further, and academic Chris Galloway has recently applied theological concepts in an attempt to answer the question “What is public relations?” (Galloway, 2013).

As we observed in the introduction to this chapter, Liberation theology “attempts to use the insights of Marxist social criticism to forge a new vision of the Christian message” (Cohn-Sherbok, 1995, p. 1001). Also driving it is Gramsci’s central thought which, through the theological lens, can be seen as “liberation [that] has been privatised at the expense of its social and, political and cultural dimensions” (Clements, 1995, p. 284). In addition to this concept of liberation to public relations, it is important to place it in the context of the development of Liberation theology as expounded by the Australian scriptural scholar Charles Hill (1989, p. 68): “Christian response in faith to Jesus takes a variety of forms because Christians live in a variety of times, places, cultures.” For this chapter it is critical to see that not all publics are exposed to, or live in, a US public relations monoculture driven by the ideology of few individuals.
One of the founders of Liberation theology, Leonardo Boff, has written that it opts for a dialectical analysis that analyses “conflicts and imbalances affecting the impoverished and calls for a reformulation of the social system itself...in order to secure justice for all its members” (Berryman, 1987, p. 88). The concept of Liberation public relations does not propose that PR’s role is to make society equal – rather, in some instances and in some nations it is used a tool of change not by corporations but by governments and those groups that seek social change not for commercial reasons but for the sake of social justice. Liberation public relations contends that the leaders and pioneers of public relations can also be found in social movements and providing counsel on their behalf.

An Australian perspective of Liberation PR

As we have discussed there is a common paradigm among some public relations academics, not just in the US, that public relations is practised in Australia as it is in the US. This assumption is supported by a view that public relations was easily transplanted to Australian society because of the similarity of the capitalist class structures of the two nations. From that perspective, public relations in Australia until the 1950s can be characterised as attempting to play a role in bringing about a better society. This section of the chapter will look at the attempts of PR in shaping society and giving the voiceless the opportunity to be heard – to be liberated. It will suggest how we can accept the pluralist (as opposed to a Marxist or elitist) role of the government within a liberation public relations context in Australia in the first half of the twentieth century.

Australia’s colonial history and its role in the British Empire have shaped its national being. With one procedural act in 1901 the six colonies become a nation. Neither warfare, nor revolt, but a democratic ballot had decided the federation. A massive land with a sparse population of four million had already begun to form its character. It is noteworthy that the US railroad kings and oilmen had no equivalent match in Australia. In fact it was governments that, by the 1880s, ran rail transport in Australia. In 1920 the federal government established and built the Commonwealth Oil Refinery (COR), the only refinery in Australia. Sheehan (2014a) has observed that “many initiatives to build the new society fell to government”, creating an environment in which the “cooperative approach of citizen and state came about in Australia” (p. 5).

Government departments saw the usefulness of public relations, and the key thrust in the early part of the twentieth century was to build the nation and encourage immigration. The commercial nature and use of public relations was negligible, and in a democracy with full enfranchisement it can be assumed that all parties were equally heard.

The key influencer for Australia at this time – culturally, socially, commercially and, as it happened, in PR – was still the United Kingdom. The Empire Marketing Board and its communications had an impact on all parts of the Empire, and its role was to make the British “Empire conscious consumers”. But more than this it encouraged all members to see the “Empire as an ethical concern”. Stephen Tallents influenced many Australians working in London at the time, including the future foreign minister and governor-general, Richard Casey. Tallents (1932) wrote and published, in effect, what was a public relations manifesto: *The Projection of England*. In it, he posited the view that “the new technologies of radio and film could promote a healthy national culture and act as the sextant and compass which would manoeuvre citizenship over the new democratic distances”. In a recent biography of Tallents, academic Scott Anthony wrote:

The ‘Britishness’ of public relations reflected the pioneers’ roots in the public sector. Having worked alongside businessmen and trade unionists during the War, they contrasted the
lack of transparency and ‘shoddy carelessness’ of the private sector with the openness of government.

(Anthony, 2012, p. 13)

Anthony contrasts the patriotic Tallents’ alignment of PR to public administration as an “ongoing infinite process of social development” (2012, p. 14) compared to the cynical Bernays “conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses [and] the executive arm of the invisible government”. It is this thinking that influenced the perception of the role of public relations in Australia at this time, and allows for a liberated approach for PR practitioners at this time, and one that is evidenced through their work.

In the first text to concentrate on Australian public relations campaigns (Sheehan and Xavier 2007) Sheehan outlined the significant campaigns of Australia up to the 1950s. All of them focused on government and social initiatives: immigration, construction of the Snowy Mountain hydro scheme, the building of Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance. As was also the case with the Spanish comparisons, these campaigns of significance rarely had a commercial outcome. Macnamara and Crawford’s (2013) work on the development of Australia Day as a national day of celebration adds further to this claim and shows that the historical record of Australian PR is different to that of the US, and that Australian PR was, in its infancy, liberated from the US paradigm. In this liberation it was formed in a different image – not as a reaction but as something that grew out of the character of a nation that was being newly formed, a nation that was referred to at home and abroad as “the working man’s paradise”.

A point of differentiation between the Spanish and Australian contexts is the early role of the individual practitioner and their own personal view of what public relations might achieve in a free society. This backdrop of freedom in Australia contrasts with Spain’s totalitarian regime. Australia’s first public relations consultant was George Fitzpatrick, and many academics (Harrison 2011; Tymson, Lazar & Lazar 2006; Tymson & Sherman, 1996) credit him with founding the first public relations consultancy in Australia in the early 1930s. However, as Gleeson (2013) has outlined in great detail and using forensic scholarship, Fitzpatrick had engaged in public relations activities since as early as 1918.

Gleeson (2013) documented Fitzpatrick’s early involvement in charitable and community services and fundraising campaigns on behalf of a number of Sydney hospitals – including a major fundraising campaign for Sydney Hospital. Much of Fitzpatrick’s work in this sector was done in an honorary capacity – he received no payment and one charitable organisation went to some lengths to point out that he received “no salary, bonus, honorarium or gratuity in any shape or form” and was himself a generous contributor to the charity.

Fitzpatrick’s inclusion in this chapter is critical; if other writers insist that Bernays (or Lee for that matter) was the first counsel of public relations, that his early career and philosophies entitled him to the accolade of being the father of PR, it is reasonable to make this same claim for Fitzpatrick in Australia. However the contrast in their practice was stark.

A further example of the liberated development of Australian public relations is the extensive campaigns undertaken by social agencies in the 1950s. The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL), the charitable arm of the Anglican Church, employed public relations consultants John and Esta Handfield in a number of successful campaigns over a period spanning 30 years. The Handfields saw work in this sector as critical to their organisation, and to the growth of PR in Australia.

Following Tallents’ and Grierson’s use of film for their public relations work in the 1930s, BSL produced three films focusing on life in the slums around Melbourne. Sheehan has noted (2014b) that “as well as being promotional material for the Brotherhood of St Laurence and its work, these films also raised general awareness of inner–city housing conditions in Melbourne.
at the time”. This campaign’s focus was to pressure the state government to increase the supply of public housing.

Through astute presentation and media management, the Brotherhood brought back to prominence an issue that a jaded press no longer considered news. In early 1955 the campaign gained both government and opposition commitment to the demolition of a notorious slum suburb and the relocation of its tenants to public housing. This campaign signalled a growing sophistication in PR practice, evidenced by its use of research to monitor public reaction and media response to a single issue. Furthermore, the driving incentive behind this was not commercial but rather out of a desire to build a better society – the working man’s paradise.

A Spanish perspective of Liberation PR

The term “liberation” is polysemic. From the perspective of contemporary history, its historical connotations are obvious. During the World War Two, the liberation movements against the Nazi occupation were numerous and ultimately effective. Liberation marked, therefore, the return to democracy in Europe, or rather, in most European countries. In Europe, some of the most eminent professionals and scholars of public relations were leaders of the Resistance and assisted in the liberation of their countries. This is the case of William Ugeux, leader of the Belgian Resistance and the main promoter of a European theory of public relations that was sketched out and led by Lucien Matrat (Xifra, 2012).

But in Spain there was neither liberation nor democracy until 1975. In 1945 Spain was still recovering from a punishing and destructive civil war. This war had brought about 40 years of dictatorship, and under this type of regime liberation movements had no chance of victory – although we can find examples of activism that led to public relations campaigns directly targeted at the totalitarian government of Franco.

Therefore, the history of Spain is an excellent framework for discussing Liberation public relations. Moreover – and even more interestingly – the history of Spain allows us to think about another kind of Liberation public relations that is different to the Australian one discussed previously. This liberation was born from the chains that linked public relations to propaganda – and the battle for the freedom to oppose and be separate from propaganda, a position expressed by the public relations founding fathers, most especially Edward Bernays. The history of public relations in Spain suggests that public relations can grow and develop under a totalitarian regime, regardless of propaganda. Nevertheless, we will not discuss here whether public relations is a (most sophisticated) form of propaganda, since this has been brilliantly argued by other scholars (e.g., Moloney, 2000). Instead, we want to emphasise how public relations can grow and develop under a dictatorship and coexist in different spheres: one of civil society and the other of the state.

Thus, in this liberation of public relations, we free it to exist outside exclusively democratic environments. However, in liberating it from those who consider it exclusively a democratic function, we do not remove this democratic function. We will first provide a brief overview of the history of Spanish public relations under Franco, using the investigations of Rodríguez-Salcedo (Rodríguez-Salcedo & Gutiérrez-García, 2007; Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2008, 2010) as our guide.

Spanish public relations, in the post-civil war era (1939–53), was shaped by public health and tourist campaigns that bore witness to the new political situation: the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco. In the following years, Francoist Spain saw the first PR campaigns, which were then called “prestige” campaigns and which were based on the personal genius of men working in advertising agencies or in the world of broadcasting. In 1953 a Spanish book about the theory of advertising first translated the English term “public relations” to
“general relations with the public” (Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2008, p. 2009). Indeed, the theory and scant literature on the topic seemed to run parallel with practice. The first campaigns, which were developed in the late 1950s under the name of “prestige advertising”, were known as “public relations” only after the pioneer Joaquin Maestre – who founded the first agency fully devoted to offering PR services in Spain in 1960 – met with Lucien Matrat, the father of European PR (Xifra, 2012), in Brussels. This meeting occurred at a time of national paradox for Spain: censorship of the media, yet social innovation and a period of economic openings. The private sector naturally became interested in establishing communicative links with their publics.

During the late 1950s, Western Europe experienced significant economic growth. At the same time, Spain was on the threshold of developing basic industries thanks to the “Plans for Stabilization and Development” [Planes de Estabilización y Desarrollo], which were beginning to bear fruit by early the 1960s. These plans set down the essentials for economic growth within an authoritarian system, and most importantly they relinquished some control thereby gently ushering in a period of liberation. As Rodríguez-Salcedo (2008) suggests, the origins of PR in Spain can be found precisely in this national development, between the mid-1950s and the early 1960s, a period which marked the changing-point for Spain’s economic reality within the Franco regime. Nevertheless, she pointed out “the time conjunction makes the author of this article wonder whether it was industrial development that favored the dawn of PR, or vice versa” (Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2008, p. 289).

Following the creation of the first Spanish PR firm, the 1960s became a decade characterised by the search for professional PR associations. This was indeed a challenge in a post-civil war country where the right of assembly of any kind was neither socially acceptable nor politically permitted. As the profession grew in vitality during the 1970s, it searched in vain for social and official recognition from the fading and mortally wounded state system. The profession also brought about a certain acknowledgement and institutionalization for PR. It was then that the discipline was included, together with advertising, as a university degree course in the curricula of the three newly created Faculties of Communication Science: Barcelona, Madrid and Navarra (Xifra & Castillo, 2006; Xifra, 2007). In 1975 an Official Register of Public Relations Technicians [sic] was finally created. This register defined the profession and set out the conditions for qualifying to appear on the list – thus protecting against professional fraud.

We could make the contrary argument, as Rodríguez-Salcedo (2008) do, that while advertising and PR developed as different fields in other countries, the birth of PR in Spain was different. According to Rodríguez-Salcedo (2008, p. 290):

- It is difficult to separate the historical precursors of advertising and PR in the origins of the activity in the first half of the twentieth century. When, through historical research, PR campaigns were found, it turns out that they were created by advertising agencies or by advertising professionals, and were, at times, hidden under the designations of “social”, “educational” and “prestige” advertising or “propaganda”.

Perhaps this lack of clarity of its roles and content has, in turn, led to the notion that PR is merely a secondary tool of advertising, and that its application is limited to media relations – i.e., sending out press releases, setting up press conferences and keeping up good relations with journalists – and events planning. This may help to explain the profession’s “present identity crisis” (Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2008, p. 290).
However, Franco used public relations for personal purposes. So, public relations can be seen as a government function of the authoritarian public administration. One of the most paradigmatic examples of this was the so-called Operation Catalonia. Franco and his government were based for a month in Barcelona (May–June 1960), and the cabinet meetings were held in the Palace of Pedralbes. During those days the government approved the Barcelona municipal charter and the transfer of Montjuïc Castle to the city council. This was among other measures “to try to improve its relations with the Catalan public opinion” (Polo, 2003, p. 77). Operation Catalonia was an attempt to repair the image affected by the so-called “Galinsoga Affair” that had occurred a month before the visit of Franco.

The incident involved Luis de Galinsoga, editor of *La Vanguardia*, then as now the most influential and widely circulated newspaper in Catalonia. Galinsoga was appointed to his position by the government (Franco personally selected the editors of the main Spanish newspapers) and was well-known for his strong anti-Catalan views.

The statement that unleashed the “affair” was the exclamation by Galinsoga, inside a church, that “all the Catalans are crap”, a statement motivated by the fact that mass had been celebrated in Spanish and Catalan. In response, nationalist activists began a campaign to boycott *La Vanguardia* – publicly destroying copies, throwing stones at the windows of the newspaper’s headquarters, and other actions. As one of the activists, Xavier Polo, remembers it, the most forceful action was to “put toilets filled with human crap on La Ramblas [one of the most famous streets in Barcelona] with the inscription: “Galinsoga, get out of the toilet” (Polo, 2005, p. 185). The affair ended with Galinsoga being dismissed, and the undertaking of an extensive tour and public relations campaign by Franco to repair the damage.

This case is, possibly, the most notable example of how a dictator had to deal with public relations campaigns (or image repair strategies) in order to manage the mood of the public. It is questionable whether this constitutes propaganda, because the aims were not those of the propagandist and because the strategy used was a reaction to a crisis of Franco’s reputation among a specific public: Catalan civil society. The tactics used by Franco during his month in Barcelona were also public relations tactics: visits to Catalan symbolic places (e.g., Montserrat Abbey), visits to emblematic corporations (e.g., Seat [the motor company]), or attending events celebrated in places such as the Nou Camp, the stadium of Barcelona Football Club (a symbol of Catalan nationalism). In reflecting on these events it is difficult to imagine a society further removed from that of Bernays and his ilk in the US.

**Conclusion**

How much can we attribute these events to a liberated form of public relations? In comparing the birth and development of public relations based around the thinking of its widely cited founders – such as Bernays – we have attempted to identify a liberated approach for Spain and Australia. In Australia’s case, this was not an approach consciously driven by commercial demands, but rather by enlightened government and social agencies; while in Spain the liberated approach was in reaction to a repressive autocracy. The practice as invented in these two nations was in fact free (or liberated) from the kinds of commercial constraints that imposed themselves on US practice – a practice that was long-accepted as the dominant paradigm of public relations and its role in societies.

We recommend a Gramscian approach to reconsider public relations not as a US invention developed for corporate propaganda, but rather as an indigenous organic activity responding to circumstances in the development of a nation. This chapter has sought to liberate thinking about
why public relations is created. Who were the pioneers? And what were the circumstances of its inception? We have by no means attempted a comprehensive treatment of liberation in a PR context, but it has been our intention to start a discussion that focuses on the reasons for this way of thinking and the peculiar features that might characterise a different approach to the development of PR in a national context.

In this chapter we have seen how “liberation” has a sturdier political connotation. Through liberation the oppressed break the chains by which the oppressors have hitherto restricted their freedom. In Europe, the example of William Ugeux, leader of the Belgian Resistance and father of Belgian public relations, emphasises the democratic nature of the public relations function. But this is not always the case. In Spain, for example, public relations was not introduced by the Resistance. It was the fascists — in particular those who developed communication functions in the Franco government and did not oppose its methods — who introduced public relations to Spain. Thus, in this chapter's context public relations should also be liberated from the idea that it can only be developed within the framework of democracy. In fact, even those professionals from democratic countries, such as British PR pioneer Toby O'Brien, helped the Franco regime in its public relations efforts to generate public diplomacy and soft power (L'Etang, 2004). And so, it is time to liberate public relations from romantic visions. Public relations is a communicative weapon available to any nation state, from nascent ones and even to stateless nations (Xifra & McKie, 2012). Its techniques can serve propaganda purposes, but these can also generate reputation, attraction and sympathy for totalitarian regimes.

References


