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Recognition, symbolic capital and reputation in the seventeenth century: Thomas Hobbes and the origins of critical public relations historiography

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ABSTRACT

The intellectual history of public relations has not paid attention to British political philosopher Thomas Hobbes. This article aims to close this gap. Following the so-called philosophy of prestige (Carnevali, 2012), the article applies Hobbes' doctrine of natural law and human passions to public relations historiography. Indeed, considering recognition and reputation to be critical elements for human beings in a conflictual society in which gaining power was the main goal, Hobbes anticipated critical public relations thinking. In the Hobbesian system, because recognition is a social capital, reputation management becomes the most appropriate relational strategy to negotiate and gain power. Accordingly, uncertainty characterizes reputation and dealing with it fits into risk management. Although Hobbes never used the concepts of public relations or reputational risk, he was the first thinker to approach social relations from a conflictual perspective and view reputation as a risk deriving from it. Thus, through his approach, Hobbes opened up a new perspective, differing from those of other renowned Renaissance thinkers like Machiavelli or even some of his contemporaries, like Gracián, who also dealt with the idea of reputation.

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1. Introduction

The history of thought is rich in examples –for instance, alienation–in which the intuition and elaboration of a problem preceded the invention of the concept itself and of any specific terminology for it (Carnevali, 2013). Even if it cannot be considered a philosophical or sociological conceptual category, this appears to be true of public relations, at least for some public relations historians. Indeed, as Fitch & L'Etang (2017) point out, for “some authors public information and propaganda are part of the story and may encompass centuries; for others, PR history is limited to the emergence of a commercial occupation and ‘professional’ bodies” (p. 131). Other scholars, like Moore (2014), prefer to use the expression “managed public communication” (p. 3).

In contrast with the above, the idea of reputation –considered as the idea, the consideration or, better still, the esteem that partners of an individual have of his/her value within the interaction, i.e., as a form of social recognition (Honnet, 1996)– is one of those notions in which the intuition and foundation of a problem preceded the creation of the concept and of a precise terminology for it. Although the historiographical tradition considers philosophical knowledge regarding this problem to have appeared with German idealism (Carnevali, 2013) and coincided in particular with the elaboration of the technical concept of *Anerkennung* by Fichte and Hegel (Honnet, 1996; Williams, 1992), it is difficult to believe that

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recognition—the eternal trait of the human condition, at least if one accepts a definition of man as a social being— represents an original discovery of nineteenth-century thought. As Carnevali (2013) puts it, “this idea is only a simplification deriving from a too restricted use of the word recognition” (p. 49).

It would, however, be problematic—at least from the historiographical point of view—to consider Plato and Saint Augustine’s theories on love, or Aristotle’s approach to friendship, for instance, as ancient philosophies of recognition, even if they are antecedents of the current idea of recognition. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to provide a theoretical and historical context that elucidates (1) whether there is a specifically modern approach to the subject of reputation and recognition, (2) whether this approach appeared before Hegel, and (3) whether this perspective can be considered a turning point in the influence the history of ideas had in shaping a historiography of public relations. Following Carnevali (2013), we can assert that the work of Thomas Hobbes allows us to answer both questions efficiently thanks to two aspects that can be considered fully relevant today.

Hobbes first developed a new metaphysical paradigm of subjectivity, centered on the law of individual self-affirmation. This new configuration of the ego finds an exemplary expression in his theory of natural law (Hobbes, 1969), focused on the relationship between power and freedom, and rightly considered as a point of rupture between the anthropology of the ancients and that of the moderns. In parallel with this philosophical turn, modernity was accompanied by important historical and social transformations: the disentangling of recognition in social contexts was turning identity into a stage for conflictual negotiation. Social value was no longer a direct result of individuals’ economic or social status, but necessarily derived from the self—a self defined as a unique, private, personal and non-institutional entity. In a traditional society, recognition is not perceived as a problem because it is spontaneously included in the collective categories of social identity (Strauss, 1936). On the other hand, when individuals begin to free themselves from the chains of the social order, their identity is no longer automatically defined by the roles assigned to it by tradition: it must be constructed in a more autonomous and unpredictable form, through a dialogical and conflicting relationship with others (Carnevali, 2013). Thus, according to Taylor (1989), what was born with modernity was not the need for recognition, but the struggle for recognition and the possibility of failing in this struggle; and, consequently, the uncertain nature of the outcome of that struggle, i.e., reputation. Closely related to the former aspect, the latter refers to the fact that conflict becomes the privileged paradigm of the interpretation of social relations. Hobbes’ most popular expressions and formulas—*homo homini lupus* (a man is a wolf to another man), *bellum omnium contra omnes* (the war of all against all)—among other features confirm that he marked a turning point in the philosophy of conflict. Indeed, because of the tumultuous period in which Hobbes lived and the influence of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*—which was his first printed work, published in 1629—(Sowerby, 1998), Hobbesian doctrine is always immediately associated with the endemic nature of war (Ryan, 2015).

The combination of these two elements is present in all modern theories of recognition (e.g. Butler, 1990; Carnevali, 2012; Honneth, 1996; Ricoeur, 2005). We are therefore faced with a new difficulty—that of elucidating which theoretical models on conflict will be most useful for our study. Conflict is not the same for Hobbes as for Hegel. Even within the same school of thought, we find different approaches to this philosophical and sociological phenomenon. Now, this article is not a philosophical essay, but a work that attempts to legitimize the origins of an intellectual history of critical public relations. Accordingly, our approach is one of the more widely accepted, the main feature of which is to reduce recognition to a strategic model of action and communication for maximizing power and magnifying social status (Bourdieu, 1990; Honneth, 1996, 2002). This model has its roots in the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, and particularly in his books *Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* (1640) and *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (1651). As Piirimäe (2006) demonstrated, Hobbes’ theory regarding the need for an absolute sovereign, put forward in *Leviathan*, rests upon the argument that anarchy is a condition of violent conflict. To Hobbes, it is therefore crucial to demonstrate that, despite being predominantly rational creatures, humankind is unable to arrange and keep cooperative agreements without enforcement by the State.

On the other hand, Hobbes (1969) analyzes human passions in-depth, and establishes one of his fundamental theoretical assumptions: the existence of an essential link between the question of recognition and that of power (Slomp, 2014). We agree with Carnevali (2013) when she argues that the originality of this approach can be found at the level of terminology itself, in the complementary nature of the two terms at the center of Hobbesian anthropology: power and glory, or, in more accurate and current terms, hegemony and reputation.

2. Hobbes on reputation as social and symbolic capital

Reputation was one of Hobbes’ main concerns, and he dealt with it via other philosophical concepts such as glory, honor or recognition, as versions of reputation. In fact, he wrote a text entitled *Considerations upon the Reputation, Loyalty, Manners, & Religion of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury* (1680), in which we find his concern regarding social recognition. However, this text is an autobiographical work and not a crucial source on Hobbes’ approach to reputation. The most important is *Elements of Law*, in which Hobbes breaks from the classical anthropology that had tied the individual quest for pleasure and happiness to an objective and hierarchical vision of good. In contrast, the British thinker studied human nature from a naturalistic and mechanistic perspective, focusing on the metaphysical principle that individuals share with all living beings: endeavor (*conatus*), that is, the effort by which the individual seeks to preserve his own life and gradually increase his power (Hobbes, 1969). In other words, the theory of natural law frees human beings from this inflexible network of

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