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Extending cultural horizons: Political economy and public relations

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we aim to offer a conceptual bridge between political economy and the practice of public relations, which should be helpful especially for practitioners and scholars interested in public relations at a global level. The combination of social, political, and economic forces is powerful, pervasive, and highly influential on the public relations activities of organizations, and we assert that these factors must be examined in unison. In turn, we discuss the role of political-economic relationships and the constraints they impart on the goal-seeking behavior of organizations. We conclude by offering suggestions as to how public relations practitioners and scholars can begin to think about their efforts and linkages with political economy.

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The dawn of the era of globalization has prompted public relations scholars and practitioners alike to take increased interest in how to effectively communicate with “new markets” that are also distant geographically and culturally to their own. *Culture*, then becomes central to our analysis of the nexus between public relations and globalization. At the outset, it is important to note that in public relations, the term *culture* should be viewed broadly beyond the concept studied by anthropologists and ethnographers to include for example, political and economic culture as well (Sriramesh, 2009). For, we believe that political economies affect, and are affected by, societal culture just as media culture is affected by, and affects, societal culture, political culture, and economic culture. In other words these variables are interrelated influencing each other but important enough to be studied individually in order to expand the body of knowledge. In fact, the very definition of the term “public relations” ought to be brought in line with globalization and therefore include a more holistic perspective. That is where we would like to begin this essay.

Sriramesh (2009, p. xxxiv) offered a definition of the term *public relations* that is very pertinent to the needs and challenges of the 21st century: “*Public relations* is the strategic communication that different types of organizations use for establishing and maintaining symbiotic relationships with relevant publics many of whom are increasingly becoming culturally diverse.” The “relevant publics” in this definition are becoming increasingly “diverse and global” and therefore in order to be effective, public relations practitioners should be “well educated and sensitized to communicating in a global environment.”

The “education” that is implied here is also intended to help reduce ethnocentricity in the practice and scholarship. As an underlying current of social, political, and economic forces guides the conduct of individuals, groups, and organizations in ways that often escape notice, culture is hard to define and even harder to measure. The influence of these forces on human behavior is powerful and pervasive, yet subtle and specific, in public and private spheres. These joint forces, directed by state-driven principles regarding the proper roles of government, business, and civil society, comprise a nation’s unique political economy. Along with societal and organizational culture, political economies dictate the nuances of exchange

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relationships at an almost unconscious level. When the outcomes of political–economic structures are judged as socially good and beneficial, their long-standing tenets remain relatively unchallenged.

The high level of interdependence in a fast globalizing world has been brought home in recent months with the ripple, or even mild tsunami, effect that has dogged even the world's strongest market economies. The painful effects of recession are acute and widespread, and they have triggered citizens, policymakers, and institutional leaders to question the fundamental principles of political economies and even offer interesting proposals. A case in point is the pronouncement in May 2009 by US President Obama that he proposes to reform the current tax code “that says you should pay lower taxes if you create a job in Bangalore, India, than if you create one in Buffalo, New York” (EconomicTimes.com, May 5, 2009). One has to juxtapose this proposal with the “free trade” regime so ardently advocated by most of the Western industrialized countries and Republican and Democratic US administrations in recent decades. Activism – governmental, judicial, and civil society – can serve to reinforce or challenge these economic principles. In either case, the implications for public relations are plentiful.

In examining the practice of public relations within the theoretical framework of political economy, we draw from, and build on, previous work (Duhé & Sriramesh, 2009). We argue that public relations is more effective, especially when working on a global scale, for clients, stakeholders, and the society at large when practitioners take into account not only the economic, but also the social and political factors that influence relationship building with publics. We also suggest that political economy offers a suitable venue through which the theory and practice of public relations, especially in the global sphere, can be refined and made efficacious.

1. A political economy perspective

The term “political economy” dates back to the 18th century when economic transactions were becoming increasingly political and subject to government intervention (Caporaso & Levine, 1992). Heads of households, once the sole purveyors of their own want satisfaction, began to rely on heads of state to provide the institutions and rule of law necessary to earn one's livelihood. This fundamental shift in the understanding of what comprised an “economy” sparked vigorous debates regarding the extent to which government should be involved in the economic lives of its citizens. Today, NGOs and civil society are actively engaged in this ongoing debate amidst a background of emerging democracies around the world.

The overarching concept that unites definitions of political economy is the complex and inevitable interplay of social, economic, and political forces in the marketplace and the need to examine each of these elements to understand economic order. Whereas sociology, political science, and economics are disciplines unto themselves, a political economy perspective draws upon contributions of each to recognize the economy as part of a larger social system and study it as such much the same way as the body of knowledge of public relations draws from many disciplines. Following this logic, Caporaso and Levine (1992) described the economy as having “its own social purpose irreducible to those we associate with politics and family life” (p. 29). Political economy is distinguished from pure economics in that “political economies in varying degrees acknowledge the impact of economic developments of political and (to a lesser extent) ideological, cultural, and other societal factors and make it a part of their analysis” (Kollontai, 2002, p. 218). Such a holistic perspective is helpful in taking public relations away from its current ethnocentricity (Sriramesh, 2002) and fits with Gilpin's (2001) view on markets as “embedded in larger sociopolitical systems” (p. 41) and on the inseparability of economics and politics:

The ways in which the world economy functions are determined by both markets and the policies of nation-states, especially those of powerful states; markets and economic forces alone cannot account for the structure and functioning of the global economy. ...The relationship of economics and politics is interactive (p. 23).

We propose that although focusing on individual variables such as socio-cultural, economic, media, or political forces, and their impact on public relations is useful, such a perspective might be limiting. It also needs to be combined with an understanding of the intricacies of how these forces interact with one another and affect the goal-seeking behavior of organizations. That said, a “political economy approach to public relations examines the interplay between organizations and publics with particular attention paid to the conflicts, expectations, and constraints imparted upon relevant parties by a powerful combination of social, economic, and political forces” (Duhé & Sriramesh, 2009, p. 25). At present, the public relations literature offers only a few political economy case studies (e.g., Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Eid, 2007; Weaver & Motion, 2002) and other research that has examined how the practice (and, to a certain extent, scholarship) of public relations has preserved hegemonic power by favoring the interests of the social, political, and economic elite (Berger, 2005; McKie, 2001; Motion & Weaver, 2005; Roper, 2005; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2004). We hope to see the number of studies using a political economy framework grow because of its obvious usefulness to the profession and the body of knowledge. To that end, we have offered a set of research questions as a starting point for global public relations scholarship (see Duhé & Sriramesh, 2009) and hope to see many more studies on this topic so relevant to public relations.

2. Economic relationships, opportunities, and constraints

By virtue of their self-organizing, social nature, economies are webs of relationships related to the pursuit of individual and collective gains. The tie between political economies and public relations is intuitively pleasing, as relationships are the hallmark of public relations theory and practice, and they are the nexus of political–economic structures as well. A vast array of publics, including corporations, labor, media, NGOs, communities, shareholders, regulators, policymakers, consumers,

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