

## **Reputation, propaganda and hegemony in Assyriology studies: A Gramscian view of public relations historiography**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to revisit the robust interest in the history of public relations, including its role on behalf of organizations and communities. Energy for that effort is being generated by recent discussions of propaganda and reputation in Assyriology. Major archeological findings of the second half of the twentieth century revealed texts

explicating a system of public communication, the purpose of which was to legitimize the power of monarchs in the ancient Near East. Founded on written (royal inscriptions) and iconographic materials and influenced by the historical materialism predominant in historiography when Assyriology was at its height, Assyriologists have approached the study of Mesopotamian state ideology via an essentially communicative dimension where the search for legitimacy and hegemony is articulated through communication in the form of impression and reputation management. To that end, Gramsci's state theory, in particular his conception of *historical blocs* –dominant configurations of material capabilities, ideologies and institutions as determining frames for individual and collective action– are deemed useful for a critical view of public relations historiography.

**Keywords:** Assyriology, History of Public Relations, Historiography of Public Relations, Propaganda, Gramsci, Hegemony.

## **Introduction**

The historiography of public relations is a body of knowledge more often based more on recurring events and practices than on big issues whose historical origins can be placed at the origin of humankind. This limitation is the result of a professional view of the discipline, which ignores key concepts of what we understand by public relations — reputation, power, legitimacy, hegemony and propaganda, among other topics— all with a long, enduring history. Disciplines of history, such as Assyriology, have used these concepts to describe the main activity of power elites in the ancient Near East.

By highlighting this fact, this article suggests that Assyriology, in particular the so-called critical Assyriology (Liverani, 1996) that addresses propaganda and reputation in the ancient Near East, refers to activities that could well be part of ancient forms of current public relations. Therefore, we review, first, the role of propaganda and reputation as elements of legitimation and hegemony of the power of the elites of ancient Mesopotamia—the case of king Hammurabi and his code of rules serves us as a good example of this—in the work of the current Assyriology. Then, we propose a broad view of the history of public relations, overcoming some limiting organizational dimensions and extending its scope to communicative forms practiced to legitimize the power of elites, political and aristocratic.

Secondly, we explain how the relevance of the concepts of power, hegemony and propaganda in the current Assyriology is a consequence of the influence of historical materialism in European historiography and especially the theories of Italian Marxist theoretician and politician Antonio Gramsci.

This Gramscian approach to the study of propaganda strategies used to legitimize power and maintain hegemonies is connected with the contributions from some public relations scholars who have used the ideas of Gramsci in their approach to the theory and practice of public relations (e.g. Roper, 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Gregory & Halff, 2013). We reason that the Gramscian approach to ancient Near East propaganda opens a valuable perspective hitherto not contemplated in public relations historiography—the perspective based on the Gramsci's notion of historical bloc, wherein organic intellectuals play a major role as persuaders in the service of power. Thus, public relations professionals can be considered to be organic intellectuals

playing important communicative roles in a given historical bloc; the organic intellectuals of an anterior historical bloc such as the one in which public relations emerged as a profession, can be considered as evidence that today's practice of public relations existed long before the institutionalization of the profession in the nineteenth century.

Briefly, in a journey back in time to the ancient Near East through the Gramscian approach of Assyriologists on propaganda, reputation and hegemony of Mesopotamian elites, we get a historiographical paradigm that can be useful for future research on the history of public relations.

### **Archeology, Assyriology, and public relations history**

Authors of public relations textbooks typically establish the historiographic origins of public relations as a profession that began to establish its identity in the late nineteenth century (Nolte, 1979; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Cutlip, 1994; Seitel, 2013; Newsom, *et al.*, 2013; Wilcox & Cameron, 2011; Cutlip *et al.*, 2006). Although often treated as boiler-plated fact, this U.S.-centered view of the history of public relations has been criticized as being limited in scope and depth by public relations historians, such as Lamme and Miller (2010), Holtzhausen (2012) and Xifra and Collell (2014). Revisionist scholars have argued, although from different perspectives, that it is necessary to abandon the industrialization era DNA of the history of public relations—the result of a limited, exclusively managerial, and U.S. view—and expand the history of public relations to other ages, business models, cultures, political economies, political philosophies, and nation states—even tribes, where the management of impressions, reputation, and

public policies were inherent to the legitimization of power, including statist power (Harari, 2014).

Consequently, this article suggests the need to push beyond the idea that the history of public relations is no older than the seventeenth century. This paper proposes featuring different factors beyond the role of public relations as supportive of modern industrialism and as being inseparable from democracy. It also offers rationale for not limiting such study to either the mere discovery of ancients' use of traditional public relations tools and tactics, or assuming that current models necessarily define the DNA of the profession's history.

Oddly enough, despite their dedication to the industrial era origins of public relations, some public relations textbooks (e.g. Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Wilcox & Cameron, 2011; Seitel, 2013), influenced by Cutlip's (1994, 1995) history of public relations, situate the first activity resembling current public relations in the ancient Near East, specifically referring to "farm bulletins in Iran dating from 1800 B.C. instructing farmers how to sow their crops, how to irrigate, how to deal with field mice, and how to harvest their crops" (Cutlip, 1995, p. X). This traditional view of the first mention of the Mesopotamian origins of today's public relations features tools and tactics but not the larger role of the practice in society. A deeper view, one drawn from Assyriology, can open a window for illuminating more details about the origins of the practice.

Assyriology—usually eclipsed by Egyptology—is the archaeological, historical, and linguistic study of ancient Mesopotamia (ancient Iraq) and of related cultures that used cuneiform writing (Garelli, 1972). The field covers the Akkadian sister-cultures

of Assyria and Babylonia, together with their cultural predecessor, Sumer (Kramer, 1963). The main sources of Assyriological data are written and iconographic texts with a notably rhetorical and persuasive dimension emphasizing the right, obligation, and power of the state to educate the populace about matters of state and individual activities in its support, even its sustainability. Such documents and works of art function to legitimize the power of monarchs (Winter, 2010). Topics such as power legitimacy raise the opportunity to look more deeply into ancient societies to determine whether public relations was an important strategic and managerial option that included tools and tactics, but went far beyond that limited sense of public relations' roots.

Written texts include royal inscriptions and official reports about military campaigns. As Laato (1995) pointed out, most of these texts were deeply influenced by the prevailing political and religious ideology, even military campaigns:

The king was regarded as under the protection of the gods, and this was used to legitimate his position among his own people... It can be said that a social expectation connected with the religious and political legitimation of the king forced the king to provide a response. A successful military campaign provoked a positive response from society, especially when the society had the opportunity to celebrate its success. Official ceremonies were thus arranged when the victorious army of the king returned from battle. Another important way of reporting the victory was through inscriptions and reliefs which were displayed in public places. (pp. 199-200)

Examining documents such as these in the second half of the twentieth century, Assyriologists unanimously used “propaganda” to label the form of strategic public communication used by the monarchs of the ancient Near East. This topic is one of the most studied by Assyriology, as evidenced by the collection of works published by Larsen (1979) including research on channels and messaging to legitimize power used by monarchs of the age. As Siddall (2013) pointed out, the Italian school of Assyriology was influenced by historical materialism and neo-Marxism. It applied the concepts of hegemony and ideology proposed by Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser. These themes focused research mainly on the use of strategically managed communication as a means to gain and augment power legitimation by kings in the ancient Near East.

Vital to the historiography of public relations, such studies suggest that structural elements of public relations, such as prestige, reputation, policies, practices, and publics, were present in the ideologically based communicative processes of early civilizations. Even more compelling to the theme of this paper, some of the most cited Assyriology research, such as that of Porter (1993), use the term “public relations program” (p. 77) to designate the campaigns of some Babylonian monarchs. Thus, unlike that which occurs with other disciplines relating to antiquity, such as Egyptology or Greek and Roman history, the historiography of the ancient Near East takes into account the existence of public relations as ancient practice. Such insights suggest the possibility that public relations is more inseparable from all dimensions and challenges of the human condition than merely representing industrial interests.

Another factor that confounds public relations history is the scholarly entanglements over the concept of propaganda. Ellul (1967) began his book on the history of

propaganda by stating that the first difficulty researchers face when talking about propaganda is that of the definition itself. Should propaganda be applied to the field of public relations? Does that concept, broadly defined, serve to define communication processes and practices that open analysis foundationally to the historical and current practice of public relations? Do such concepts help scholars analyze phenomena prior to the consolidated institutionalization of this profession? As with propaganda, modern public relations has features not found in any past forms of communication, so what analytics are needed to look at and understand the historical origins of a field?

To resolve this situation, Ellul (1967) argued for the need to find a sufficiently ambiguous definition of propaganda that does not take its grounding from current phenomenon. Likewise, scholars interested in the history of public relations either focus on a *contemporary* history of public relations, that is since it appeared as a profession, or follow a historically retroactive path from the current phenomenon in the search for and analysis of similar forms of action and communications in the past. From the latter point of view—defended, for example, by Xifra and Collell (2014)—the fact that we can designate such activities as those carried out by the Mesopotamian monarchs as “public relations” is based on not on present-day templates of the experience, for no monarch of the ancient Near East—or their scribes—used this terminology.

The industrialized terminology of the practice grew up as agencies and bureaus, then textbooks, gave it voice in recent times, especially in the United States. The ideology of later eras linked the birth of public relations to “the first settlements of the East Coast in the 16th century” (Cutlip, 1995, p. 1). The paradigm that seems to appeal to Cutlip is one of democratic, quasi-democratic exchange “in the public forum where thousands of



shrill, competing voices daily re-create the Tower of Babel” (Cutlip, 1994, p. ix). Which if so applied as a template, necessarily obscures the strategic use of communication as ancient practice, one that is arguably fundamental to the power dimensions of human experience. It also begs the question whether the paradigm of public relations necessarily presumes democratic clash of ideas as the rationale for the profession. It suggests that rather than adopting a template set of criteria to identify the nature and origins of public relations, the discipline is best served by looking at the various roles of discourse needed for leadership to be successful and citizens to be joined into the collective effort.

The quandary addressed in this article is whether to limit the history of public relations to a time after the profession was named, to a rationale based on democracy, and to the political economy of modern industrialization. Rather than take a boiler-plated approach to locating the history of public relations, this paper look not for the origin of the tools and tactics, even strategic communication, but even more deeply into the nature of the complexities of legitimacy relevant to various political economies. By applying Ellul’s (1967) approach to propaganda as a window for opening insights into the public relations field, the history of public relations must have two objectives of study:

- a) to show that throughout history there have been phenomena comparable—but not identical—to the public relations we know today (and from this perspective, we must define the specific characteristics of these phenomena in the terms of each society or group they belong to), and
- b) to show how current public relations has roots that are deep because the nature of the human condition demands the practice.

As in the case of botany, the research objective is to track the DNA of a plant to see how it has become what it is today, by evolution or mutation. The object of study of this article is to explore what can be the timeless efforts to achieve “managed public communication” (Moore, 2014, p. 3).

### **Managed public communication in Assyriology: Influence of historical materialism**

The 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s were fruitful decades for Assyriology thanks to in-depth analysis of the rhetoric of power in the ancient Near East, mainly via royal inscriptions (in particular the so-called “Annals”), an authentic source of late Assyriology (Van de Mieroop, 2006; Winter, 2010). These Assyrian royal inscriptions and art must be considered expressions of royal ideology. “Thus, when the king wished to promote himself, his attitudes and interests would have been shaped by, and at the same time affect, the ideology of his times” (Siddall, 2013, p. 140).

These decades coincided with advances in postmodernism and critical studies, which greatly influenced the social sciences, history and Assyriology. Of the social theories to profoundly influence Assyriologists, Karlsson (2013) highlighted critical literary theory and the works of Roland Barthes, Marxism and in particular the contributions of the Italian Communist leader Antonio Gramsci. Research into the rhetoric of power in the Ancient East used the semiotics of Barthes (1967) to highlight the study of signs, language, symbolism, and communication which variously explained the social constructions of Assyrian royal inscriptions (Fales, 1999-2001).

Upon this foundation, Assyriologists enriched their work with other social and communication theories. Indeed, as Siddall (2013) pointed out:

Since propaganda has featured so regularly in studies of Assyrian royal inscriptions we should examine how the ancient evidence correlates with theories of propaganda. Studies of the functionality of propaganda are based on the communication of a message through mass media. Assyriologists have, in turn, typically treated the two major sources of Assyrian royal ideology, the royal inscriptions and artwork, as though they were the political pamphlet (or manifesto) and poster of their time. (Siddall, 2013, p. 140)

In this way, the idea that ideology is aimed at creating and maintaining political power dominates late Assyriology studies. In practice,

...what has been commonly accepted since the late 1970s, was the notion that an influential ideology of kingship existed in Mesopotamia that determined how information about the royal office was produced, and that this ideology... represented a crucial factor to explain how/why Mesopotamia elite cultural outputs... were created by a royal apparatus that sought to acquire, legitimate or enhance its political power. (Fales, 2009, p. 278)

This is one of the most influential assumptions underpinning scholarship because it is often taken for granted in modern theories of ideology that all media are public and therefore the masses must have access to the display of ideology in the media. By that logic, Gramsci's theory "is used in order to understand the primary sources of

Assyriology and their combinatory aspects of power and communication, evolving into state ideology and propaganda” (Karlson, 2013, p. 25).

Through the Gramscian theories of ideology and hegemony, ideology becomes the territory where hegemony is constructed (Hoare & Sperber, 2013). Assyriologists developed a concept of ideology based mainly on its dissemination through “propaganda” (e.g. Larsen, 1979; Liverani, 1979, 1995, 1996, 2001, 2011; Larsson, 2013; Tadmor, 1997; Fales, 2009). This critical analytic approach, led by the Italian school, is essential to public relations history, as it does not take an exclusively manipulative view of propaganda, but rather designates the management of public communication in the service of the ruler’s reputation under the term *propaganda* (Liverani, 1979, 2001).

Therefore, propaganda is, for most Assyriologists, a structural element of ideology. As Siddall (2013) pointed out, the vast majority of scholars use the terms ideology and propaganda interchangeably. For example, Liverani (1979) framed his major study of ideology in terms of its dissemination, shifting between the two terms in the study of textual criticism, propaganda and historical criticism. Fales (1991, 2009) did not always clearly distinguish between the two terms and used phraseology such as “ideological-propagandistic” (Siddall, 2013, p. 135). Machinist (1993), in his study of the representation of Assyria in the book of Isaiah, uses the term *propaganda* for both Assyrian royal ideology and the channels through which it was communicated.

In historical studies, the concepts of ideology and propaganda have been muddied by Marxism and postmodernism. “The Marxist influence is most apparent in the

assumption that ideology is concerned only with power relations and therefore any official expression of ideology must be aimed at gaining and maintaining power” (Siddall, 2013, p. 135). Indeed, as Fales (2009) argued, a Marxist inspection of ideology becomes “a collection of strategies and shared meanings deployed by an elite class to make present realities, including social and economical stratification and political inequalities, appear natural and beneficial to society as a whole” (Ross, 2005, p. 328). This provocative interpretational pathway of modern Assyriology offers insights into royal inscriptions and Ancient Middle Eastern art in a way that illuminates them as public relations.

### **Power, control and legitimation: the archeology of public relations**

As previously stated, in addition to Marx and Engels’ (1888) influence, the writings of neo-Marxists such as Gramsci (1971), with their ideas regarding hegemony, have been particularly influential in the humanities and social sciences. “Gramsci uses key concepts such as hegemony, culture, and common sense in order to argue that ideology and culture are crucial in the ambition of achieving hegemony and establishing what common sense is in a given society. State ideology and propaganda are thus important tools for (re)producing asymmetric relations of power” (Karlsson, 2013, p. 25). Another influential thinker Michel Foucault (1980) sought to undermine the ultimate narrowness of concepts such as truth and knowledge by linking them to power, authority and the marginalization of the abnormal— the different. “The parameters of these influences have led to highly political and cynical assessments of ideology and propaganda” (Siddall, 2013, p. 135). Through such analytical filters, Assyriology studies political power in the ancient Near East (e.g. Garelli, 1972; Grayson; 1999) giving special

emphasis to the interplay of power, control—historically, institutions imply control (Foucault, 1979)—and propaganda.

Whereas propaganda, especially its integration with ideology, can be scorned as dysfunctional to general community interests, that condemnation presumes the hegemony of a democratic, “people” based approach to the matter in crucial ways that are different in principle from, for instance, monarchies and totalitarian states. Set in the timeframe featured in this study, public—statist and monarchial—communication was seen as a necessary tool to build allegiance for a strong leader who was speaking for the interest of the people as a state in completion, even battle, with other leaders using similar strategies. Such communicative efforts were not narrowly flattering of the monarch, but vital to the sustainable viability of society. How, and how wisely, leaders spoke for the interests and well fare of the citizens, but in doing so helped establish the legitimacy of the state through the leaders.

Such insight is crucially relevant to the societal role of public relations as dimensions of power are systematically explored rather than treated hegemonically. Indeed, as Heath (2008) stated, “power and control are two of the molar concepts in the theory, research, and best practice of public relations” (p. 2). For his part, Xifra (2012) has noted that the concept of power in the information society proposed by sociologist Manuel Castells can be used to describe public relations. Castells (2009) defined power as “the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favor the empowered actor’s will, interests, and values” (p. 10). In addition, Heath (2008), from a critical perspective, argued that power and control are related to legitimacy, in that legitimacy “gives an organization (or individual

with a public image) the public right to make arguments relevant to its position, even if that is against current public opinion” (Hansen-Horn, 2013, p. 675). Thus, power as a rubric for assessing the nature and history of public relations is multi-dimensional—and multi-textual. And its DNA is far richer than merely finding instances of tools and tactics of public communication. It is essential to the fostering of the sorts of ideology that make societies functional and sustainable.

*Beyond anachronism: The origins of today's PR practice and soft power*

In the 1970s, Assyriology suffered a critical turn that strongly influenced its research trajectory. Karlsson (2013) pointed out that this critical view was challenged by the so-called Italian school, which shifted focus from the narrations conveyed by the sources to the texts themselves, thereby emphasizing authorship, reader/audience, and political/power background. The texts are primarily ideological and only secondarily historical or literary. A similar shift occurred in the iconographic field, from describing Assyrian royal narrative art as objective and historically-oriented to recognizing its inherently political and ideological character. In some senses, “all art is ideological”, lacking an “objective” history telling, rather carrying ambitions to naturalize the scenes of domination (Winter, 1981).

The leader of the Italian—and critical—school of modern Assyriology (Bahrani & Van De Mieroop, 2004)—is Mario Liverani, who applied the Marxist view of history to his research to explain social relations in ancient Near Eastern societies. As a Marxist historian, Liverani (1995, 1996, 2001) used Antonio Gramsci’s concept of ideology to construct his research on the ancient Near East and especially on international relations

in the Late Bronze age (1600 – 1000 BC); the ideology of power cannot be ignored, either in the ancient texts or in how they should be interpreted and treated (Bahrani & Van De Mieroop, 2004). In this treatment, Liverani (2001) argued that new methods of analyzing Assyriology must be nursed from various disciplines, including “communication theory” (p. 25).

In the study of international relations in the Late Bronze period (1600-1100 BC) Liverani (2001) followed the approach adopted by the Neo-Gramscianist economists when analyzing international relations and the global political economy (e.g. Cox, 1981, 1983). This approach developed the concepts of control, legitimacy and reputation and established associations between them. Through the analysis of language in general and rhetoric in specific used in diplomatic documents of the period, Liverani (2001) studied how the management of impression and reputation operated according to the centralist or non-centralist ideology of political power. As Coombs (2001) reminded us, in public relations today organizations attempt to control what people think of them through image and reputation management, i.e. impression management.

This impression management process is not a phenomenon exclusive to modern times, but rather, as modern Assyriology has demonstrated, was a key element in the legitimation of power in ancient civilizations. In the history of ancient Near East kingship, impression management was a molar part of ruling. In particular, during the Late Bronze period, it was fundamental to the monarchs of the Mediterranean countries—including the Egyptian pharaohs—to demonstrate universal control so as to legitimize their power and reputation before their subjects and gods. However, as observed by Liverani (2001), the relationship between theory (that which was



expressed) and reality was not always an accurate one. It was more important to convey the image of universal control than of precise reality. Hence, universal control was more mental than physical, being an idea built more on persuasion, especially via royal titulatures and commemorative-style events (Liverani, 2001).

This process was carried out in different ways. One was the use of titles and epithets, instruments of legitimizing rhetoric. This use “is well known in every period of ancient Near Eastern history” (Liverani, 2001, p. 23). One example of this use of royal titles and epithets is found in the prologue to one of the most famous Babylonian texts: the Code of Hammurabi (around 1772 BC); this first code of laws in history was carved upon a black stone monument, eight feet high, and clearly intended to be placed in public view.

The prologue to the Code is a *continuum* of epithets that we can condense into just one, that of the just king (legitimizing impression management). The aim is to reflect most of the king’s glorifying functions, including: “to ensure the welfare of his subjects, defending them against external threats; promoting prosperity through appropriate construction projects (particularly of irrigation systems); good management of land and resources; and the encouragement and sponsorship of trade and industry; supporting justice; and caring for the most vulnerable members of society such as orphans and widows” (McIntosh, 2005, p. 183).

From this perspective, the function of the Code has been much debated, but there is growing consensus that it is not a code of laws as such, but a stela presenting Hammurabi as an exemplary just king, a means for his impression management. Moreover, the numerous legal documents of the age “never make reference to the

Code... Instead of a list of legal precepts, the [*Code*] is a vivid expression of Hammurabi as a king who provides justice in his land” (Van de Mieroop, 2006, p.113). This idea is reinforced by analysis of the iconography of the stela where Hammurabi appears standing before the patron god of Babylon—an image that testifies to this King’s special relationship with the divine, “legitimizing his role and special status as righteous ruler” (Winter, 2008, p. 83).

The Code of Hammurabi had a persuasively legitimizing function (Sanmartín, 1999; Charpin, 2003; Winter, 2008). As Sanmartín pointed out (1999), “knowing that power is not only violence but also reputation, Hammurabi did not hesitate to make use of the usual resources; hence his masterful use of publicity channels” (p. 82). This is the same function as that of the titles and epithets of royal inscriptions used by rulers of the Late Bronze age. Proclaiming universal control in cases where territorial domination was limited had the purpose of generating prestige and reputation before the domestic population, a prestige that was accompanied by ideological commemorative-style instruments: parades, monuments, rituals and festivals. The aim was to legitimize power, including its hegemony, both internally and externally (Liverani, 2001).

Hence, the kings of the ancient Near East acted like today’s public relations professionals to utilize communication to create and enact power. “Practitioners create discourses that present and justify their view of the world. When publics accept the practitioner’s view of the world, hegemony is created and publics cede power to the organizations” (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 881). In addition, power is frequently linked to Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony (Coombs & Holladay, 2012) or “domination without physical coercion through the widespread acceptance of particular

ideologies and consent to the practices associated with those ideologies” (Roper, 2005, p. 70). As Gregory and Halff (2013) pointed out, Gramsci (1971) claimed that dominant classes exercised power in different spheres, including the economic, political and cultural, but also and crucially, “this extended to the state and civil society. It was in these spheres that hegemony was created and maintained” (p. 418). Thus, if the origins and manifestation of power is a rationale for public communication, even in autocratic societies, ordinary citizens empower or disempower the monarch by the way, degree, and means of adherence to the ideology. They may, for instance, see such power allotment as the monarch’s ability to create safety and prosperity.

No wonder, then, that the concept of hegemony has formed part of the research agenda of public relations scholars, as Gramscian hegemony “operates... through a power of attraction exerted by the social group on to one or more groups” (Hoare & Sperber, 2013, p. 95). From this standpoint, Nye’s concept of soft power—which “can be studied as the ontological power of public relations practice” (Xifra & McKie, 2012, p. 822)—is an updated version of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony.

As Nye (1990) pointed out: “The ability to affect what other countries want tends to be associated with intangible power resources such a culture, ideology, and institutions. Soft co-optive power is just as important as hard command power” (pp. 165–166). From the same standpoint, Pamment (2014) defined soft power “as attraction and persuasion designed to elicit cooperation, and arises from the attractiveness of a nation’s values, culture, and policies” (p. 52). According to Nye (1990, 2002, 2004, 2008), the ideal of soft power, the legitimizing hegemony of political leadership, is based, barring obvious exceptions, on a race to reach attraction, legitimacy and credibility.

Nye's (2004) approach to this topic is that while both hard power and soft power are necessary instruments for the implementation of a country's foreign and domestic policy, the use of attraction is less costly than coercion. In the ancient Near East—as well in other early civilizations—the role of hard power was crucial, but it intermingled with legitimating efforts, like those shown in this paper, that emerge as a seminal form of soft power. By this reasoning, hard power only has legitimacy through the soft power of hegemony which rationalizes all forms of power. For this reason, the concept of hegemony is useful for analyzing how power is exercised and interconnected with communication—whether public or organizational—during different historical periods.

Hegemony is not the only Gramscian concept that supports a truly critical approach to the history and historiography of public relations. As Macciocchi (1974) indicated, Gramsci's hegemony cannot stand independent of another key concept: the historical bloc. Hegemony unites civil and political society in the same historical bloc, intellectuals having the duty of contributing via ideological diffusion. The key element of hegemony is the historical bloc, the complex framework by means of which the ruling classes hold power over the people via the intermediation of intellectuals and social communication processes (Hoare & Sperber, 2013). The dissemination of and the access to these messages in these communications comprise structural elements of the discourse processes and rely on assumptions about how audiences receive managed public communication.

**Audience reception of managed public communication in the ancient Near East**

One of the most debated issues in studies on managed public communication in the ancient Near East is that of the recipients of messages. This is logical if we consider that all of the documents obtained in archaeological excavations belonged to the political elite, mostly royal palaces, meaning that the political ideology they reflect is the ideology of the ruling class. How, then, was this royal communication propagated? The question regarding the dissemination of (and access to) messages “irrevocably leads to the problem of the possible audience” (Fales, 2009, p. 279).

The essential approach to this issue is one that which establishes a more community reputational rather than self-centered propagandistic dimension of these texts. Weeks (2007) suggested that each Assyrian king attempted to establish for himself a posthumous reputation through the recording of his deeds. In time, these records would be read by a distant successor who would discover his predecessor’s inscription in the ruins of his temple or palace and rebuild it to celebrate the earlier ruler’s name. As Siddall (2013) stated, the strength of Weeks’ thesis “is that it is in accord with the address to the future rulers found in the royal inscriptions and the archaeological context in which some royal inscriptions have been discovered” (p. 142). Furthermore, we have testimony of the addressee’s adherence to the practice. For example, Shalmaneser I included a record of rulers who had rebuilt the E-hursagkurkurra in Aššur before him. When he rebuilt the temple, he redeposited the previous rulers’ texts in its foundations (Grayson, 1987).

Other scholars, such as Porter (1993), recognized that Esarhaddon tailored the content of his building inscriptions in Babylon to suit local traditions and unique sets of citizens. To Porter, this regional difference in the building texts is evidence that they were part of

a public relations program aimed at connecting the local population to the author of the texts. Most Assyriologists, including those of the influential Italian school, suggest that the addressees were just a few individuals, as at this time literacy was confined almost exclusively to scribes and some texts were not even visible (Liverani, 1995, 2001).

Since the address of these documents was so narrow, how is it possible to speak of “propaganda” or “public communication”? Liverani (2001) provided one answer:

The most technical, detailed, and complex texts were directed to palace circles, mostly scribes and high officials; only they had access to them and understood their implications; only they were professionally interested in them; and the king needed to keep them convinced and supportive on the official ideology... But there were more channels for a wider diffusion of political ideologies throughout the country: verbal, visual, and ceremonial channels, with even architecture playing a role... So the texts... were not accessible to the whole population, but a sufficient reflection of them reached everybody according to his cultural level and political involvement. (pp. 12-13)

Were those intermediaries who conveying the content of these vital texts early “public relations professionals”? Pressing the question from a slightly different vantage point, Baines and Yoffee (1998) do not believe the term propaganda to be relevant to the ancient Near East (or to ancient Egypt) because of the populace’s restricted access to sources of ideology, which they call high culture; that is, “the production and consumption of aesthetic items under the control, and for the benefit, of the inner elite of a civilization, including the ruler and the gods” (p. 235). High culture is a

“communicative complex”: it enacts, celebrates, and transmits meaning and experience. It incorporates writing systems as well as artistic production; in doing so it may mark a distinction between writing as a specialized medium of expression and as a broad instrument of social control. The spiritual, moral, and intellectual content communicated in high culture may be realized in visual art and architecture, in which case it can be largely independent of verbal form. In ancient civilizations, elites control “symbolic resources in such a way as to make them meaningful only when it is they who exploit them” (Baines & Yoffee, 1998, p. 234).

This has an interesting parallel with Gramsci’s notion of the historical bloc and intellectuals’ role in it, which Baines and Yoffee (1998) concluded to be central to the cultural hegemony of the age. According to Gramsci (1971), cultural hegemony is a concept that describes the cultural domination by and of a group or class and the role that everyday practices and collective beliefs play in establishing systems of domination, often what is called soft power (O’Brien, 2011).

In 1848, Karl Marx proposed that dialectical changes in how the economy functions in a society determine its social superstructures (culture and politics), and the composition of its economic and social classes. To this end, Gramsci (1971) proposed a strategic distinction between a war of position and a war of *manœuvre*. The war of position is an intellectual and cultural struggle wherein the anti-capitalist revolutionary creates a proletarian culture whose native value system counters the cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie.

To Gramsci (1971), any class that wants to take political power must overcome its simple economic interests, exercise moral and intellectual leadership, and build partnerships and commitments with a range of social forces (Portelli, 1972). Gramsci (1971) called this union of social forces the historical bloc (success in this war of position would allow the communists to start the war of *manœuvre*, or the insurrection against capitalism, with the support of the masses).

Such hegemony is variable in time and space. It is inseparable from the historical bloc (Portelli, 1972), an overall historical situation where we distinguish between, on the one hand, a social structure—the classes—which is directly dependent on the productive forces and, on the other, an ideological and political superstructure. Structure and superstructure are united through the actions and expressions of intellectuals (Châtelet & Pisièr-Kouchner, 1981).

Within this action by intellectuals, communication and persuasion stand out (Hoare & Sperber, 2013). The “new intellectual [*is a*]... ‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 10). Persuasion plays an integral role in the hegemonic process (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). At the heart of the historical bloc, the intellectuals of the historically ruling class exercise the power of attraction—their soft power—on intellectuals of other social groups so as to eventually unite and identify them with the ruling class.

This role of situated intellectuals in the process of ideologically developing both the superstructure (civil society and political society) and structure (economic relations with regard to production and exchange) (Gramsci, 1971) is the same as that developed by



the elite in the ancient Near East. The managers of reputation, impressions, and legitimacy, therefore, were temple officials, private landowners, community elders, and wealthy traders, as well as high military and administrative officials (Baines & Yoffee, 1998). In the historical bloc of ancient Mesopotamia, physical access to the inscriptions was limited. The level of literacy in the ancient Near East was so low, the vast majority of the population was excluded from reading the royal inscriptions first hand (Charpin, 2010). “Thus, outside of the educated elite it is impossible to argue that the information in the texts could have been understood without an intermediary” (Siddall, 2013, p. 141). Those intermediaries were the intellectuals of the Mesopotamian historical bloc: The legitimating intelligences of the society.

### **Conclusions and limitations**

Central to the analysis of this paper, the DNA of public relations can be identified and analyzed by gaining insights into the concept of ideology, understood as an infrastructural and tailored system of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts) with an existence and a historical role within a given society, where the generation mechanisms of these representations, such as managed communication, play an essential role (Martin, 1996). For that reason, Gramsci’s concept of historical bloc is a fruitful methodology for studying public relations because it clarifies the analysis of cultural and political hegemony which are unique to different periods of history.

In this article, we have seen how applying the Gramscian historical method can be used even for the analysis of other ages, as in the case of state ideology in the ancient Near East, that is, the study of archaeological finds in that area of the world. Since these

findings constitute channels of public communication, a critical approach to the history of public relations based on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci may distinguish between when we are dealing as examples of pure propaganda, more manipulative in nature, versus those those where the intention was to manage impression and construct a public image via rhetorical resources typical of persuasion (hegemony) and still others where we are facing cases of mere domination and manipulation.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is built on the idea of intellectual persuasion, negotiation, and propagation (Hoare & Sperber, 2013). Since hegemony is fundamental to the human condition, approaching it from the perspective of public relations may offer a new opportunity to "overcome the organizational conception of public relations" (Xifra & Collell, 2014, p. 2014). The form of political economy, such as industrialization, is not the only marker of public relations history. A critical view of public relations historiography should be used to investigate the processes of hegemony and/or domination, as well as existing forms of activism, in every age so as to determine the role of communication and persuasion: reputation, impression management, and public policy.

Insights can be gained to understand the extent they were comparable processes to those used today by corporations, nation-states and other organizations to impose their ideological hegemony over their environment. If power resources and legitimacy are appropriately the focal points of public discourse, a case can be made that quasi-democratic processes can actually be more dysfunctional to the interest of ordinary citizens than monarchies. If power elites shape the discourse narrowly, even though they allow ordinary citizens to "participate" in the discourse does not prevent it from being

deceitful and self-serving. In that regard, the ideological reputation management of monarchs, “trust and believe in me,” can be more fully functioning, because it is more straight forward and authentic. Monarchs cannot escape easily the responsibility for being the focal voice in such matters of agriculture, war, and commerce, as a test of their legitimacy as the viability and sustainability of their society.

Through its use of the term “propaganda,” influenced by the pejorative connotation it attained with the dictatorships of the twentieth century (Liverani, 2006), Assyriology has generated debate on whether this use is in fact correct (for example, Liverani, 1996, 2001; Fales, 2009; Siddall, 2013). Prominent members have chosen to use other terms such as prestige, reputation (Liverani, 2001) or even public relations (Porter, 2013) to refer to managed public communication. In other words, Assyriologists have not approached the issue from the point of view of Gramscian hegemony: the relationship between rulers and ruled is a hegemonic one, where communication and reputation play a key elements of attraction.

Limitations of this study relate to the long road still to be traveled if we are to discover how messages became public in the ancient Near East. One of the main causes is the precariousness of the material remains that have reached us from these civilizations. The great Mesopotamian monuments, palaces, walls, temples, ziggurats, etc. have been preserved very poorly due to their being built with adobe, a material that, unlike stone, almost completely disintegrates over time (Liverani, 2011).

A second limitation is the long historical period covered by Assyriology—over 3,000 years (Garelli, 1972)—so that even in terms of legitimizing rhetoric and royal

propaganda, it is impossible to generalize about what happened in the third millennium BC—at the beginning of Sumerian civilization—and forms of public communication from, for instance, the early neo-Assyrian state (9th century BC).

A final limitation is the lack of knowledge about the political ideologies of the lower classes in the ancient Near East, “and the little we do know is always filtered through the texts of the ruling elites” (Liverani, 2011, p. 13). Despite this and other limitations, Assyriology offers accurate, if incomplete, data for constructing a history of public relations in antiquity and applying a critical perspective of analysis to other times of history.

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