**Le relazioni pubbliche e la costruzione Europea**

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*Nell’aprile 2003 l’autore tiene a Londra, su invito dell’Institute of Public Relations inglese, una conferenza all’Assemblea Annuale dedicata al possibile ruolo che le relazioni pubbliche potrebbero svolgere per consolidare la costruzione Europea. Il testo viene poi pubblicato dalla rivista on-line Euprera.*

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This intervention can be divided in three parts:

* The European political scenario as I see it today.
* The reasons why I believe we should be proactively involved as a professional community.
* What and how, in my view, we could realistically contribute

The European political scenario as I see it today.

It seems clear that never before, since its inception in the early fifties of the last century, has the concept of a united democratic Europe been such a relevant and cogent one.

At the same time, and not surprisingly, it has never been so far from reality.

The dramatic divisions over the second Gulf war, within Europe and across the Atlantic, have visibly confirmed what for some had been clear for many years, and for most, evident since the fall of the Berlin wall:

* without a concerted inter-national (foreign and defence) policy;
* without transparent and fully democratic institutions (what-ever this may mean today),

Europe is basically today only a common market.

A fairly effective market at that.

A market from which all EU members have greatly, at one time or another, benefited (admittedly some more, others less).

But a market which is increasingly criticized

* for not being sufficiently transparent in its decision making,
* for having nurtured a hugely expensive and opaque eurocracy with insufficient political control; and nevertheless, until recently, generally accepted by public opinion as a positive feature of our daily life.

It is not a state, it is not a federation of states, nor is it even a coordination of states.

It is a market.

Geopolitical developments from the early nineties have also convinced a large number of European elites that even this generically welcome common market might not be able to survive and flourish if it is not integrated by some strong and convincing political and democratic substance.

Following the Treaty of Maastricht, the treaty of Nice and, more recently last week’s Athens new entries celebrations, we Europeans now face three utmost and daring challenges:

* the creation of a real constitution, driven by public consensus and fully democratic institutions
* the enlargement to include an additional 10 member states,
* the consolidation of a common currency.

All this in our most difficult moment of political division and visible and growing estrangement of public opinion.

It is as if Europe gained access into a Casino with a substantial sum and decided to bet all accumulated resources on one single number...

Before proceeding let me set out two assumptions.

The **first** is that we must agree to lay to rest the fallacy which tells us that everything will revert to normal, and in particular that, even if everything else fails, European economic integration will continue regardless.

Not true… history does in certain occasions turn back.

Nor can we expect to wait for a playback of the fifties, sixties and seventies where the most relevant force then driving the common market was the US-led complex of multinational companies.

It is clear that US interests are today focussed on other parts of the world and that, under-standably, both the State and the Commerce Departments, although interested in and influential on our development, after the sorry experiences of European involvement in the Balkans, the Middle East and other parts of the world, have decided to leave it up to us to decide where to go and what to do.

While it is clearly too soon to predict the future of the UN or which countries will be involved, besides the US and the UK, in the reconstruction of Iraq, we have no justification to use, as we now seem to be doing, these two variables as an alibi to avoid our responsibilities.

To the contrary, these variables are only two more cogent reasons to act quickly and effectively to put our house in order.

There are no visible ‘deus ex machina’ today pushing for an acceleration of the European integration process. Neither external nor, ironically, internal.

In short: if we are not successful in convincing our own people that this process must accelerate, our present global political irrelevance will spark a simultaneous implosion as well as a centrifugal process which will inevitably endanger those appreciated and accumulated benefits of belonging to one single market.

My **second** assumption is that never before has the UK so much needed to proactively accelerate and actually lead the European unity process, while reaffirming and consolidating, as it recently has, its strategic Atlantic alliance, thus ensuring that disturbing breeze of ‘benign neglect’ one feels coming now and then from the other side of the ocean does not become a constant feature of Euro-Atlantic relations.

Only an extreme euro sceptic could not see this urgent need, and the full political rewards which could well derive from those highly delicate risks taken by your Government in these recent months.

France and Germany, even if for different motives, have also every reason to work in favour of this scenario and, as much as it may count (admittedly little..), Italy’s coming presidency of the EU seems fully oriented in that direction, and then… it will be Ireland’s turn.

The reasons why I believe we should be proactively involved as a professional community.

And now to us as professionals…

I would like to briefly identify that global public relations community to which we all belong, one way or another, aware or unaware as we may be.

Let us accept, as a broad definition of public relations, that we assist individuals or organisations from the private, the public and the social sectors of society in the management of their relationships with interested and aware stakeholder groups, as well as with other not necessarily interested nor even aware publics whom we however believe have influence on the objectives our employers or clients intend to pursue.

We can guesstimate, with the same approximation of many other estimates normally taken for granted simply because they appear in the FT or in the Economist, that some 3 million individuals belong to our enlarged global public relations community.

Of these, not more than 250 thousand consciously belong, as we all do this evening, to professional associations.

By breaking down these figures, in Europe some 400 thousand belong to the first category but only some 40 thousand to the second.

The issue of our professional identity and its relationship with its public perception has always haunted us since I can remember, and it is no wonder that this issue persists and in fact becomes even more relevant as elites from all over the world gradually understand the growing impact our activities have on the public discourse and policies, as well as on people’s opinions, attitudes, decisions and consumptions.

Nor should we be at all surprised, if we realise that less than ten percent of our colleagues are sufficiently aware of their participating to this enlarged community to belong to a professional association.

This, of course, does not mean in any way that the large majority of those 90 percent who do not belong operate with questionable methods, nor does it mean that all of those 10 percent who do belong operate impeccably.

The issue here is quite different:

it is the awareness, the reliability, the usefulness and the effectiveness of professional associations like ours…

We must be fully aware that if one took a poll amongst our more far away kin, we would also be defined as ‘old boys whist clubs’, ‘lazy environments with secluded paths to professional success’, ‘closed doors for new and odd thinkers and doers’ and, more to the point, ‘useless, onanistic dens’.

Having said this, it is also important to acknowledge that in recent years the European public relations community, and specifically its education and research segments, have gone a long way towards the identification and consolidation of a European body of knowledge whose impact will be inevitably strong in the founding of a specific professional identity, similar and at the same time diverse from the traditional American body of knowledge.

Thousands of students graduating from European universities have this in their minds vividly, quite unlike my generation and the one that followed it. The reason for this is possibly that academics and researchers have been less constrained than professionals by the overwhelmingly American orientated structure of the European offer system dominated by US multinational agencies and which is also so influential on corporate public relations professionals.

This cultural influence is far less true if one looks at the public and social sectors of our profession (a majority in numbers, at least in Europe) but it is fair to say that professional associations, by and large, have so far had eyes mostly for the corporate and the consultancy sectors of our profession.

Helas! Nor should we forget that, one one side, US’s most respected academic, James Grunig, privately states that one of the worst effects of US cultural dominance in these last fifty years is the global export and implementation of the one-way, asymmetric and Barnum model of public relations, while, on the other side, the 2002 Bled Manifesto, possibly the most advanced statement for a European public relations identity, identifies the term ‘public’ in public relations not as ‘relations with publics’ but as ‘relations with the public sphere’, right along the lines of Jurgen Habermas’s thought.

Professional associations in Europe have had and have today mixed identities.

IPR undoubtedly is a bench-mark example of how an effective association should be, but other associations operate in different contexts and are more erratic in their operations.

Cerp, the European association of associations is only intermittently healthy and its main passive purpose today appears to be to keep associations in touch with each other and to offer a mild sense of belonging to newly formed associations emerging from the eastern European countries. And, clearly, these are very limited ambitions.

Yet the European public relations community is at an important turning point: tens of thousands of students coming out of university with pr degrees and requesting a more substantial and less casual working environment; the absence of standards, regulations and rules for the large majority of professionals belonging to a profession which is recognizably growing its direct impact on society; a questionable perceived identity in public opinion strongly supported by a conflictual inter-relationship with journalists which is at least as difficult as the frequent questionable practices of many of our colleagues.

All these variables, and many more, tell us that it is now or never…we must do something about ourselves now, not tomorrow. Now.

As much as it may seem contradictory, irrelevance is possibly the most serious risk we face today as the management of stakeholder relationships is becoming a hot topic in every organisation and everyone else and his cousin are claiming responsibility for it.

The risk is thus the worst of all for a professional community: perceived irrelevance.

What and how, in my view, we could realistically contribute.

If we consider ourselves as the core part of an enlarged subject aiming to affirm its identity, I would dare say that by consciously applying the methods we often suggest to our employers/clients, we should look at achievable objectives.

We should aim at modifying existing perceptions of our profession by beginning to attract the attention of those 40 thousand first and then those other 360 thousand members of our community who are out there every day in every European city doing public relations and thus making a living by relating with others, for the most…influential members of communities.

You will surely appreciate how this potential army of public relators could/would help us get the message across.

This implies identifying them, attracting their attention, listening to and relating with them.

This is our first and foremost stakeholder group, our own kin.

They are clearly not currently interested in an invitation to join us, otherwise they would have done so already.

Their attention could however be attracted in a well thought through invitation to actively participate to a well conceived, thoughtful, measurable Europe-wide public relations effort to support and accelerate the integration process, if they are led to realise and be conscious what is truly at stake for themselves and their day to day life.

They, in turn, could be a terrific multiplying force incredibly spreading appropriate and convincing messages to their own professional and personal relationship systems.

In the mid tens of the last century, Woodrow Wilson had the aim of convincing the American people that it was necessary to participate in the first world war.

George Creel, Ed Bernays and tens of other of our better colleagues embarked, with nowhere near the communication and financial means available today, in that four-minute-men campaign you are well aware of, and to which most historians today attribute that rapid change in public opinion which allowed the Wilson White House to modify its policy and help the entente win its war against the central empires.

This is certainly not the place to well on details but you can certainly envisage what a fascinating task this could be to prove throughout the whole of Europe and elsewhere:

1. that public relations is truly and terrifically effective in the one-on-one or one-to-few relationship context;
2. that the European public relations community is seriously concerned and engaged in a never so huge one-on-one campaign in favour of a cause which is urgent, necessary and fruitful and ties up with EU thought leaders in the political and academic communities, seeking and obtaining funds from concerned and highly worried corporate representatives of the European business and financial communities.

To summarise and conclude therefore my message to you goes something like this:

* the challenges facing Europe today are terrific and if they are not met we risk losing the benefits we have so far experienced,
* we must inform our colleagues and convince them to, in turn, inform their relationship systems what these benefits actually are as nine Europeans out of ten are only minimally aware of them,
* we must tell them why:
	+ if the Euro zone is not enlarged,
	+ if the Constitution will not ensure an effective democratic system by involving concerned Europeans in the process,
	+ if the entry in the EU of ten-now and subsequently more countries will only create more complex governance issues as well as social, economic and personal mobility and security problems,

*all of today’s benefits will shortly disappear and we shall progressively proceed towards being ineffective, irresponsible and non influential vassals of America’s empire.*

Ironically then Europe and Public Relations face the same risk: irrelevance.

Yet we are in a better position than anyone to avert those risks.

To do so we need to face up to them and agree a collective Europe-wide programme to meet their challenge.

Please friends and colleagues let us wake up, ‘smell the coffee’ as the Americans say and honestly recognise the nature of these challenges - and work together to meet them.

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***How PR Can Contribute to the Political Development of Europe?***