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Challenging hegemony and power in the sixteenth century: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude as antecedent of critical public relations theory

Abstract

This article applies La Boétie's concept of voluntary servitude to public relations historiography through a historic-critical analysis. Written in the same Renaissance era than other early history books of the history of public relations such as Machiavelli's *The Prince*, *The discourse of voluntary servitude* (1552-1553) reveals to the publics the power that would lie in their refusal to engage with the authority (or in other words, the state, the prince or the monarch). The result is that, through a postmodern approach of emphasizing dissensus, the concept of voluntary servitude and its encouragement of activism and passive resistance can be considered an early precedent of critical public relations theory. Furthermore, without being judgmental, La Boétie invites us to a reflection on the role of self-responsibility of the publics in their power relationships with organizations.

Keywords

Public Relations, propaganda, critical theory of PR, voluntary servitude, civil disobedience.

1. Introduction

In recent times, there has been a renewed interest in the history of ideas in public relations. A number of articles has delved into how many of the ideas that have shaped the public relations field were already present in the history of Western thought several centuries ago. (And, although there are a few examples from other cultures in the scholarship [Moore, 2014; Munshi, Kurian & Xifra, 2017], there is an imbalance in this regard that should be corrected in the future). The premise of all these works is that, even if these authors did not have a notion of public relations, and many current and past practitioners were not familiar with these authors, their ideas impregnated the culture and, therefore, public relations as an interdisciplinary discipline.

In recent years, we have moved from Machiavelli as the main proto-historical precedent of the PR counselor (Moore, 2012) to include other authors mainly from the 17th century. A good example is Baltasar Gracián's *Pocket Oracle* (1995 [1637]) and *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (1992 [1647]), where the Spanish author's focus on substance and good deeds as the basis for a good reputation is in agreement with contemporary ethical principles of public relations and in multiple ways contradicts the author of *The Prince* (García, 2017). Xifra (2017) recently emphasized how the work of Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century considered recognition a form

of social capital and, therefore, a way to gain power. Likewise, the work of Benedict of Spinoza has taken on new relevance because of its vindication of the publics' rationality and detachment in comparison with Machiavelli, Bernays and Walter Lippmann (García, 2015a). These European philosophers are concerned with communication and power. They adopt the perspective of the Prince (Machiavelli), King (Gracián) or government (Spinoza) and explore the best ways for historical figures, such as the Medici family or King Ferdinand of Aragon, to manage perceptions in order to gain and retain hegemony over their subjects.

The history and analysis of more contemporary ideas influencing the PR field has flourished as well (Ihlen, van Ruler, & Fredriksson, 2009; García, 2010; Moore, 2014; Wolf, 2018), and contributed to generating a multidisciplinary body of PR scholarship rich in philosophical and sociological thought. There is a power paradigm based on learning from the ideas and actions of philosophers and historical figures that can serve managers in current institutions and corporations, especially in managing and controlling stakeholders. McKie (2005) argues that contemporary European philosophers, such as Habermas with his Theory of Communicative Action, concerning the ideal speech situation and democratic communication, where the field of public relations found inspiration to develop one of its most popular contributions to the field of communication: Grunig's two-way symmetrical model. Its evolution, the Excellence Theory (Grunig, 1992), was the normative ideal of public relations from the mass media era to a hyperconnected digital world.

That period has ended, however, because of the Excellence Theory's limitations and lack of a basis in reality. Scholarship criticism has been abundant in recent times. Pieczka (2006) considers it impossible for public relations to serve the interests of organizations and publics equally because, as part of the dominant coalition, it prioritizes the interests of top management. Moreover, the dynamics of person-to-person dialogue do not apply to the relationship between organizations and individual citizens. When the participants do not share common objectives and communication is rhetorical, because relationship management does not generate affection, it is difficult to expect real dialogue to happen (Pieczka, 2011). McNamara (2009) argues while the internet seems to be a perfect ecosystem for the development of dialogue and interaction between organizations and publics, the reality is that "public relations practice remains grounded in a control paradigm focused on one-way, top-down monologue" (p. 11). Laskin (2012) criticizes its utopian element. L'Etang (2008) suggests that even Corporate Social Responsibility has a main purpose of controlling the public's will and avoiding public interference in an organization's plans. In sum, a number of the criticisms that the symmetrical ideal received from public relations scholars (especially after 2005) challenged a communication perspective not dissimilar to the ones of Machiavelli or even Gracián where hegemony is the most appreciated outcome. They all have in common a critique of the Excellence Theory that ultimately sees activists as "constraints or problems that public relations must address" (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 882) and the cause of "turbulent environments" (Holtzhausen, 2007) for organizations.

The rise of critical theory, mainly thanks to the works of McKie and Munshi (2011) and Coombs and Holladay (2012), poses an alternative to the Excellence Theory as the theoretical paradigm where the role and study of activism becomes more relevant. La Boétie's *Discourse*, with his emphasis on publics and their potential to be at the center of the communicative process, squares well with this new paradigm.

2. A precedent for PR activism

The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude can be considered a major exception in its time concerning its approach to power and its precedent of activism in the proto-history of PR. Indeed, written approximately in 1552-1553, twenty years after Machiavelli's *The Prince*, this book challenges Machiavelli's autocratic conception of power during the Renaissance, and by the same token Gracián and other similar authors who played the role of *consiglieres*.

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Personifying this in the figure of the “tyrant,” La Boétie challenges the absolute power obtained by kings and princes to the point that he considers the people (or “the stakeholders,” in modern PR terminology) responsible for their own slavery under the despot. La Boétie feels contempt for the tyrant, but also disdain for his victims and their lack of will to rebel against him. “How does he have any power over you except through you? How would he dare assail you if he had no cooperation from you?” (La Boétie, 2015, p. 48). For La Boétie, rebellion does not involve violence but rather civil disobedience, which he finds much more powerful than tyrannicide.

If La Boétie had lived in current times he would be talking about activism. According to Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, activism can be defined as “a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue.” In the PR domain, Sriramesh (2009) defined activist publics “as those who chose to become ‘relevant’ for an organization even when the organization does not choose them as a stakeholder” (2009, p. 6). Therefore, La Boétie is suggesting subjects become activists (*ergo* relevant) in order to free themselves from the tyrant (or a primitive form of the state in the 16th century), because what can be more controversial than being free or not?

The importance of activism for the PR field has been increasingly emphasized in recent times. Critical public relations theory keeps gaining ground and agglutinating scholars from diverse theoretical traditions and methodologies (L’Etang, McKie, Snow & Xifra, 2016). Young (2016) notes that “public relations activity is central to activism” (p. 470). Munshi, Kurian and Xifra (2017) rebel against the alignment of PR with elite publics and call attention to how the power of elites has been resisted by non-elites.

An analysis of the work of La Boétie adds to recent articles that anticipate critical public relations thinking (Xifra, 2017) and offer a new perspective, such as the concept of voluntary servitude, on the link between obedience and power. While advocates of critical public relations theory have criticized the obsession of orthodox public relations approaches with forming part of the dominant coalition, controlling stakeholders and maintaining power, the blame has been put on organizations rather than victims. In other words, the publics have been excused as the innocent victims and naïve audiences of organizational manipulation. That is not the case with La Boétie’s voluntary servitude. He holds the public accountable for their own position. He nearly accuses the people (and by extension the reader) of collaboration. “What could he do to you if you yourselves did not connive with the thief who plunders you?” (La Boétie, 2015, p. 48).

However, not everybody has read La Boétie’s concept of voluntary servitude in the same way. Hegel (1991 [1820]) also challenges voluntary servitude, arguing individual freedom consists in not being forced to accept anything as valid unless the individual conscience, will and reason give their consent. If individuals accept the role of the state, or the tyrant or the monarch for the purposes of this argument, it is because there is some rationality to it, and even under the rule of a monarchical quasi-state individuals can satisfy their own needs of work, production and property in at least a limited way. Likewise, Foucault (1983) suggests there are no free or rational bad choices, like voluntary submission to a despot: “The crucial problem of power is not that of voluntary servitude (how could we seek to be slaves?). At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom” (pp. 221–222). More recently, Buron (2015) has found in La Boétie a legitimizer of royal power, validating “his right to use sacred legends to assert his reign, provided that this propaganda is for the people” and, therefore, “subordinating the value of the government to the judgment of some of the subjects, implicitly considered as the only legitimate ones” (para. 54).

3 Pioneering civil disobedience

La Boétie was only eighteen when he wrote it and died when he was only thirty-three. Despite his short life, La Boétie was an accomplished and precocious man. He was a law scholar, a diplomat, a judge, a humanist and a political philosopher. All those facets of his personality show in his work. Indeed, *Politics of disobedience* is at the same time a vindication of human beings' freedom of will and their voluntary submission. La Boétie challenges the role of the state and also uses "universal, speculative and abstract" (Rothbard, 1970) arguments instead of the traditional legal and historical data used by the Huguenot writers, rooted in French law, to question the role of the French state. Interestingly, considering La Boétie's law education (he wrote the book while he was a law student at the University of Orleans), *The Discourse* was circulated in manuscript and never published as a book. Rothbard (1970) speculates that his radical views were probably the reason for the author's withholding it from publication.

La Boétie's activism promoted the inalienable rights of persons, the same rights affirmed in the preambles to the French and United States Constitutions more than two hundred years later. His ideas on civil disobedience inspired passive resistance activist movements such as Gandhi's and the anarchist movement (Rothbard, 2015). The author of this paper coincides with Rothbard (2015) concerning the modernity of La Boétie's analysis of the power of propaganda in the creation of consent and voluntary servitude, as well on how his ideas on obedience and power influenced activist mentality on counterfeit propaganda.

4. Voluntary servitude as tension between power and obedience

Although written in the same era as Machiavelli or Hobbes, *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* does not participate in the negative anthropology of many thinkers of this period. Machiavelli sees the world as a fight for power, where human beings are "ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers" that "shun danger and are greedy for profit" (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 54). Likewise, Hobbes is known for coining fatalistic formulas such as *homo homini lupus* [a man is a wolf to another man] and *bella omnium contra omnes* [the war of all against all]. La Boétie (2015) is optimistic and considers freedom, as it occurs in the animal world, to be a natural state for human beings: "if we led our lives according to the ways intended by nature and the lessons taught by her... we should adopt reason as our guide and become slaves to nobody" (p. 50). La Boétie's conception of human being sounds almost Roussonian. The tragedy, for La Boétie, is that human beings have abandoned reason and lost the desire for freedom. The idea of voluntary servitude is his attempt to explain the causes for this.

La Boétie does not see the history of the world as a predestination for conflict. Human beings are created equal by nature and even if nature's distribution of gifts has favored some more than others, he believes the *conditio sine qua non* for human freedom is that individuals enjoy equal relationships with other members of the species.

Since she [nature] has bestowed upon us all the great gift of voice and speech for fraternal relationship, thus achieving by the common and mutual statement of our thoughts a communication of our wills; and since she has tried in every way to narrow and tighten the bond of our union and kinship... there can be no further doubt that we are all naturally free, inasmuch as we are all comrades (La Boétie, 2015, p. 51).

For public relations scholars, La Boétie places communication, the free exchange of sentiments and ideas, at the center of human comradeship. For the French thinker, communication should be an act between equals that prevents anyone from concluding "that nature has placed some of us in slavery, since she has actually created us all in one likeness" (p. 51).

La Boétie acknowledges, however, the fragility of this intrinsic human impulse towards freedom. "I do not know how it happens that nature fails to place within the hearts of men a burning desire for liberty" (p. 47). Once liberty is lost, servitude corrupts everything and men

do not insist on regaining their freedom. Human beings can only defeat apathy by returning to their animal nature. Ferris (2013) notes that La Boétie's human being has to shed his humanity and descend into the world of beasts, but unlike most authors of his time, humans do not need to be evil when circumstances demand it but rather must regain their love for freedom. La Boétie cares about power management in terms of recovering lost freedom.

Why are humans often unable to appeal to their animal nature (for freedom)? La Boétie (2015) argues that the maintenance of tyranny is permitted and bolstered by the insidious throes of habit. He compares humans to race horses: "custom becomes the first reason for voluntary servitude. Men are like handsome race horses who first bite the bit and later like it" (p. 60). While he expresses his belief in "the gift of voice and speech" to make human beings more equal, he also emphasizes the role of propaganda, sophist rhetoric and demagoguery in the creation of custom or habituation to subjection.

5. Consent, custom and propaganda

In his classic foreword to *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, Rothbard (2015) uses the term *consent* fourteen different times to describe the *ethos* of the book, an interrogation about why people consent to be slaves. Consent is a word full of resonances in the history of communication that immediately invites us to think of the state use of communication management to forge cohesive societies (Lippmann, 1997), the power of organizations to influence public opinion (Bernays, 1969) or the propagandistic power of the media (Hermann & Chomsky, 1988). La Boétie only uses the term once, the third person of the French verb *consentir* ("il est défait de lui-même, pourvu que le pays ne consente point à la servitude") to note there is no need to battle with weapons against any tyrant if there is an internal refusal among the people to rebel against him. Therefore, consent is not a key word in La Boétie's *discourse*. But "custom" is. La Boétie (2015) sees in custom "the first reason for voluntary servitude" (p. 60).

Indeed, La Boétie argues the persuasive power of propaganda to switch the natural desire for freedom into submission: "it is truly the nature of man to be free and to wish to be so, yet his character is such that he instinctively follows the tendencies that his training gives him" (p. 60). Once the majority have become accustomed to automatic obedience, the tyrant's main challenge is to reduce dissent. There are two basic means of doing so: by controlling the flow of information and by monopolizing education, because, referring to the school of thought of Ottoman Sultan of Constantinople in the fifteenth century, "books and teaching more than anything else give men the sense to comprehend their own nature and to detest tyranny" (p. 61). In this manner, the tyrant stultifies his subjects: he "could inculcate the belief that his administration was a living embodiment of such concepts as justice, tradition, patriotism, law and order, or the public good. Thus, to oppose the tyrant became tantamount to opposing such concepts" (McElroy, 2003).

The main ruler's purpose is to make people believe that "they benefit from tyrannical rule" (Rothbard, 2015, p. 26). In the tyrant's use of *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses) to induce submission among his subjects, La Boétie describes a typical scene of the Roman empire where the authority *buys* people's wills in exchange for the entertainment of the masses.

Plays, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange beasts, medals, pictures, and other such opiates, these were for ancient peoples the bait toward slavery, the price of their liberty, the instruments of tyranny. By these practices and enticements, the ancient dictators so successfully lulled their subjects under the yoke, that the stupefied peoples, fascinated by the pastimes and vain pleasures flashed before their eyes, learned subservience as naively, but not so creditably, as little children learn to read by looking at bright picture books (La Boétie, 2015, p. 65).

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For La Boétie, the mystification of power, whereby rulers try to appear greater than mere human beings, is another strategy to create voluntary servitude. Their display of pomposity and ceremonies have made kings, since ancient times, “look more than men to their subjects” (p. 67). As an example of the use of sophisticated propaganda to create mystery around the figure of the monarch, La Boétie recalls the kings of the Assyrians who showed themselves in public as seldom as possible in order to set up a doubt in the minds of the rabble as to whether they were not in some way more than man” (p. 67).

La Boétie barely talks in his book about military power except to discredit it. He is interested in its communicative power more than anything. Arms “are used, it seems to me, more for ceremony and a show of force than for any reliance placed in them” (p. 71). He emphasizes the importance of gaining the goodwill of the people more than military superiority.

La Boétie offers a portrayal of the use of bribery practices. The secret of the tyrant’s domination is the existence of patronage relationships whereby a number of individuals make direct monetary profit or obtain favours from the government. As a consequence, the French author describes a cascade effect of power that increases the number of people willing to abandon their freedom and serve the tyrant for the promise of a small or big profit.

...there are only four or five who maintain the dictator, four or five who keep the country in bondage to him... The six have six hundred who profit under them, and with the six hundred they do what they have accomplished with their tyrant. The six hundred maintain under them six thousand, whom they promote in rank... (La Boétie, 2015, pp. 71-72).

Indeed, in his book La Boétie is talking about a social phenomenon as archaic as patronage relationships (also called clientelism), “a pattern of social organization in which access to resources is controlled by patrons and delivered to clients in exchange for deference and various kinds of support” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). These individuals “willingly destroyed their own liberty and that of their neighbors. And they did so without thinking because the force of custom led them to believe that things had always been this way and always would be” (McElroy, 2003, para. 41). The importance of clientelism’s communicative power has been highlighted in public relations literature due to its capacity to create and sustain asymmetric relationships between patrons and clients or government officials and companies (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002; García, 2015b). Patronage relationships would act as a source of capillary power, in Foucault’s terminology (Foucault, 1991), because, due to people’s expectations of obtaining favors from the tyrant and feeling observed by the tyrant’s supporters, they feel comfortable proving their loyalty to the government even in their most private aspects of life.

In sum, according to La Boétie (2015), power is maintained thanks to two key factors. First, because the work of those four or five *consiglieres* in the service of the rulers is capable of building a persuasive story “pieced together from idle gossip of the city and silly reports from the rabble” (pp. 67-68). Second, “through big favors or little ones, that large profits or small are obtained under a tyrant” (p. 72).

The message of La Boétie is revolutionary for his era. He argues military power is not the reason why people are submissive, “it is not the troops on horseback, it is not the companies afoot, it is not arms that defend the tyrant” (La Boétie, 2015, p. 71). Likewise, he previously refuted the power of arms as an effective way toward liberation: “obviously there is no need of fighting to overcome this single tyrant, for he is automatically defeated if the country refuses consent to its own enslavement” (p. 46). It is all about will’s power to break the chains with custom. The only hope La Boétie sees for breaking the vicious circle is the leadership of an elite, which always exists in any society, of well-educated people capable of educating others on the entire nature and procedures of the despotic state. It is the job of this elite to persuade others that there is no possible despotism without the delighted active complicity of the servant (Albiac, 2011). No further activism would be needed.

6. The legacy of voluntary servitude in public relations

According to La Boétie, “voluntary servitude had to do with political domination” (Romele, Gallino, Emmenegger & Gorgone, 2017, p. 211). Voluntary servitude talks about hegemony and power. The paradigm is that there is political or military force, on one side, and a group of individuals on the other side. Talking in contemporary terms, and adopting a communication perspective, we can include political and economic forces which, through marketing and communication techniques, try to control the group of individuals.

Rothbard (2015), in his analysis of the book, highlights the new perspective that La Boétie introduces in power relationships. With this purpose, he quotes the historian Pierre Mesnard (1936) when comparing La Boétie with Machiavelli: “for La Boétie as for Machiavelli, authority can only be grounded on acceptance by the subjects: except that the one teaches the prince how to compel their acquiescence, while the other reveals to the people the power that would lie in their refusal” (p. 31).

La Boétie (2015) had an activist mentality before activist theory as such had been invented. Today, he would be considered a messenger of peaceful resistance. He promotes abstention from those acts that produce and maintain custom and oppression as a means of emancipation. And those acts, as he described profusely, are mainly shows and propaganda, those “plays, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange beasts, medals, pictures, and other such opiates” (p. 65). It is no coincidence that La Boétie is considered “the first theorist of the strategy of mass; non-violent civil disobedience of State edicts and exaction” (Rothbard, 2015, p. 37). La Boétie’s message is revolutionary. He does not suggest the people use weapons to defeat the tyrant. Instead, he suggests abstaining from propaganda and *panem et circenses*. He argues for not paying attention to propaganda, not participating in the game, refusing to be seduced by the communicative power of the tyrant, as more profound and important than a military victory.

His perspective on power is unusual for his time. Whereas Machiavelli or Gracián attempt to instruct the Prince or King Fernando on ways of cementing their rule, La Boétie analyzes power relationships from the viewpoint of the subjects rather than the monarch or the state. Rothbard (1970) sees La Boétie’s concentration on the universal rights of the individual as a precedent for political thinking in the 18th century.

La Boétie understands, perhaps for the first time, that communication management is an internalized process whereby all the tyrants of the world establish and perpetuate their power thanks to a performance which suggests the status quo is invincible. For La Boétie, the tragedy is that people, naively, do not realize that they are in fact only receiving a small proportion of the wealth already filched from them by their rulers. Putting an end to this situation does not require developing an alternative apparatus of propaganda or power since there is a natural power imbalance between organizations and publics (Holtzhausen, 2007; Demetrious, 2013; L’Etang, 2016).

When La Boétie (2015) uses a negative syntax, this is not accidental. He is suggesting lack of action is more important than what to do in boycotting voluntary servitude because when “they are simply not obeyed, they become naked and undone and as nothing, just as, when the root receives no nourishment, the branch withers and dies” (p. 47). In other words, La Boétie is saying any articulated military action, or symmetrical or asymmetrical communication response, to combat propaganda and *panem et circenses*, would ultimately contribute to the legitimation of a communication process that would facilitate hegemony and power structures (Roper, 2005). And, in this sense, paraphrasing John O’Neill (1995) in his book *The Poverty of Postmodernism*, “in the postmodern scene, power is knowledge of our voluntary servitude. In the Enlightenment scene, our knowledge is the power to end servitude” (p. 5), La Boétie’s approach is at once from his era *and* typically postmodern. Indeed, La Boétie is a precursor of postmodern scholarship on power and freedom.

La Boétie acknowledges that the so-called tyrants in general, or the then-primitive states, only privilege their own perspectives and under these conditions the possibility of reciprocity between the tyrants and the people to change the status quo is not real. As such, peaceful activism is a must. This perspective is as well ahead of its time. Coombs and Holladay (2007) argue the use of PR can help activists gain power and persuade organizations and governments to change their behaviors and policies. Ciszek (2015) posits that public relations and activism are much more similar than we like to admit in terms of tactics and motives, which can be seen as public relations strategies. Furthermore, when organizations or governments do not respond to symmetrical communication efforts by the public, those publics have to use asymmetrical efforts in order to be treated as equals (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Of course, this former perspective was not expected in the times of La Boétie, an era of despotic power.

Postmodern theory of public relations argues that there are always power relations inherent when organizations relate to their publics (Holtzhausen, 2000; 2002). It suggests “public relations need to be understood and examined in a broader social, cultural, and political context rather than in a narrowly defined organizational function” (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 95). Earlier in this paper, the importance of power has been vindicated more recently by critical public relations scholars that explore and challenge the Excellence dialectic (Coombs & Halladay, 2007; 2012). In opposition to the consensus-seeking two-way symmetrical approach, the postmodern approach warns that sometimes conflict and dissensus between camps is a better way of legitimating all parts because it promotes plurality and diversity. Moreover, dissensus is more ethical because it implies that practitioners are focused on the process of communication rather than on defending a single perspective, and it acts as an equalizer whose outcome “might well be an asymmetrical relationship with stakeholders in favour of the stakeholders and not the organization” (Holtzhausen, 2012, p. 64).

In sum, La Boétie’s voluntary servitude challenges the public relations paradigm of organizations trying to manage and/or control publics in a similar way to what we know of today as critical public relations theory, in which power is used to gain and maintain hegemony. It is an example of protohistory in critical ethical public relations and postmodern approaches because it attempts to introduce marginalized voices into the public sphere in opposing resistance to institutionalized power.

7. Conclusion

There are a number of authors and thinkers in the history of communication that privilege organizations’ perspectives in acting as advisors of kings, princes or sometimes despotic figures. In a way, it is not an exaggeration to say the Excellence Theory is a *humanization* of the approaches of figures like Machiavelli and Gracián that understand communication as a tool to convey and maintain power.

La Boétie’s discourse opens a new horizon that aligns much better with the questioning of public relations as a power weapon of organizations to control their publics and, instead, vindicates activism as a counterbalance to the power of organizations. In the new paradigm of a critical theory that believes in the force of activism, La Boétie’s *Discourse* offers an alternative view to other historical figures with his positive view of human beings (despite his denouncement of voluntary servitude) and the acknowledgement that the communication process is about power relationships. Considering value figures such as La Boétie is helpful to change the public image and also the *ethos* of the public relations profession, far from the hegemony perspective.

And, at the same time, La Boétie has the positive criteria of making publics co-responsible, an important quality to promoting a more activist mentality among the publics themselves. Historically, and with reason, organizations have tended to be heavily scrutinized in their behavior while publics have been perceived as relatively innocent and (perhaps)

passive victims of these organizations. Romele, Gallino, Emmenegger and Gorgone (2017) suggest La Boétie's *Discourse* changes that: "servitude is not a matter of coercion, but rather of voluntary submission: the strength of the tyrant is nothing but the strength of his serfs" (p. 208).

La Boétie's voluntary servitude does not blame the publics despite the fact that they are voluntarily subjugated, but it does focus attention on the power relationship and the publics' attitude. His approach opens questions regarding the responsibility and consent of the publics traditionally viewed as innocent victims of manipulation and persuasion. It places the possibility of activism as an ethical choice and not just one among other options in the communicative process. La Boétie puts the public at the center and makes it accountable.

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