

# **Genealogies of The Political Consultant. The Path of The Professionalization of Political Communication Between History of Marketing and Sociology**

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## **Abstract**

- **Purpose.** The purpose of this paper is to analyse the roots of the figure of the political consultant, and to reconstruct the beginning of modern age of political marketing. The paper aims to design a genealogy of those processes in between historiography and sociology, according three main interpretation lines: the role of Americanization exporting in Europe also the technicalities of political marketing; the evolution of full-time professionalism in political consultancy; and the issue of status and collective identity of this profession, particularly related to the evolution of technologies applied to consensus-building.
- **Design/Method** Methodologically, this paper was written using a qualitative paradigm. Discourse analysis was used extensively in its drafting. The primary sources – from the late nineteenth century to the first three decades of the twentieth century – and secondary scientific literature were examined on the basis of the three research questions indicated in the “Purpose” section, following an exploratory research approach.
- **Findings** Findings show that modern political consultant as it is understood today (and in the sense of professional self-awareness) emerged relatively recently during Thirties in United States (and especially in California), a very influential decade in development of political polling and study of public opinion and propaganda (and, above all, in its implementation). Political marketing can be seen as one of the outcomes of modernization processes, indebted to the communication innovations brought about by the First World War and then consolidated – and exported around the world – in the wake of Americanization.
- **Research implications/limitations (either for further research, for practice, or for society)** The paper highlights the persuasive power that political marketing, at the confluence of different fields of knowledge, has demonstrated since its establishment as an autonomous discipline. On the one hand, this leads to an invitation to professionals in the sector and political communicators to rediscover the rich historical roots of their activities. On the other hand, it leads to an invitation to citizens-voters to exercise critical thinking in the face of the manipulative nature of political communication and the very fine line, in this case, between ideological propaganda (in its various forms) and the “policy market”.
- **Originality/value** The analysis of political marketing represents a significant area of research in scientific literature, but its historical genealogy remains largely unexplored. This paper aims to explore the diverse and rich influences that have shaped its development, using an original approach that combines the history of marketing and the sociology of communication.

• **Keywords:** Political marketing, Americanization, Sociology of mass communications, Public Relation and Political Consultancy, Electoral Campaigning, Audience Democracy

## **Introduction**

The Twentieth Century has been characterized by a progressive extension of the market and its language to public life – particularly evident in the field of electoral campaigning, where the lexicon of advertising and marketing has displaced that of war. In metaphorical terms (and in terms of pop culture imagery), this is a process that can be summed up in the idea that the precursors of Don Draper and *Mad Men* – to quote the famous TV series, created by Matthew Weiner and produced by Lionsgate Television (2007-2025) – have archived Carl Von Clausewitz. And it is precisely the abandon of the European-derived polemological imprint, typical of pre-modern campaigning (Nimmo, 1976), and the adoption of the specialised vocabulary of commercial advertising and consumer psychology that will accompany the definitive and structural shaping of mediated politics (Nimmo D. and Combs J., 1983).

Marketing, in turn, was originally located at the confluence of applied disciplines and more theoretically oriented knowledge (Newman, 1999); and its importance also derives from its “measurability”, that is to say the fact that its language represented the first type of public discourse extensively subjected to large-scale systematic research to empirically understand how it works, and how it could be made more persuasive and convincing (Thompson, 2016).

Political marketing, a complex of practices and theories at the confluence of marketing and political science (Newman, 1999), has also introduced a number of innovative approaches and methods of analysis for understanding political-electoral behavior. Through the study of political marketing, it was and it is possible to take a fresh look at central themes of political studies such as the evolution of the relationship between rulers and ruled, the purpose of the media and the activity of consultants (and spin doctors) in consensus building. Therefore, the analysis of the growth of the functions of the political communication consultant over the decades constitutes a significant vantage point for understanding various historical, cultural and methodological transitions in the discipline of marketing.

This paper aims to reconstruct the beginning and roots of modern age of political marketing and political consulting. And it is intended to design a genealogy of this process in between history of marketing and advertising and sociology of communication, according three main interpretation lines: the role of Americanization exporting in Europe also the technicalities of political marketing; the evolution of full-time professionalism in political consultancy; and the issue of status and collective identity of this work, particularly related to the advancement of technologies applied to consensus-building.

### **A “Special Relationship”: Americanization and Political-Electoral Marketing**

The process of professionalization of political marketing and consultancy is a phenomenon that, although not with a mass character, has had very significant consequences on public opinion (and, to some extent, on the imaginary surrounding politics, from literature to cinematography). In particular, political communication has become a topic of discussion and analysis by the mass media, as well as a factor capable of exerting forms of influence on their narrative logic. It is a process that can be framed in a now long-term historical perspective, in the light of the profound transformations it has undergone over time, allowing it to be divided into stages and phases. The development of political communication in a general sense lies at the very origins of the contemporary age (Finelli, Fruci and Galimi, 2012); and the

communicative strategies for addressing public discourse were widely used by the European notables and liberal ruling classes in the second half of the 19th century. A process that experienced a progressive and unstoppable acceleration during the Twentieth century, under the banner of the specificity of structuring at the level of professionalism and codification in terms of the professions of political consultancy and political marketing as performance activities and accumulations of competences, skills and expertise made available, against remuneration, to various actors of the political-institutional system (candidates, parties and leaders). Spin doctoring (a research subject on which there is as yet little literature in academia) constitutes, in fact, a typical derivation and extension of the transition to postmodernity – from Reaganism onwards –, but it too has its roots in the United States of the 1930s. It was in the course of that decade, in fact, that modern professional political consulting was structured (in adherence, it may be noted, to the historiographic scheme of the end of what Eric J. Hobsbawm has labelled the «long nineteenth century»), taking place at the confluence of a multiplicity of situations and contexts, some of a more general nature and others referring to the long tail of certain transformations in American society. On the one hand, the impetuous and relentless growth of marketing and advertising technologies, with the progressive centrality acquired by the codes and stylistic features of corporate communication (Fasce, 2000, 2012) in the public discourse of the United States to the point of making it a kind of «Business Democracy». On the other hand, the propaganda that became “scientific” during the First World War of total mobilisation, and was made totalitarian and all-pervasive by the dictatorial regimes of the 1920s (McQuail, 2014).

There has been a structural marriage between Americanization and the pathways of professionalization of that political and electoral consultancy that was born as a spin-off of commercial marketing and, in its early days, applied its precepts and insights in a very observant and consequential manner in a market context still being structured in terms of demand from candidates and the political class. The United States, in addition to having long identified itself in the Western imaginary as the “promised land” and land of opportunity, very concretely represents «the land of elections» (Johnson, 2016; 1) in terms of the frequency and variety of electoral appointments, which exceed those of any other liberal democratic nation.

In 1890, in the US of Phineas Taylor Barnum, with the debut of “Age of the Entertainment” (Postman, 1985), the “rules of the show business” began to apply to all public actors. The latter are also such because they seek the consensus of a public whose opinions, however, are becoming more and more metamorphic, and who tend to develop attitudes and behaviors towards public affairs that are oriented more by “political perception” than by actual knowledge of the topics, «influenced by a set of factors often referred to as the modernization or even “Americanization” of politics (emphasis on commercialization, globalization, visual culture, development of new technologies)» (Maricchiolo and Bonaiuto, 2011; 114). It should also be noted that this debut of the “Age of the spectacle” (and entertainment) occurred in the same decade in which the expression “fake news” began to circulate more intensely in the United States to designate an episode invented mainly for the purpose of ruining the reputation of a person (or an institution) in the political sphere (Merriam-Webster, 2017). In some ways, therefore, fake news can be considered as an embryonic late-nineteenth-century form of negative advertising. The history of the spread and circulation of sensationalist, scandalous and negative contents (and, therefore, comparable in some respects to the first expressions of disinformation of contemporaneity) thus begins in the United States at the end of the 19th century. A “twist” that occurred very early, confirming the connection between propaganda, marketing and disinformation in America, where the cultural centrality of the economic sphere and the social centrality of the business community have already structured in the first decades of the twentieth century that “market

of truths” (Nicita, 2021) which asserts itself in parallel and is configured as a threat (at least potential) towards the market of ideas – to quote John Stuart Mill – placed at the foundation of liberal democracy. And where the construction and expansion of a more structured and ramified media system than in any other nation in the world has determined the experimentation and implementation of the most modern methods of political communication, subsequently adopted elsewhere as well (Maarek, 2011).

### **The World War I as a Communication and Propaganda Laboratory**

Americanization has constituted a sort of “obsession” (or, better to say, in a negative and critical sense) of numerous European intellectuals of the “Short Twentieth Century”; an object of analysis, and of fascination or, especially, of repulsion by various protagonists of the culture of the Old Continent, from Antonio Gramsci to Franz Kafka, from Martin Heidegger to Federico García Lorca, to name just a few. And, above all, a compendium of phenomena, metamorphoses and innovations to which the «global revolution» (Sondhaus, 2020) represented by the World War I gave an extraordinary acceleration. The total mobilization of war, therefore, was clearly also Americanization, as was the landing of rhetorical and communicative formats describable as extensions to the words of the serialization and standardization paradigm, in a manner that can be qualified as “oratorical Fordism”. The Wilson Administration, very relevant and significant in many respects – from the outlawing of child labour to the establishment of a work accident insurance system, to the granting of the right to vote to women – represented an important example of a “media presidency”. It was a presidency in some ways related to the model of the Hollywood star-system that had become a very strong appeal to the collective imaginary and to the paradigm of celebrity politics – between celebrity presidency and celebrity political system (West and Orman, 2003) –, which was just then taking its first steps. Indelibly reconfiguring the language and image of politics in terms of media communication was also the birth of the Hollywood film district in the early 1910s, and the debut of the phenomenon of actor stardom – the star-system –, starting with the explosion in popularity of the silent film diva, and later film entrepreneur, Mary Pickford (real name Gladys Louise Smith).

Attention to consensus-building tools was one of the most marked traits of Wilson’s presidency. One of its most significant manifestations coincided with the activities of the Committee on Public Information, or Creel Committee, named after its chairman, investigative journalist and muckracker George Creel (1876-1953), who had been the founder-publisher and the editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper *Kansas City Independent*, and had also directed the *Rocky Mountain News*. The Creel Committee was established by Wilson in 1917 (and disbanded in 1919), and had included some of the best-known “creative minds” in public relations, including, among others, figures such as Walter Lippmann (as Assistant Secretary of War for Propaganda) and Ivy Lee – a pioneer of commercial PR and information manipulation, nicknamed “Poison Ivy” and the “Poisoner” for his talents in the field and, during World War I, assistant to the president of the U.S. Red Cross, which was a linchpin of the government’s propaganda activities and strategies. As well as another fundamental figure, Edward Louis Bernays – son of Anna, who was Sigmund Freud’s sister, and of Ely Bernays, brother of Martha who had married the founder of psychoanalysis –, the *de facto* founder of the “hidden persuaders” and the precursor *ante litteram* of the techniques of spin doctoring, who deliberately theorized the propagandistic and manipulative dimension of public relations, focusing on the irrational and unconscious dimension of individual behaviors within mass society (Curry Jansen, 2016). This

“theoretical orientation” and underlying inspiration was carried over by Bernays into all his most famous campaigns, such as the one known as “Torches of Freedom” (Topić, 2021).

The philanthropic associations and the universe of religious charities (as in the case of the Protestant YMCA, Young Men’s Christian Association) were used by American institutions as vehicles for the internationalization of their propaganda apparatus. The communicative paradigm of the Creel Committee has been defined, among others, as «oratorical Americanism» (Gibelli, 2002), and was hinged on a simplified and standardised language, relaunched by means of technology (such as the innovative electric loudspeakers) and, therefore, rationalised, modelled under the banner of psychological techniques of persuasion to improve as much as possible its effectiveness with the masses called to enlistment and war sacrifice. The work of the CPI must therefore be considered as a laboratory of modern propaganda, a precursor of subsequent mass persuasion campaigns within the context of the American “business democracy” (Fasce, 2000), where corporate communication and the “engineering of emotions” would have an increasingly significant impact on the circuits of public discourse.

This contamination between different disciplines and competencies also constituted the paradigm destined to characterise the «new propaganda» (as Bernays had defined it). The activities of the Creel Committee had shown it with the collaboration between journalists, marketing experts, psychologists, intellectuals and advertising specialists, and the confluence of advertising tools, suggestions coming from the universe of mass culture in its early stages, and assault journalistic methodologies (primarily indebted to the investigative formats of muckraking, in this particular instance changed in sign and objective). The “new propagandists” represented a broad and diversified group of professional figures endowed with the capacity to directly influence public opinion, which, precisely because of its growth in education, found itself “paradoxically” more exposed to these manipulative actions aimed at supporting the «invisible government» (Bernays, 1928). The activity of the Committee on Public Information, an authentic federal propaganda body, set up to defend the “noble cause” of the battle for freedom against the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) and the «universal civilizing mission» of Wilsonism, had thus succeeded in the operation of legitimizing an entire professional sector that was still burdened by the discredit-filled legacy of the sensationalism and communicative excesses of P.T. Barnum.

### **The “Roaring Thirties” of Professionalization of Political Marketing and Consulting**

From Sergei Diaghilev’s celebrated avant-garde *Ballets Russes* to the automobile industry, from the American Tobacco Company to the United Fruit Company (with the related regime change in Guatemala in June 1954 to the detriment of President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán), Bernays collaborated and placed his services at the disposal of a very important clientele. Bernays’ fundamental intuition coincided with the application of Freudian theory of the unconscious to advertising and marketing, to the point of being referred to as one of the most influential figures of the 20th century, the “American Century” par excellence (Snow, 2021). In the aftermath of his experience in the Committee on Public Information (Bernays, 1942), he was also directly involved in the extension of his techniques first of “advertising management” (as he called his own consultancy firm based on Broadway, the New York street of show business) and later, from 1920, of “public relations” to the universe of politics. He did this with several notable interventions, starting with the image-building of the “sad president” (characterized by austerity, both personally and in economic policies) Calvin Coolidge, who was associated by him with the Hollywood film star system and the recording industry. The result was the *de facto* invention of celebrity politics, thus making a lasting mark on the future evolution of the communication of public life, and

extending to politics – through the figure of the recognized testimonial – the communicative logic of the “seemingly neutral body” he had already used extensively to advertise brands and big companies.

After the turning point represented by Bernays’ private activity, a consultancy side and dimension of political communication and electoral marketing began to structure itself in the United States through the field work and for the benefit of certain clients carried out by a number of public relations and social science professionals. This is, therefore, the entry to all intents and purposes into the first phase of modern political consultancy, which differs from the function performed by the advisors to elective political and administrative offices or the members of staff working in ministerial cabinets. A political-professional category that was itself the protagonist of a significant diffusion in the 1930s, primarily due to the expansion of public interventionism brought about by the New Deal, one of whose symbols was the journalist Louis McHenry Howe, the “shadow man” since 1909, and later the chief of staff, behind Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Fenster, 2011).

Along with New York on the East Coast, the great laboratory for the propagation of Americanization in the form of socio-economic and communicative innovation was, on the West Coast, California. In that State, the structuring of modern political consultancy was able to benefit from the impetus given to the evolution of public life by the movement for direct legislation and the peculiar institutional set-up, with the introduction of the three powers of «initiative, referendum, recall» of the voter through constitutional amendments in 1911. During the 1930s, there was also a considerable growth in the general public’s attention to political issues, stimulating interest groups to try to take advantage of this mutation, and to find ways to convert this climate of opinion into specific and “tailor-made” proposals, as well as the election of candidates close to them.

In the decade of the 1930s (what can be called the “Roaring Thirties” of professionalization of political communication and consulting), both the large-scale application of marketing and persuasion techniques and their extension to situations and contexts other than the general commodity production market matured. What came to light, therefore, was primarily a veritable political market in the form of electoral campaigns, with the expansion and technicisation of “influence management” practices that boasted a thousand-year history – traced by some scholars, in their «uncertain boundaries» (Mazzoleni, 1998), from the rhetoric of the Sophists to Aristotle and Cicero. At the same time interest in the study of the dynamics of public opinion increased, which had also started with Walter Lippmann’s famous essay on the subject, published in 1922. The 1930s saw the foundation of two important research institutes on this innovative field of study, destined to become points of reference: the Public Opinion Quarterly and the American Institute of Public Opinion, created in ‘35 by the statistician George Horace Gallup (who also promoted the birth of the Audience Research Institute in ‘39). The latter was a market research agency and polling institute at the service in the same way, with a double structural significance in the US context, of corporate and political clients. These social research centers elaborated a new science of data – the «scientific polling» (Sheingate, 2016) – in the wake of the widespread view that bureaucracy and public authority apparatuses should scientifically understand the ideas and sentiments circulating among citizen-voters, and somehow take them into account in decision-making processes as an effect of the entry of the masses into political life (Gallup and Rae, 1940). And during the New Deal’s period of reform and renovation of the institutional architecture, Rooseveltism accentuated its propensity to monitor the mood of public opinion, proving to be a keen consumer of polls, prepared for “FDR” (who was also quite attentive to the care of his public image) precisely by Gallup.

In 1933, the first US political consulting firm, Campaigns Incorporated of Clem Withaker (who worked in newspaper advertising) and Leone Baxter, was formed in Sacramento (Johnson, 2016). This «political public relations firm» (Pitchell, 1958) won 70 of the 75 election campaigns it worked on from its formation to 1955, contributing decisively to the election of Republican Frank Finley Merriam as governor of California in 1934. He was in fact the client for whom Withaker and Baxter invented the first “character assassination campaign”, implemented by much of the Golden State press and William Randolph Hearst’s penny press, as well as the first example of negative ad, shown in cinemas and directed against the competitor. That is the well-known writer and journalist Upton Sinclair, candidate of the Democratic Party, who – like several of his colleagues, during the Progressive Era (1901-1929) – had played the role of investigative journalist and muckraker, an experience that was successfully transferred into the book *The Jungle*, published in 1906 (Mitchell, 1992).

The Thirties are, therefore, the years of the absolute deployment of the propaganda machinery of totalitarian regimes and, at the same time, of the start of the conversion of political consultancy and marketing into more codified and recognizable freelance activities. And it was again in the 1930s that the legacy of the transformation that had taken place in the previous decade was gathered and strengthened, with the most dynamic strand of advertising becoming public relations, a change that was initiated primarily by Edward Bernays (Bernays, 1923; Tye, 1998). That decade also saw further quantitative expansion of the Hollywood film industry market, which was responsible for the establishment of celebrity culture in American society (West and Orman, 2003; Sternheimer, 2014) and the spread of mass culture paradigms.

It can be said that the history of political consultancy began officially with the firm of Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter in the 1930s, and came into its own in the 1960s. Pioneering, as the academic literature indicates, was in fact the establishment in 1933 of Campaigns Inc., founded by Clem Withaker with his wife Leone Baxter, the first communications and PR firm in the history of the world that also provided expertise in the field of political consultancy (Lepore, 2012). The company philosophy that guided the couple was in absolute continuity with the dictates of commercial marketing, based on the assumption that every voter is a consumer. The citizen-elector-consumer had to be addressed with political messages that resembled the characteristics of advertising messages, simplified, immediate, easy to memorize, and substantially inspired by the mode of entertainment that had long been identifying one of the developmental lines of US mass society (and one of the most effective vehicles for selling goods and services). Together with the idea of the constant construction of an “enemy”, and the deployment of a series of grassroots activities in favor of the candidates during campaigning, one of the most innovative insights of the pair of strategists consisted in the idea of trying to exert a form of influence on the news disseminated by the media (in particular the radio, which had become a genuinely mass medium in the 1930s), rather than just sending out election advertising. An approach in which some studies have seen an early anticipation in terms of application in the electoral campaigning of spin doctoring and manipulative techniques destined to translate into operational practices that were later to become increasingly popular and consolidated. And manipulation was configured, in various respects, as a legacy of propaganda made scientific by the First World War.

### **Some Final Remarks**

The stages in the formation of the modern political consultant – a term that, as such, makes its actual appearance in an early 1970s book by Joseph Napolitan considered a classic work

of literature on campaigning, *The Election Game and How to Win It* (Napolitan, 1972) – thus appear anything but linear. And around the possibility of codifying it precisely as a professional, an intense debate has been developing since the 2000s, because professionalism implies the existence of organizational models of work (the object of interest above all for certain sectors of the social sciences) and of schemes for controlling and verifying decision-making in the campaign process (Grossmann, 2009). As well as a kind of continuous training and learning in the use of new tools; most recently digital technologies, which have become increasingly central to the permanent (Blumenthal, 1980) and postmodern (according to the well-known classification adopted on the subject by Pippa Norris, 2000) campaign.

Prior to the 1930s, support for the candidate in an electoral race was provided by the “newspaper man” (the journalist), who was the holder of the useful knowledge needed for campaigning, which basically involved writing speeches and public speeches and liaising with the print media. After that initial stage, in its pre-televisory «formative years» (Johnson, 2012), the professionalization of political consultancy was characterized by the confluence of different and multidisciplinary skills, with lawyers, part-time political activists, press office holders, marketing specialists and pr (Plasser and Plasser, 2002). Later in the 1950s, another big change happened when party conventions started getting hyped up for television. Back then, campaign managers still split their time between political communication and working on commercials and corporate ads, or promoting Hollywood stars. After that decade, the hegemony of television media logic spread, pushing political consultants in a more stringent direction, that of “professional image makers”, as Dan Nimmo wrote, who acted as brokers using the mass media to highlight the most appropriate qualities of their clients (Nimmo, 1976). This marked a new metamorphosis of the profession. Once again, *mutatis mutandis*, the factors that Philippe Maarek (2011) identified as genetic and permanent in the development of electoral marketing and political consulting in the United States reappeared. Namely, the peculiarities of the electoral system, the emergence and establishment of political public relations, and the modernity and technological power of the mass media (responsible, among other distinguishing attributes, for the marked nature of audience democracy and, subsequently, post-democracy in the American nation).

The figure of the political consultant has thus inherited over time the uncertain professional (and also what could be labelled as “epistemological”) status, the erratic paths and the multiplicity of not necessarily coherent expertise that have presided over its constitution. But it can still be said that the modern political consultant as it is understood today emerged during Thirties in United States (and especially in California), a very influential decade in development of private political polling, study of public opinion and propaganda (and, above all, in its implementation), and “scientific” and professional electoral campaigning. Therefore, in order to understand these social processes, the analytical key in genealogical and temporal evolutionary terms provided by the history of marketing therefore proves particularly valuable, along with a sociological approach (Mellet, 2025).

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