

# POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND POLITICAL POWER IN THE MIDDLE AGES: A CONCEPTUAL JOURNEY \*

*Comunicación política y poder político  
en la Edad Media: un viaje conceptual.*

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**RESUMEN:** El concepto de comunicación es tan amplio que finalmente podría abarcar casi toda la actividad humana. La comunicación es un rasgo esencial de todas las formas de vida social y todas las acciones sociales poseen necesariamente aspectos comunicativos. La “comunicación política” se define aquí como las formas de comunicación que tratan cuestiones públicas en el marco de relaciones desiguales de poder. Después de la segunda guerra mundial la comunicación se convirtió en un tema de investigación cada vez más popular y, después de los setenta, ha influido también en los estudios medievales. Este artículo revisa una serie de conceptos claves usados por los medievalistas que estudian la comunicación política y el modo en que los aplican.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Teoría de la comunicación. Historia política medieval. Cultura política.

**ABSTRACT:** The concept of communication is such a broad one that in the end it might encompass almost every human activity in the course of history. Communication is an essential feature of all forms of social life and all social actions necessarily have

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communicative aspects. “Political communication” refers to forms of communication dealing with public matters under unequal power relations. After World War II, communication became an ever more popular subject of research, and since the 1970s it has also influenced medieval studies. This article surveys a number of key concepts used by medievalists who study political communication and the way in which these notions are applied.

**KEYWORDS:** Communication Theory. Medieval Political History. Political Culture.

**SUMARIO:** 0. Introduction. 1. Communication as a Historiographical Problem. 2. Communication theory and medieval history. 3. Medieval Propaganda. 4. Political Culture. 5. Public Opinion. 6. Communication Systems and “Symbolic Communication”. 7. Rituals or ceremonies. 8. Perspectives for future research.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

In 2004 Pierre Monnet wrote that the word “communication” not only tends to be used more and more in our daily lives but also carries away “la faveur grandissante des historiens, plus singulièrement des médiévistes”<sup>1</sup>. Even if this phenomenon might be just another fashion, the increasing interest in communication has stimulated research into, among other topics, the circulation and networks of news and messages, the messengers themselves, and languages and spaces of oral, written and gestural communication. An important problem, however, is that the concept of communication is such a large one that in the end it might encompass almost every human historical activity. Quite obviously, communication is an essential feature of all forms of social life and all social actions necessarily have communicative aspects. Moreover, the ways and media we use to communicate are extremely diverse. The study of “non-verbal communication”, for instance, may include research into smells, colours, gestures, cloths, the visual arts and music. Though often neglected by historians, these non-

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<sup>1</sup> MONNET, P., «Pouvoir communal et communication politique dans les villes de l’Empire à la fin du Moyen Âge», in *Francia*, 2004, 31, p. 121-123, citing most of the recent, mostly German literature on the subject.

verbal forms “are so powerful because they directly engaged the feelings through the physical senses”<sup>2</sup>.

And in many ways, all these forms of communication may have partly or entirely political and social meanings. Every form of communication involves relations of unequally distributed power. Hence, “political communication” or “social communication” are in themselves tautological expressions. The main scientific merit of the concept of communication seems to be that it draws the attention to certain phenomena as objects of study. Its main problem is clearly that “communication” is a very large concept and it can be used in many different ways to study a very wide range of things without necessarily adding more understanding or coherence to the general problematic. I will argue that this is exactly how the study of communication has been adapted by medieval historians. Though it certainly has a lot of value, I will also point to the potential danger of considering communication too much as a central historical problem, a tendency present in historical writing since the linguistic and performative turns. That is, the central position the notion of communication has in some recent research often seems to obscure a far more important historical question: that of power and inequality. The main reason for this trend is that the concepts used to analyse medieval political communication are usually situated within a structural-functionalist paradigm stressing consensus in historical societies rather than conflict. Therefore, this essay is in some ways a plea to first reconsider the unequal distribution of power, essential to political history, more explicitly and fundamentally when studying the problem of “political communication”, however valuable the latter phenomenon may be as an independent topic of research.

In a somewhat ironical manner, one might say that most historians only seem to jump on theoretical and conceptual bandwagons when they are already fashionable for at least a decade in the social sciences, in economics, cultural anthropology, literary theory or similar neighbouring fields. Medievalists are certainly no exception to this observation. They also regularly use such “borrowed material” in an uncritical or eclectic way, picking and choosing specialised notions and categories *à la carte*. They apply them loosely, often without taking into account the philosophical or sociological assumptions such concepts imply. Yet in other cases, it is not the historian using a concept that is the problem, but the concept itself which seems to be too blunt a tool to sharply cut into historical reality. One can deplore such lack of reflexivity in our craft but it obviously seems more

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<sup>2</sup> CLANCHY, M., «Introduction», in MOSTERT, M. (ed.), *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, Turnhout, Brepols, 1999, pp. 5-6.

useful to regularly evaluate these tensions between the medievalists' practice and the theoretical toolkits they borrow from the social sciences or from other humanities in some particular field of research. That is what I propose to do, tentatively and forcibly schematically, in the following short contribution on the use of the concept of "political communication" for the study of the medieval period. In addition, a particularly influential expression in recent work is clearly also "symbolic communication", this one coined by the renowned German medievalist Gerd Althoff and, for once, not by a social theorist or linguist. That notion should be dealt with as well. In search of more clarity, my basic approach will be to briefly explore the theoretical background of those concepts most popular among medievalists studying political communication, and to look at how they apply these concepts<sup>3</sup>.

## 1. COMMUNICATION AS A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PROBLEM

After World War II, with the rapid transformations in mass media, political propaganda and commercial advertising, communication became an ever more popular subject of research. "Communication studies" even developed into a specific academic field. This development, regrettably led to the even further fragmenting of the social and human sciences into institutionalized settings with often artificial barriers. In fact, "communication studies", a subject expanding greatly since the 1980's, relies heavily on, among other 'disciplines', (socio-, or ethno-)linguistics, sociology, hermeneutics, semiotics, psycho-analysis and cultural anthropology. By its very nature it is an interdisciplinary field and obviously has the potential to serve many masters. Probably to a large degree as a result of this development of the media and the growing scientific interest in them, "communication" as one of the most elementary daily human activities, according to the logic of the Annales-school, could now also become a major topic for *le métier de l'historien*, including the medieval historian<sup>4</sup>. First of all, communication appeared as a topic for medievalists primarily as the material organization of

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<sup>3</sup> As there is a mass of literature on the subject, it will perhaps be impossible to deal with the full complexity of the debate and represent every author's view discussed here in a manner nuanced enough.

<sup>4</sup> The paragraph that follows is not based on extensive bibliometrical research but a more impressionist view derived from searches in the International Medieval Bibliography (until 2010) and the extensive bibliography provided by Mostert (until 1999). In what is a vast historiographical production in one way or another dealing with the topic of "medieval communication", the examples quoted are often randomly selected and not based on the influence of these works. They only serve to illustrate general tendencies.

communication. Historians focused on classical themes such as trade routes and the development of commerce and merely introduced the notion of communication as a new way of saying the same things (which is no judgment at all on the importance of such works)<sup>5</sup>. Communication could also refer to phenomena of a completely different nature. For instance, in the context of a growing attention for communication studies proper, the 1970s and 1980s saw an increasing interest in the study of forms of non-verbal communication, in literature or in sign languages used by monks<sup>6</sup>. Also of particular interest were works of historical linguists studying the development of vernacular languages in their sociolinguistic contexts, such as the important work of Michel Baniard<sup>7</sup>.

In the early 1990s innovative French specialists of medieval political history such as Claude Gauvard introduced communicative themes like rumours into mainstream research<sup>8</sup>. However, the most systematic and thorough endeavours in this field were made by German medievalists, who quantitatively and qualitatively still dominate the study of medieval political communication, often also in conjunction with their interest for the Habermasian concept of *Öffentlichkeit* (usually quite incorrectly translated into English as “the public sphere” and even more inexactly in French as “l’espace public”)<sup>9</sup>. The growing focus on

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<sup>5</sup> An example is LEIGHTON, A.C., *Transport and Communication in Early Medieval Europe*, A. D. 500-1100, New York, Barnes and Noble, 1972; and still later: RAPP, F., «Routes et voies de communication à travers les Vosges du XII au début du XVI siècle», in *Le Pays de l’Entre-deux au Moyen Age: Questions d’histoire des territoires d’Empire entre Meuse, Rhône et Rhin. Actes du 113e Congrès national des sociétés savants, Section d’histoire médiévale et philologie*, Paris, Éditions du Comité des Travaux historiques et scientifiques, 1988, pp. 195-207 and BAUTIER, R.H., «Comunicazione e vita di relazione nel medioevo», in ID., PIEMONTESE, A. M. and LORENZINI, A. (eds.), *La comunicazione nella storia. 2. Lo sviluppo del pensiero e le forme del comunicare. 1. Medioevo/Islam*, Rome, Seat-Divisione Stet, 1999, pp. 2-4.

<sup>6</sup> BARAKAT, R. A., *The Cistercian Sign Language: A Study in Non-Verbal Communication*, Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications, 1975; later BURROW, J. A., «Non-Verbal Communication in Medieval England: some Lexical Problems», in GREEN, R. F. and MOONEY, L. R. (eds.), *Interstices: Studies in Middle English and Anglo-Latin. Texts in Honour of A.G. Rigg*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004, pp. 44-54.

<sup>7</sup> Among others BANIARD, M., *Viva Voce. Communication écrite et communication orale du IVe au IXe siècle in Occident latin*, Paris, Institut des études augustinienes, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> GAUWARD, C., «Rumeur et stereotypes à la fin du Moyen Age», in *La circulation des nouvelles au Moyen Age XXIVe Congrès de la S.H.M.E.S.*, Avignon, École Française de Rome, 1993, p. 254.

<sup>9</sup> Especially the works by Gerd Althoff cited below in notes 55, 57, 64 and 65; and to name but a few other ones among the extensive historiography in German on this subject: HAVERKAMP, A., «Zur Einführung», in HAVERKAMP, A. (ed.), *Information, Kommunikation und Selbstdarstellung im mittelalterlichen Gemeinden*, München, Oldenbourg, 1998, pp. IX-XX; BRÄUER, H. and SCHLENKRICH, E. (eds.), *Die Stadt als Kommunikationsraum*, Leipzig, Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2001; FAULSTICH,

communication and media has understandably had an important influence on the study of medieval drama as a cultural practice combining different aspects of the problem of communication<sup>10</sup>. Since the so-called “performative turn” left its imprint on medieval history, most notably on the study of rituals such as entry ceremonies, themes traditionally belonging to political history were now also in many ways, one might say “dramatised” or “ritualised”<sup>11</sup>. Another subdiscipline of medieval studies which lends itself to introduce concepts and theories of communication is diplomatic, a classic “auxiliary science” in full methodological transformation under the influence of communication theories and digital methods<sup>12</sup>. To add one final example of themes covered by the heading of “communication”, the specific problems of political communication in multilingual medieval regions have come to the foreground as well<sup>13</sup>.

Marco Mostert, a pioneer in the systematic study of medieval communication has good arguments for the privilege of “oral communication” over all other forms in the medieval context since this was obviously the principal way in which people communicated in this epoch, or for that matter in any other historical period before the final decades of the twentieth century. His 1999 bibliographical selection of studies in medieval history that deal with communication in one of its forms or aspects lists some 1580 publications dating mainly from the 1960s. They strongly increase in frequency after 1984 with an average of more than 50 a year since the 1990s; though certainly not all written by medievalists, since many of them are theoretical works. In many ways, the selection criteria Mostert used for the works by medievalists proper have been necessarily arbitrary and politics has certainly not been his main emphasis. Still, Mostert deplores that there is a “paucity of

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W. (ed.), *Medien und Öffentlichkeiten im Mittelalter*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck-Ruprecht, 1996; BULST, N. (ed.), *Politik und Kommunikation: zur Geschichte des Politischen in der Vormoderne*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus Verlag, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> DILLER, H. J., «Code-switching in Medieval English Drama», *Comparative Drama*, 1997-1998, 31, pp. 506-537, who applies the sociolinguist notion of code-switching, is but one example among many.

<sup>11</sup> LECUPPRE-DESIARDIN, E., «Un model de scénographie urbaine: l'exemple des Pays-Bas bourguignons au XVe siècle», *Revue du Nord*, 1999, 81, pp. 679-688.

<sup>12</sup> For instance WEBER, CH. F., «Urkunden in der symbolischen Kommunikation zwischen dem Deutschen Orde und Polen: Friedensschluss und Konfliktführung im 14. Jahrhundert», in WENTA J., HARTMANN S. and VOLLMANN-PROFE, G. (eds.), *Mittelalterliche Literatur und Kultur im Deutschordensstaat in Preußen: Leben und Nachleben*, Torun, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2008, pp. 309-329.

<sup>13</sup> BOONE, M., «Langue, pouvoirs et dialogue. Aspects linguistiques de la communication entre les ducs de Bourgogne et leurs sujets flamands (1385-1505)», *Revue du Nord*, 2009, 91, pp. 9-33.

publications dealing explicitly with medieval communication”. A notable exception to this implicit nature of most work by medievalists on the topic is the “Münster school” directed by Gerd Althoff since the early 1990s, focusing on the oral and non-verbal aspects of rituals in the communication between powerful laymen, with a focus on the Central Middle Ages. As we have seen, during the last two decades, the historiography of medieval political communication in Germany has expanded<sup>14</sup>. Perhaps the fact that many medieval historians do not explicitly refer to the concept of communication when they write about some aspect of it may be because they perceive this all-encompassing notion as one too vague and blunt to be analytically operational. It is therefore understandable that when Mostert writes about communication he also limits himself to certain aspects and certainly privileges some more than other, for instance the discussion about orality and literacy (mostly in the early and central Middle Ages), ritual, “performance”, literature, codicological, palaeographical and diplomatic methodologies etc<sup>15</sup>.

## 2. COMMUNICATION THEORY AND MEDIEVAL HISTORY

The classical models for analysing the phenomenon of “communication”, as it was first systematically and explicitly considered as a scientific problem in the middle of the twentieth century were those by Laswell and by Shannon and Weaver. In their condensed catchphrase-like form these analytical questionnaires still have the merit of being sound and simple. “Who says what to whom in what channel and with what effect?”, as Harold Laswell famously formulated it. He also studied the frequency of symbols in a given message, and how and to what objective these are intended to persuade the audience<sup>16</sup>. In their 1963 “mathematical theory of communication”, one of the first classic scientific expressions of the new capitalist consumer society dominated by electronic media, Shannon and Weaver distinguished between analytical categories like “information source”, “sender”, “message”, “transmitter”, “signal”, “channel”, “noise”, “interference”, “entropy”

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<sup>14</sup> MOSTERT, M., «New Approaches to Medieval Communication?», in ID. (ed.), *New Approaches*, pp. 15, 17.

<sup>15</sup> His «bibliography of Works on Medieval Communication», in ID. (ed.), *New Approaches*, pp. 193-297, as he admits himself, could be supplemented in many ways, for instance with studies on late medieval urban history and the history of medieval state formation, two of the fields I somewhat master myself which involve many discussions of what could be considered “political communication”, as specialists in other fields could undoubtedly observe similar lacunae.

<sup>16</sup> LASWELL, H. D., «The Structure and Functions of Communication in Society», in BRYSON, L. (ed.), *The Communication of Ideas*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1948, pp. 38-44.

and “receiver”. These categories made up a theory of communication developed to study the impact of the new mass media upon society<sup>17</sup>. Claude Shannon was an electrical engineer, so it should come as no surprise that he developed his theory for the Bell company. The content of the “message” was not his concern, but a host of later communication theorists, too numerous to cite, have tried to refine this model and elaborate on it from perspectives of the social sciences.

Recently, Marco Mostert has endeavoured to adapt this basic model into a questionnaire for medieval studies which is quite a useful checklist for any medievalist dealing with aspects of this large topic. He asks further questions such as “Who are represented by the “senders””: supernatural beings, human beings of different classes and ranks, and “Which is the sender’s sex or age?” And the same questions are asked concerning the receivers. He exhaustively distinguishes between “forms of communication”, and since his list is the most elaborate one I have come across, I will reproduce it in full: “attitudes; gestures; physical contact; visual signs; olfactory signs; flavours; auditive, non-verbal signs; speech acts; writing as author; reproducing written texts; reading aloud; reading silently; listening; commenting; a combination.” When he poses the question to what the “subject” of the message is, he mentions examples like “the social function of the sender”, “training or education for a social role”, “social organisation” “the relations with the supernatural” etc., a list, he says, which is obviously not complete, but one of “mainly types of social activities with which historians are well acquainted”<sup>18</sup>. Although Mostert has reflected a lot on medieval communication, and especially on the debates on literacy and orality, his theoretical framework remains somewhat cautious, incongruent and eclectic. This is a sin for which one can be easily pardoned in a complex debate such as this one and to which the present author also will have to confess. Yet again the question arises: is the vague and all-encompassing notion of “communication” a useful one at all, whether for the study of contemporary or historical societies? The Laswell-question, for instance, is only a checklist of common-sense banalities, but perhaps this might be exactly why we as empiricist historians feel at ease with it.

Even narrowing the subject of “communication in general” to that of “political communication” does not make things easier. We now also have to reflect on when exactly a “form of communication” or some specific “subject”, to remain within the conceptual framework of Mostert, could be a “political” one. Not to open an

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<sup>17</sup> WEAVER, W. and SHANNON, C. E., *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1963.

<sup>18</sup> MOSTERT, «New Approaches», pp. 20-21.



otherwise unavoidable and endless philosophical debate on what the level of “the political” may be, an interesting matter but one impossible to treat here at even the most superficial level, we might in a very simplistic manner propose that “political communication” is a form of communication in which power is the central element. Such a definition is useful because the discourses produced while communicating are about power, and because the communicating parties are involved in relations of power. Of course, this is true in any communication situation – feminism rightly emphasized that “the personal” is also always “political” – but everybody will spontaneously understand “political communication” as to deal in the first place with public matters and to be part of the “public sphere”, the *polis*. Before following this line of thought and avoiding reflecting too long on this contentious topic, the public sphere (or better the Habermasian *Öffentlichkeit*), the main point I will try to develop here is that the question of power relations is in fact the most important one for a historian studying political communication. It was Pierre Bourdieu who castigated some of the most important theorists of communication in his remarkable essay *Ce que parler veut dire* for what he called “sémiologisme”: the tendency to reduce social transactions to purely communicative events.<sup>19</sup> Such uses are often found in approaches based on structuralist-functionalism and symbolic interactionism, and in the work of historians who follow the ethnological approach of Clifford Geertz<sup>20</sup>.

### 3. MEDIEVAL PROPAGANDA

Indeed, it cannot be repeated enough that communication always takes place within a given set of power relations. Though there are notable exceptions, medievalists working on cultural history sometimes forget this or tend to leave power out of their analysis as if it always has to be taken for granted and no longer needs to be explicitly considered. When communication has “ritual” or “political” aspects they implicitly tend to be understood in a functionalist manner as contributing to harmony within the social order. Power and inequality are sometimes not considered at all. Indeed a lot of what is now called political “communication”, is a one-way system of communication, both when it was directed from the rulers as “senders” to the subjects as “receivers”, and in the source material that comes down to us. Obviously, the overwhelming majority of sources we use to study any kind of medieval communication have been produced by

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<sup>19</sup> BOURDIEU, P., *Ce que parler veut dire: l'économie des échanges linguistiques*, Paris, Fayard, 1982.

<sup>20</sup> GEERTZ, C., *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, London, Hutchinson, 1975.

clerical and lay elites and only focus on the same groups. This is a truism, but one that must be emphasized over and over again. Indeed, until not very long ago, historians would have written about, for instance “royal propaganda”<sup>21</sup> rather than about “political communication”.

This shift in terminology is not an innocent one, it clearly changes the focus from a communicative situation, in which one party has superior power, to one of more neutral or diffuse power relations, of a situation of power left implicit. In a similar way, contemporary “communication theory” focuses on both commercial and political marketing, the difference between which is hardly discernable in today’s world. After Laswell, Walter Lippman<sup>22</sup> and Jacques Ellul<sup>23</sup> laid the foundations for the theory of communication, and though these were critical writers, the insights they and others derived from Freudianism, the Frankfurt School or semiotics have now mostly become ingredients for deliberately manipulating the public. Unsurprisingly, this is no longer called “propaganda”<sup>24</sup>, “education of the people” or “Volksaufklärung”. Even the most shameless commercial marketing or manipulation of texts and images to serve political and military goals is now sold under the label of “communication”, designed to keep economic and political consumers happy, though in a slightly more cynical and critical tone of voice some commentators might also call it “spin”. In the same way, the “neutrally” connoted notion of communication, when too uncritically applied by historians can clearly obscure conflicts over power and inequality.

In that sense the term “medieval propaganda” is still a valid one. It could come in many forms and by different media. Propaganda seems to have been especially studied in the context of later medieval warfare and statebuilding<sup>25</sup> and is still a matter of concern for medievalists. Doig, for instance, elaborated on English

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<sup>21</sup> For instance, half a century ago, BOSSUAT, A., «La littérature de propagande au XVe siècle: le mémoire de Jean de Rinel, secrétaire du roi d’Angleterre, contre le duc de Bourgogne (1435)», *Cahiers d’Histoire*, 1956, 8, pp. 131-146.

<sup>22</sup> LIPPMANN, W., *Public Opinion*, New York, Macmillan, 1922.

<sup>23</sup> ELLUL, J., *Propagandes*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1962.

<sup>24</sup> DOOB L. W., *Public Opinion and Propaganda*, Hamden, Conn Archon, 1966.

<sup>25</sup> For instance NIETO SORIA, J. M. (ed.), *Orígenes de la monarquía hispánica: propaganda y legitimación (ca. 1400-1520)*, Madrid, Dykinson, 1999; ROSS, C., «Rumour, propaganda and popular opinion during the War of the Roses», in GRIFFITHS, R.A. (ed.), *Patronage, the Crown and the Provinces in Later Medieval England*, Gloucester, Alan Sutton, 1981; ORMROD, W. M., «The Domestic Response to the Hundred Years War», in CURRY, A. and HUGHES, M. (eds.), *Arms, Armies and Fortifications in the Hundred Years War*, Woodbridge, Boydell, 1994, p. 97, however, does not believe that proclamations and sermons were very important in this respect.

propaganda during the siege of Calais in 1436, enumerating newsletters, bills and open letters, sermons, proclamations, pageants and mumming, but also poetry as media of the propaganda war against the Burgundians. He argues, giving preeminence to purely linguistic communication, that the most important vehicle for disseminating propaganda remained the royal writ<sup>26</sup>. He does not consider, however, the impact of such media upon the so-called “public opinion”. In other words, as with most other studies of medieval propaganda, the scope is limited to the production and, to a lesser degree, to the circulation of discourses, yet their consumption or “reception” is not taken into account at all. The latter is obviously much more difficult to study, and remains a matter of scientific dispute even among contemporary sociologists, political scientists, marketers and spin doctors of all vocations as far as political and commercial messages for today’s audiences are concerned.

The propaganda value of historiography is also a rather obvious matter. Yet in most cases even when the word “propaganda” is mentioned in the title of a book or article considering it, this question is not really theoretically elaborated upon<sup>27</sup>. One of the best attempts to formulate the basic problematic of how medieval propaganda must have functioned is Craig Taylor’s study of French royal propaganda by writers such as Alain Chartier, Jean Gerson, and Christine de Pisan. He writes “Medieval rulers did not have the capacity to produce and circulate propaganda on a modern scale, nor could they benefit from the scientific analysis of psychology and sociology as a guide for such activities. Yet they were well aware of the basic means, such as the manipulation of words and images, symbols and public ceremony, of influencing thoughts and actions of their subjects”<sup>28</sup>. Numerous other

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<sup>26</sup> DOIG, J., «Siege of Calais», in ARCHER, R. E. (ed.), *Crown, Government and People in the Fifteenth Century*, Stroud, Alan Sutton, 1995, pp. 79-106 (especially pp. 87-94) and ID., «Political Propaganda and Royal Proclamations in Late Medieval England», *Historical Research*, 1998, 71, pp. 253-280.

<sup>27</sup> Such is the case, for instance, in IANZITTI, G., *Humanistic Historiography under the Sforzas: Politics and Propaganda in Fifteenth-Century Milan*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1988, but this book is absolutely no isolated example of such ‘common sense-approach’.

<sup>28</sup> TAYLOR, C., «War, Propaganda and Diplomacy in Fifteenth-Century France and England», in ALLMOND, C. (ed.), *War, Government and Power in Late Medieval France*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2000, p. 70; see also CONTAMINE, P., «Aperçus sur la propagande de guerre, de la fin du XIIIe au début du XVIe siècle: les Croisades, la Guerre de Cent Ans», in CAMMARASANO, P. (ed.), *Le forme della propaganda politica nel due e trecento*, Rome, 1994, pp. 5-27; PONS, N. (ed.), *L’Honneur de la couronne de France’: quatre libelles contre les Anglais (vers 1418-vers 1429)*, Paris, Droz, 1990; GUENÉE, B., «Les campagnes de lettres qui ont suivi le meurtre de Jean sans Peur, duc de Bourgogne (septembre 1419-février 1420)», *Annuaire-Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire de France*, 1993, pp. 45-65; and see the methodological remarks by NIETO SORIA, J.M., «Propaganda política y poder real en la Castilla Trastámara», *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 1995, 25, pp. 109-131.

studies have also considered late medieval writers of political pamphlets and treatises such as John Fortescue, Nicolas Oresme, Jean Juvenal des Ursins, Jean de Montreuil or Cristine de Pisan, but the question of the impact of these works, many of which have only survived in a very limited number of manuscripts, remains unanswered<sup>29</sup>.

It is a rather obvious point that in medieval society auditive, visual and performative propaganda must have had a much stronger impact on the mass of the population than the written word ever could have. Scholars studying entry ceremonies have stressed the whole setting, choreography, *décor* and multimedia-like character of such events, when clearly the force of the spoken and written word could not stand on its own when a mass audience was addressed<sup>30</sup>. Sarah Gaunt has attempted to give an overview of such “visual propaganda”, distinguishing between media such as miniatures in illuminated manuscripts, though these were only directed towards a small and privileged audience. She considers pennants, banners and coats of arms to be “the most overt expression of political authority”, and heraldry in general the most universally recognizable pictorial language, as it could be encountered on buildings, ships, horse harnesses, clothing and domestic plate. Badges and liveries also served important political functions, while public displays such as military ceremonies and public executions had always been of primary importance for rulers<sup>31</sup>. In most of these and similar studies, the focus is on the physical settings and their architectural aspects<sup>32</sup> and on the media of such non-linguistic forms of communication, not only the visual ones but also acoustic ones

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<sup>29</sup> GILL, P.E., «Politics and Propaganda in Fifteenth-Century England: The Polemical Writings of Sir John Fortescue», *Speculum*, 1971, 46, pp. 333-347.

<sup>30</sup> LECUPPRE-DESJARDIN, «Un modèle de scénographie urbaine»; SPIESZ, K.H. (ed.), *Medien der Kommunikation im Mittelalter*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> GAUNT, S., «Visual Propaganda in England in the Later Middle Ages», in TAITH, B. and THORNTON, T. (eds.), *Propaganda. Political Identity and Rhetoric, 1300-2000*, Stroud, Alan Sutton, 1999, pp. 27-39; see also JÜTTE, R., «Funktion und Zeichen. Zur Semiotik herrschaftlicher Kommunikation in der Stadtgesellschaft», in MAUÉ, H. (ed.), *Visualisierung städtischer Ordnung. Zeichen-Abzeichen-Hoheitszeichen*, Nürnberg, Anzeiger des Germanischen Nationalmuseums, 1993, pp. 13-21.

<sup>32</sup> For instance in German town halls: FRIEDRICH, C.R., «Das städtische Rathaus als kommunikativer Raum in europäischer Perspektive», in BURKHARDT, J. and WERKSTETTER, C. (eds.), *Kommunikation und Medien in der frühen Neuzeit*, pp. 159-174; or on the Flemish belfries as symbolic buildings for both princes and cities by VAN UYTVEN, R., «Flämische Belfriede und süd-niederländische städtische Bauwerke im Mittelalter: Symbol und Mythos», in HAVERKAMP (ed.), *Information*, pp. 125-159.

such as the use of trumpets, bagpipes or bells<sup>33</sup>. Inscriptions on buildings can also be considered multimedia combinations of political messages, mixing the linguistic, visual and architectural elements. Sometimes a total spectacle of shouting, waving banners, ringing the bells, and mass choreography in mobilizing and arming oneself or ritually claiming urban space with processions could be the scene for a popular riot or revolt. This was often the case in the cities of the Low Countries<sup>34</sup>. The signs and sign languages most associated with official political propaganda, such as the official bells of a city, the use of particular coats of arms or devises serving as battle cries, and even the relics of significant patron saints could often become loci of contestation in themselves when opponents tried to appropriate them, thus claiming political power<sup>35</sup>. In other words, the “official media” could be used against those who normally controlled it, as is still the case with today’s means of propaganda.

#### 4. POLITICAL CULTURE

But if, in most cases, the concept of political propaganda principally presupposes a unilateral form of communication, or better: manipulation, its specific impact unwillingly evokes the notion of “public opinion”. Propaganda was directed towards some kind of public that had to be politically convinced. And the specific ways and fields of forces in which that kind of political communication functioned could be contextualized in what is commonly known as “political culture”. As with many others concepts, this one is not completely unproblematic since it carries specific connotations as it has been developed for half a century. The precise meaning of “political culture” is often also somewhat unclear, though it must be said that there seems to be a general commonsensical understanding when historians use it.

In an otherwise interesting essay, Koziol, for instance, does not attempt to provide a real definition of political culture. He does make the strong statement that “[t]he durability of France and French kingship lies elsewhere: not in power or institutions, but in shared political culture of which kingship was an expression”. He

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<sup>33</sup> HAVERKAMP, A., «... an die grosse Glocke hängen. Über Öffentlichkeit im Mittelalter», in MATHEUS, M. and BURGARD, F. (eds.), *Gemeinden, Gemeinschaften und Kommunikationsformen im hohen und späten Mittelalter. Festgabe zur Vollendung des 65. Lebensjahres Alfred Haverkamp*, Trier, Kliomedia, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> ARNADE, P., «Crowds, Banners and the Marketplace: Symbols of Defiance and Defeat during the Ghent War of 1452-1453», *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 1994, 24, pp. 471-497.

<sup>35</sup> LOWAGIE, H., «Stedelijke communicatie in de late middeleeuwen: aard, motivaties en politieke implicaties», *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis*, 2009, 87, pp. 273-295.

makes his meaning more or less clear with the following enumeration of what he seems to consider the key elements of political culture: pacts and treaties between kings and magnates or, as in the Truce and Peace of God, a certain balance of power based on feudal relations, “political values” – one could say: ideologies – like royal virtues, knightly ideals, shared mythologies<sup>36</sup>. As in common usage in the contemporary analysis of politics, political culture seems to refer to a set of institutions, power relations, practices and ideological discourses that characterize a given political system. Such empirical conceptions of political culture dominate most of the instances in which medievalists use them. The essays of the British medievalist Simon Walker were gathered in a volume under the title «Political Culture in late medieval England». Here too, and though the content is often brilliant, it is hard to find a clear definition of the concept<sup>37</sup>. Dale Hook, followed by Christine Carpenter, are rare among historians in presenting their audience with a well reflected definition of political culture. For them it consists of “codes of conduct, formal and informal, governing ... [political] actions”<sup>38</sup>. In a volume edited by Carpenter we also find one of the few attempts by a medieval historian to look at the intellectual genealogy of concepts from the social sciences she deploys<sup>39</sup>.

In fact, as Carpenter rightly explains, the political scientist who first systematically started using the notion of “political culture” was Gabriel Almond in his 1963 book *The Civic Culture*, in which he aimed to establish a “scientific theory of democracy”. Of course, such assertions and the date of publication should in themselves warn of the path he was following. Just like Harold Laswell’s work, Almond’s writings have to be situated in the darkest years of the Cold War. Almond opposed “democracy” and “totalitarianism”<sup>40</sup>. He did not hide his intentions when, in 1956, he described political culture as “a particular pattern of

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<sup>36</sup> KOZIOL, G., «Political culture», in BULL, M. G. (ed.), *The Short Oxford History France: France in the Central Middle Ages, 900-1200*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> WALKER, S., *Political Culture in later Medieval England*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006.

<sup>38</sup> CARPENTER, C., «Introduction», in ID. and CLARK, L. (eds.), *Political Culture, Politics and Cultural History (The Fifteenth Century Yearbook)*, 2004, p. 1, quoting HOOK, D. (ed.), *Tudor Political Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-2.

<sup>39</sup> By using two fundamental articles by GENDZEL, G., «Political Culture: Genealogy of a Concept», *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 1997-1998, 28, pp. 225-250 and FORMISANO, R.P., «The Concept of Political Culture», *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2001, 31, pp. 393-426.

<sup>40</sup> ALMOND, G. A., *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1963; see also ALMOND, G. and VERBA, S. (eds.), *The Civic Culture Revisited*, Newbury Park, CA, Sage Publications, 1989.

orientations to political action” to define the characteristics of the “Free World” in contrast to the Soviet Union and other totalitarian states. A proper democratic political culture was considered essentially “a particular pattern of orientations to political action”, a consensus model in “democratic society”. Carpenter goes on to describe the notion of political culture as “this most inexact and elastic of terms” but retains it anyway before associating it with a Geertzian definition of culture as a “complex whole” of social organization<sup>41</sup>. It is certainly a fact that the frequent and uncritical use of the concept of political culture by historians during the last decades reflects the influence of the “new cultural history” over other domains of the field such as the spheres of the political and the social. Today, every history must be a “cultural history” and that seems to go for political history as well, which has now apparently become the history of political culture. Exactly as in the case of “communication”, this tendency has had a positive effect in opening the perspective and the fields of study for political historians, although the downside remains a lack of “conceptual hygiene”.

Gendzel, for instance, admits that political culture is a “clumpish concept” but thinks it can still be valuable. It should be seen in a long tradition of notions such as Plato’s dispositions, Montesquieu’s “spirit of the laws”, Rousseau’s “mores”, Hume’s ‘manners’, Tocqueville’s “habits of the heart”, Durkheim’s “collective consciousness” and Weber’s “authority systems”<sup>42</sup>. Formisano takes a firmer stance. He calls political culture a “catch word”, an “umbrella concept” and says that it is “deliberately vague” and that, typically, such concepts are in vogue among historians precisely because they are indeterminate<sup>43</sup>. All this considered, the main problem seems to be that Laswell’s and Allmond’s concepts of political culture and public opinion are directed towards consensus models of society. In that sense they do not seem very useful to break open the harmonizing ideologies produced in most medieval texts, which themselves often present inherent conflicts in discourses on what is now generally called “conflict resolution”. At any rate, even if the notion of “political culture” can be used because it is a widespread metaphor, its exact scientific clarity remains disappointing. What is positive about its use, however, is the fact that “political culture” when generally defined as a set of discourses and practices organizing political life in a given society not only denotes top-down political communication but also includes discourses and practices “from below”. The present thematic issue of *La Edad Media* focuses exactly on the “political

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<sup>41</sup> Referring to GEERTZ, *The Interpretation*.

<sup>42</sup> GENDZEL, «Political Culture», p. 226.

<sup>43</sup> FORMISANO, «The Concept», p. 394.

culture” in urban and rural communes, from kinship and other network groups, in some sort of a “dialogue” with “official” political culture<sup>44</sup>.

## 5. PUBLIC OPINION

As already mentioned, the notion of “political culture” has a strong connection with “public opinion” “and with the quantitative research in voters” behaviour that has been at the heart of political science since the mid twentieth century. But what is the heuristic value of the latter concept for the historian? Even before 1900, Ferdinand Tönnies systematically elaborated on the notion, considering public opinion to be fundamental to the modern type of *Gesellschaft* and replacing the shared religious visions of traditional *Gemeinschaft*-societies<sup>45</sup>. Walter Lippman saw public opinion as something volatile, biased, stereotypical and incoherent that should not be taken too seriously by the elite of policy makers<sup>46</sup>. One of the first systematic studies of public opinion in political science, L. W. Doob’s, *Public opinion and propaganda*<sup>47</sup> very critically discussed the concept invoking elements such as “cultural heritage”, “leaders”, “enduring public opinion”, “momentary public opinion”, “socialization”, “consistency”, “rationalization”, “displacement”, “projection”, “identification”, “conformity” and “simplification”. In the end, the goal of such studies of public opinion was to serve as a handbook for opinion polls and marketing, questions obviously of little utility for the medieval historian and the sources he or she disposes of.

The latest attempt by a medievalist to apply this concept was Bernard Guenée’s last book, *Opinion publique*, based on the *Chronique du religieux de Saint-Denis* (written by Michel Pintoin). This is a study, and indeed a brilliant one, of the dissemination and frequency of political vocabularies that can be retrieved in the chronicle<sup>48</sup>. To reconstruct some later medieval French or even Parisian “public

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<sup>44</sup> An example is: OLIVA HERRER, H. R., «La circulation des idées politiques parmi les élites paysannes», in MENANT, F. & JESSENNE, J. P. (eds.), *Les élites rurales dans l’Europe médiévale et moderne*, Toulouse, Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2007, pp. 179-194.

<sup>45</sup> TÖNNIES, F., *Kritik der öffentlichen Meinung*, Berlin, Springer, 1922 (this essay was only published after World War I but represents a synthesis of reflections Tönnies had already started in the 1880s).

<sup>46</sup> LIPPMANN, *Public Opinion*.

<sup>47</sup> See note 24.

<sup>48</sup> GUENEE, B., *L’opinion publique à la fin du Moyen Age: d’après la Chronique de Charles VI du religieux de Saint-Denis*, Paris, Perrin, 2002.



opinion”, however, Guenée’s approach was doomed to failure from the start because the concept is itself an untenable one. The obvious question is “whose public opinion?” It is hardly surprising that medieval historians have defined “public opinion”, for the sake of a particular argument, in rather odd ways. Ross, for instance, puts it in the following manner: ““public opinion” may be taken as reflecting the outlook, attitudes, and interests of the commons in parliament, and, to a lesser degree, those of many members of the lords also. These were the politically active classes with a voice in government: barons, knights, esquires, merchants”<sup>49</sup>. Apart from the theoretical problems such a definition raises, his argument also begs the rhetorical question if “the people”, “the popular”, for example a London guild master, would have had no opinion on a matter such as the War of the Roses, which is the subject matter of his article.

The question seems to be who makes up the medieval *communauté politique*, as Raymond Cazelles and Jean-Philippe Genet have emphasized and popularized the latter term in this context<sup>50</sup>. Are we only talking about some kind of political elite or broader ruling class? Is there any notion of “the people” becoming more prominent on the stage of politics in the later Middle Ages as John Watts has convincingly demonstrated for England?<sup>51</sup> Even if to my mind the concept of “public opinion” is inadequate for the analysis of a chronicle, Guenée’s suggestion that the fourteenth century was the beginning of an epoch in which princes started to consider “ce que pensaient les gens” and therefore, that this period witnessed the birth of “public opinion” is an interesting one<sup>52</sup>. In other words, several problems are at stake here: is the only relevant “public opinion” the one circulating among the political elites or, inversely, does it mean that ideas circulating in broader layers of society start to matter exactly in this period? And this brings us to a further and unavoidable question: does “public opinion” represent a kind of “dominant ideology” or “hegemonic” discourse to put it in terms of Gramscian Marxism, or perhaps a Durkheimian “conscience collective”?<sup>53</sup> Or is it rather a political

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<sup>49</sup> ROSS, «Rumour, Propaganda», p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> CAZELLES, R., *Société politique, noblesse et couronne sous Jean le Bon et Charles V*, Genève, Droz, 1982; GENET, J.-P. (ed.), *La genèse de l'Etat moderne. Culture et société politique en Angleterre*, Paris, PUF, 2003.

<sup>51</sup> WATTS, J., «Public or Plebs: The Changing Meaning of ‘the Commons’, 1381-1549», in ID. and PRYCE, H. (eds.), *Power and Identity in the Middle Ages: Essays in Memory of Rees Davis*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 242-260.

<sup>52</sup> GUENÉE, *L'opinion publique*, p. 10.

<sup>53</sup> ABERCROMBIE, N., HILL, S., and TURNER, B. S., *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1984.

discourse of a more popular nature? These are fundamental problems and space does not permit me to elaborate upon them, but, once again, one thing is clear: to have any sense, the analysis of something like “public opinion” must start from an explicit consideration of the distribution of political power, including symbolic and discursive power, in society.

## 6. COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS AND “SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION”

Can we therefore conclude that public opinion is an irrelevant ideological construct with no heuristic value whatsoever? It certainly ignores both the effect of autonomously circulating discourses within different speech situation models and the – inherently conflict laden – institutional and social settings in which political opinions are constructed and uttered. However, the general notion of “political culture”, though vague and fuzzy, does call attention to these elements. One might say that discourses and practices which make up political communication are produced, circulated and consumed within certain “systems”. Following Sophia Menache, who wrote an interesting synthesis on medieval communication integrating different theoretical perspectives and a lot of empirical material, Genet uses the term “communication systems” (“systèmes de communication”)<sup>54</sup>. In a communication system, the media are not merely technical tools, they are also socially created structures associated with commonly understandable “codes”, shared codes of symbols, semiotic systems. Sounds, for instance, can be organized in music and in speech. Speech can be formalized in discourse. Gestures can accompany words and music in a ritual etc. Finally, in the political history of the early and high Middle Ages, and also under the influence of a “system theory”-inspired approach, an original alternative to “political culture” was developed by Althoff with his notion of “rules of the game” or *Spielregeln*. These are rules for political action or public interaction, they are ‘negotiations’ stressing consent, they can be associated with ‘ceremony’ or, in more contemporary discourse ‘performance’ and “performativity”. Thus, Althoff speaks of the “unwritten laws” of medieval politics, and he also uses the older term “Praxis” to include these forms

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<sup>54</sup> MENACHE, S., *The Vox Dei. Communication in the Middle Ages*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990; GENET, J.-PH., «Histoire et système de communication», in ID. (ed.), *L'histoire et les nouveaux publics dans l'Europe médiévale (XIII-XVe siècles)*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1997, pp. 12-13 and ID., «Culture et communication politique dans l'État européen de la fin du Moyen Âge», in BERSTEIN, S. and MILZA, P. (eds.), *Axes et méthodes de l'histoire politique*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1998, pp. 273-290.

of political communication<sup>55</sup>. In his view, rituals, ceremonies and gestures, forms of “demonstration” and “staging” (*Inszenierung*) basically served to maintain the fundamental social principle of honour in what he calls “archaic society”<sup>56</sup>.

In Gerd Althoff’s work, there is a strong emphasis on non-verbal communication or “rituals”, though “the game” of politics can include all forms of communication. Althoff’s influential distinction between “symbolic”, verbal and written communication has been adopted by many medievalists. His “restrictive” definition of “symbols” and distinctions with “allegories”, “metaphors” and “signs” does not really engage with the generally accepted heritage of Saussurean and Peircean semiotics. However, he acknowledges that verbal communication is also in a way symbolic<sup>57</sup>. The obvious critique is that according to classic semiotics all communication is by definition symbolic and the term is consequently a pleonasm<sup>58</sup>. But in fact, this theoretical idiosyncrasy is of minor importance when compared to his provocative empirical points. As one of the chief proponents of the “performative turn” in medieval studies, he clearly suggests that gestures, rituals, ceremonies would have greater communicative power than the spoken or written word. His claim that so-called “symbolic communication” was dominant in the medieval *Öffentlichkeit*, when he means *Gesten, Gebärden, Ritualen* and all *Handlungen symbolischer Qualität* may seem plausible within the context of the Ottonian court but is in fact hard to prove in many other places and times. It would perhaps be better to simply use the term “non-verbal communication”, and it is certainly Althoff’s merit to have drawn systematic attention to its importance in medieval politics. He makes another useful point in distinguishing speech situations of political council between *Colloquium Familiare* or *Colloquium Secretum*, the advice of the loyal councillors to the prince behind closed door, and the *Colloquium Publicum*, the ritualized assemblies where decisions were decreed, accompanied by the right symbols and gestures<sup>59</sup>. Though his model leaves some space for an engagement of “the public”, given the source situation of the period he studies

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<sup>55</sup> ALTHOFF, G., *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter. Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde*, Darmstadt, Primus Verlag, 1997, pp. 2-3, 10 and passim.

<sup>56</sup> ALTHOFF, *Spielregeln der Politik*, p. 257.

<sup>57</sup> ALTHOFF, G., «Zur Bedeutung symbolischer Kommunikation für das Verständnis des Mittelalters», *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 1997, 31, p. 373.

<sup>58</sup> Wim Blockmans’ similar distinction between “real” and “symbolic” communication also remains confusing when he states that “both systems overlap to some extent” (BLOCKMANS, W., «The Feeling of Being Oneself», in ID. and JANSE, A. (eds.), *Showing Status: Representations of Social Positions in the Late Middle Ages*, Turnhout, Brepols, 1999, p. 10).

<sup>59</sup> ALTHOFF, *Spielregeln der Politik*, pp. 157-184.

Althoff mainly deals with communicative strategies of elites meant to sustain the existing social order. The presence of objective political contradictions is inherent to his model but the emphasis is on what is now mostly called “conflict resolution”. Once again, when reflecting on concepts of “political communication”, the medievalist has to deal with the tension between consensus and conflict in his or her model of analysis, with approaches that highlight or cover up social and political conflict.

## 7. RITUALS OR CEREMONIES

Implicitly structural-functionalist approaches can often be encountered when medieval historians deal with the question of “rituals”. Theories of ritual are often directed to the understanding of acts that seek to maintain the conservation of the social world, for instance a procession of guilds representing the balance and harmony within the political body of a medieval city. Edward Muir has rightly stressed that “political ritual or ritualized politics tends to camouflage tensions, especially by representing more political harmony than may actually exist”. Moreover, he adds, political rituals tend to discourage critical thinking by those who witness them and stimulate schematic thinking<sup>60</sup>. In the last decade, the amount of historiographical writing on royal entry ceremonies and other kinds of so-called “rituals” has been overwhelming. I cannot give it the full attention it deserves in this short essay but it would be impossible to omit this problematic when discussing medieval political communication. The anthropological discussion on rituals that started with the work of Van Gennep and Turner has now become a very voluminous one. Catherine Bell’s most recent book on the subject gives a brilliant overview of all the implications of these discussions, though she seems to mostly ignore the work of medievalists<sup>61</sup>.

The controversy provoked by Philippe Buc’s sharp attack on those medieval historians who see rituals everywhere in the sources and apply anthropology when they should apply text criticism has been dealt with enough for me to repeat it once more<sup>62</sup>. Partly as a result of the debate it has started, medieval historians are

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<sup>60</sup> MUIR, E., *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 230-231.

<sup>61</sup> BELL, C., *Ritual. Perspectives and Dimensions*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>62</sup> BUC, PH., *The Dangers of Ritual: between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001.

developing a more and more nuanced approach in their enthusiasm for “political ritual”. In the context of later medieval urban history, “civic” rituals, have been studied since the work of Trexler and other medievalists and early modernists since the early 1980s, and have inspired a lot of interesting research<sup>63</sup>. However, the concepts of “political ritual” or “civic ritual” also usually remain vague. Althoff defends a pragmatic definition of rituals: “We talk about rituals when actions, or rather chains of actions, of a complex nature are repeated by actors in certain circumstances in the same or similar way, and, if this happens deliberately, with the conscious goal of familiarity. In the mind of both actors and spectators, an ideal type of ritual exists that takes on a material form that is easily recognized in its various concrete manifestations”<sup>64</sup>.

So according to Althoff, as the term “ritual” overlaps with other concepts like ceremony, rite or custom, it should be used loosely, and not too much in connection with particular anthropological paradigms<sup>65</sup>. Other medieval historians disagree with this point of view. For instance, in a recent study dealing with political ritual the later Middle Ages, by Elodie Lecuppre-Desjardin, focusing on the Burgundian princely entries and their interplay with the civic world, the term “ritual” is abandoned in approach of medieval political communication<sup>66</sup>. Lecuppre-Desjardin somewhat nuances the importance of the ritual in history when she states that “violence arose out of urges, disagreements or feelings or attack, but it became organized thanks to ritual gestures that consolidated and justified it”<sup>67</sup>. Not every type of repetitive social or political behaviour is a ritual. She ultimately shies away from the term “ritual” altogether because of its connotation, in the anthropological theories of Van Gennep and Turner on liminality and transformation, and prefers the more general term “ceremony”, which in her view and in the common usage of French ethnology, carries the connotations of the affirmation of social status.

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<sup>63</sup> TREXLER, R. C., *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, New York, Academic Press, 1980; MUIR, E., *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1981; MUIR, *Ritual in Early Europe*.

<sup>64</sup> ALTHOFF, G., «The Variability of Rituals in the Middle Ages», in ID., FRIED, J. and GEARY, P.J. (eds.), *Medieval Concepts of the Past. Ritual, Memory, Historiography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 71.

<sup>65</sup> ALTHOFF, G., *Die Macht der Rituale. Symbolik und Herrschaft im Mittelalter*, Darmstadt, 2003, p. 12.

<sup>66</sup> KIPLING, G., *Enter the King. Theatre, Liturgy, and Ritual in Medieval Civic Triumph*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>67</sup> LECUPPRE-DESJARDIN, E., «The Distorted Messages of Peace: Controlled and Uncontrolled Reactions to Propaganda in the Burgundian Low Countries during the Fifteenth Century», in TE BRAKE, W. (ed.), *Power and the City in the Netherlandic World*, Leiden, Brill, 2006, p. 57.

Lecuppre-Desjardin emphasizes the role of space, traditions, urban memories, emotions, dialogues, and the multiplicity of cultural referents in form and content. In a similar manner, Nicolas Offenstadt wants to consider “les rencontres et les déploiements rituels” in a pragmatic way as situations to be analyzed and study the meaning of all the elements of these performances: time, place, objects, gestures, words, silences etc. In other words, ritual as a “bricolage”<sup>68</sup>. For Nicholas Howe, “Ceremonial culture” comprises processions, dramas, rituals, and liturgies. Some are performed in “public spaces like streets and squares”, others in “sacred spaces like churches and cathedrals”, some legitimize power, others manifest the presence of the sacred. Some are changing over time, others remain the same, though he stresses that such pairings need not be binary oppositions. Thus, ceremonies and rituals are fluid in space and time, and their meaning is constantly interpreted and negotiated<sup>69</sup>. From this necessarily brief overview, one might conclude that there is now a wide range of empirical evidence on the importance of the phenomena classified under the notions of “symbolic communication”, political “rituals” or, if one prefers Lecuppre-Desjardin’s viewpoint, “ceremonies”, but still little agreement on the precise meanings of these terms and on how they should be integrated in a general political “system of communication” as proposed by Menache and Genet.

## 8. PERSPECTIVES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the context of the research project of which this thematic issue of *La Edad Media* has been the result, some other questions deserve far more attention than they have received up till now. First of all, medievalists have seldom reflected on this relationship between political utterances or “speech acts”, or “political discourse” or ideologies on the one hand and these rituals or ceremonies or non-verbal forms of communication which have received most of the medievalists’ attention in the last decades. Even if notions and functions of ritual remain theoretically vague, the performative turn has been crucial in emphasizing the importance of these non-verbal or, according to some, even “ritual” forms of communication. However, the balance may have gone too far in the other direction, so as to underestimate the power of the spoken word in medieval politics, the political “perlocutory speech act” to put in the terms of Austin<sup>70</sup>. In his latest book

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<sup>68</sup> OFFENSTADT, N., *Faire la paix au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2007, pp. 20-23.

<sup>69</sup> HOWE, N., «Introduction», in ID. (ed.), *Ceremonial Culture in Pre-Modern Europe*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, pp. 1, 11.

<sup>70</sup> AUSTIN, J. L., *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1962.

on current trends in cultural history Peter Burke argues for a restoration of the social elements in studying topics like language and practice by studying “communities of practice” and “speech communities”<sup>71</sup>. Menache had also stressed the importance of immediate contact between communicator and audience in what she refers to as “traditional societies”, as in preaching, political assemblies or processions<sup>72</sup>.

Does it not go without saying that when it comes to the sphere of “the political”, apart from those ritualized events (which as Althoff himself states, only make up a certain part of political life) whether in institutionalized settings as in more uncontrolled and spontaneous forms, medieval politics was mainly a question of speech? This is certainly the case when one descends from, say, the Ottonian or Burgundian court, to the level of gossip and rumour in the streets, marketplaces, inns and workshops of the later medieval city, or to a peasant meeting dominated by the *coqs du village*. Certainly in the context of communal politics and the political system and ideology which Blickle calls *Kommunalismus*<sup>73</sup>, both in urban and rural communities, the tendency remains to underestimate the voices of those usually considered voiceless, the local elites and certainly the middle and lower classes. They too possessed a “political culture”, if we define this in a simple manner as a set of more or less formalized and institutionalized discourses and practices dealing with political life, not in a static manner but dynamic and open to subversion and transformation<sup>74</sup>. In that sense, perhaps a crucial task within the further study of “medieval political communication” should be the analysis of these political speech acts “from the bottom up” and in negotiation and dialogue with those of the ruling elites, set in an integral system of communication, accompanied by other media and forms of communicating, whether visual, auditive or gestural, situated in a set of comprehensible codes, and contextualized in a speech situation including its spatial and physical settings, in which power is unequally distributed.

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<sup>71</sup> BURKE, P., *What is Cultural History?*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 104.

<sup>72</sup> MENACHE, *The Vox Dei*, pp. 25-38.

<sup>73</sup> BLICKLE, P., *Kommunalismus. Skizzen einer gesellschaftlichen Organisationsform*, München, Oldenbourg, 2000.

<sup>74</sup> An interesting methodological proposition considering political culture as a set of discourses and practices can be found in ALFONSO ANTÓN, M. I., «Cultura, lenguaje y prácticas políticas en las sociedades medievales: propuestas para su estudio», *Espania*, 2007, 4, pp. 1-8.