

COMMUNICATING POLITICAL ORDER IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Discourse, Agency, and the Exercise of Power

José Antonio Jara Fuente
(coord.)



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Introduction. Communicating Political Order in the Middle Ages¹

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University of Castilla-La Mancha

Political order represents much more than the basic structure of domination operating within a given political entity. It is built upon the interaction of the various political bodies that comprise it, in accordance with what political-constitutional practice establishes in each case, and it is grounded in the communication that necessarily accompanies it —without which it cannot be fully realized.² This communication must be understood as a process, nourished and sustained by the actions of agencies and agents, as well as individual actors. It is a form of communication that necessarily responds to the constraints of the political culture in which it develops —though this does not mean it is incapable of introducing “novelties”, as seen with the incorporation of rhetoric into the arsenal of discursive resources from the 13th century onward. It is a communication expressed through a multiplicity of mechanisms and channels, not always formal. Its message is not necessarily conformist or submissive to power in all cases, as dissent can be part of an ordered political system —in fact, it serves as a safety valve for sociopolitical grievances and a mechanism of negotiation, especially for groups more distant from the core of domination. It is a

¹ This work was undertaken within the framework of research project *Más allá de la palabra. Comunicación y discurso políticos en la Castilla Trastámara (1367-1504) / Beyond the Word. Political Communication and Discourse in Trastámara Castile (1367-1504)*. PID2021-125571NB-I00, funded by MICIU/AEI /10.13039/501100011033 and FEDER, UE.

² ARNAUD, 2012: 7-26; vid. also, MENACHE, 1990. A broad reflection on what the process of communication represented in the Middle Ages, in JARA FUENTE, 2023: 79-102. For the applicability of this analytical model to the Castilian case, see the contributions in CARZOLIO, MUÑOZ GÓMEZ, 2021.

communication constructed through symbols —linguistic or otherwise— relying on a diversity of expressive channels: metaphors and metonymies, artifacts, texts, images, gestures, actions. It is always performative and performed, staging the political relationship and positioning of actors within the specific political order.³

As demonstrated by the studies included in this volume, communication encompasses an extensive array of functions, procedures, agents, channels and instruments, as well as purposes or aims.

As communicative practices align with political agendas —whether supported by structures of domination or reflecting varying degrees of sociopolitical dissent— they manifest in diverse ways. This is evident in the deployment of notions such as unity and the common good, the dissemination of political treatises, or the use of formalized spaces for “debate and agreement”, such as parliaments. Particularly at the local level —in towns, cities, and villages— communication also takes place beyond the official frameworks of municipal councils, through voices raised in taverns, markets, fountains, and public squares. In this way, “public opinion” is shaped; information —including mandates— is transmitted from town councils to community of citizens and residents via town criers; news circulates, whether provided by agents of power, by representatives of the various authorities present in a given space, or by actors operating more or less independently of them; propaganda is disseminated, discourses are crafted to damage or praise reputations, sociopolitical discontent is expressed through rumour, and political rejection is publicly announced.⁴

³ Regarding its functionality and, especially, its integration into processes of social conflict, see LASSWELL, 1948. For its conceptualization and its relationship with the political culture of which it is a part, PALETZ, LIPINSKI, 1994; GENET, 2012: 9-45; DUMOLYN, 2012: 33-55; NIETO SORIA, 2018: 17-47. In relation to political dissent, CORRAL SÁNCHEZ, 2020: 47-65. On the symbolic nature of communication, see the studies collected in REINHARDT, MONNET, KLESMANN, BRUHNS, 2008. On political representation, see, BÉLANGER, 1995: 125-143; BALANDIER, 2006: esp. 19-23 y 42-46; and a case study focused on the Kingdom of Castile in MARTÍNEZ MARTÍNEZ, 2016.

⁴ See, regarding the participation of local communities in these communicative processes, and the significance of such expression within the framework of public spaces, GAUVARD, 1993: 5-13; LETT, OFFENSTADT, 2003; DUMOLYN, HAEMERS, OLIVA HERRER, CHALLET, 2014. For the connection between communication, authority and political power, MARTÍN CEA, OLIVA HERRER, 2012. In relation to propaganda, NIETO SORIA, 1995: 489-515; CARRASCO MANCHADO, 1998: 229-269, and 2006. On rumour, CARRASCO MANCHADO, 2006; FLETCHER, 2014: 193-210; as well as the studies included in BILLORÉ, SORIA, 2011.

These practices acquire a specific expression in the collective action they sustain, acknowledging the political agency exercised by institutions and individuals across the various levels that make up the broader political structure. This agency is fundamentally anchored in communicative processes —more or less formalized— that involve not only the adoption of political agreements but also the public dissemination of selected aspects of the negotiation process that the parties wish to convey to the political community. This constitutes, in effect, an attempt to influence how that community positions itself in relation to the negotiation.⁵ Such communication extends both within and, especially, beyond the local political community, reaching other agencies either within the same overarching political system or external to it —including cities, the nobility, the Church, the monarchy, and even other collective entities organized through associative models, such as craft guilds. In these cases, the communicative process relies on a range of responsible agents: couriers and messengers of various kinds, ambassadors, and also other actors who, whether or not institutionally recognized, occupy strategic positions within communication networks —such as factors and innkeepers.⁶

Finally, communication is constructed through a multiplicity of “languages” that acquire political significance beyond conventional discursive linguistic forms. While dominant groups possess the means to “enforce” specific communicative processes and to “impose” their own categories and channels of communication, the dominated demonstrate, on the one hand, their capacity to insert themselves into the communicative spaces of the dominant —as is expected of them— and to make use of those spaces, with varying degrees of success, in pursuit of their own interests. On the other hand, they also show their ability to develop their own political languages, both public and even secret —languages that may become temporarily public depending on their strategic need to manipulate communication. In this regard, one might consider the political use of certain non-violent forms of expressing conflict, such as the use of urine, faeces, or garbage to convey, that is, to communicate, political rejection. One should also take into account verbal insults and

⁵ JARA FUENTE, 2017: 305-325. DUMOLYN, 2008: 5-23.

⁶ See the studies included in this volume, which, from a more institutional perspective, address these issues in depth. More generally, see the works collected in BOUDREAU, FIANU, GAUVARD, HEBERT, 2004; LAZZARINI, 2015; and the pages devoted to the “hommes de réseaux” in BUCHHOLZER-REMY, 2006: 253-310. For the Iberian Peninsula, see NIETO SORIA, VILLARROEL GONZÁLEZ, 2021a and 2021b.

offensive gestures, which often find expression in music, songs, and satirical pamphlets, and which gained notable diffusion with the advent of print. These forms of communication also circulate through ritualized speech and gesture, incorporated in various ways into this broader communicative repertoire.⁷

Communicating the political order, therefore, entails much more than merely declaring and imposing a particular model of order, as demonstrated by the studies included in this volume. These contributions are the result of an international conference (*Communicating Political Order in the Middle Ages: Discourse, Agency, and the Exercise of Power*), held at the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Humanities on the Cuenca Campus of the University of Castilla-La Mancha, on the 7th and 8th of September, 2023, within the framework of the research project *Más allá de la palabra. Comunicación y discurso políticos en la Castilla Trastámara (1367-1504) / Beyond the Word. Political Communication and Discourse in Trastámara Castile (1367-1504)*. PID2021-125571NB-I00, funded by MICIU/AEI /10.13039/501100011033 and FEDER, UE.

The volume is organized into two main sections. The first is devoted to examining the processes of political organization experienced primarily by the urban world in the Late Middle Ages. It focuses on the constituent elements of communicative processes within this context, both internally—regarding the formation of local political order and its projection over the broader local political community—and externally—particularly in relation to communication with other urban entities, the nobility, and the monarchy. The second, more concise section offers a detailed analysis of communication from the perspective of agents specialized in message transmission within and beyond the political agency, such as town criers and messengers of various kinds.

Although the book focuses on the Castilian urban world and the communicative processes experienced within it and in relation to royal and noble agencies, it also opens up to the consideration of other contexts (Portugal, Flanders, or the Empire), whose presence—though necessarily limited—offers a valuable theoretical and comparative contribution.

⁷ GENET, 1993: 11-29. Particularly noteworthy are the contributions included in DUMOLYN, HAEMERS, OLIVA HERRER, CHALLET, 2014; in MAIREY, GAUTIER, 2009; and in ROSIER, 2012. On the capacity of the dominated to generate their own political languages, see DUMOLYN, HAEMERS, 2012: 45-86; GAMBERINI, 2012: 406-424.

Within the first section of the volume, José Antonio Jara Fuente (*Performing Unity and Concord: Political Communication in the City of Cuenca in the 15th Century*) analyses the discursive use made by the city council of Cuenca of the political-community ideals of unity and concord. In a broader context of profound political disorder affecting the kingdom as a whole —marked by various episodes of civil war up to 1479— the invocation of unity and concord pursued two complementary objectives. On the one hand, it sought to significantly limit political opposition and dissent by binding the urban community —and the dependent rural communities— to a political model presented as a guarantor of order in the face of the kingdom's instability. On the other hand, it aimed to foster within those political communities —urban and rural alike— the perception that policies of unity and concord promoted social harmony. This objective was supported by the discursive manipulation of complementary concepts such as utility, the common good, social peace, and civic love.

Jan Dumolyn (*Rebellious Sign Systems in the Medieval Textile Town of Ypres*) offers an alternative perspective to this model of social peace, focusing on the political agency exercised by textile workers in Flanders, and specifically in Ypres. This capacity for political intervention was expressed through collective action and manifested in their ability to play a leading role in strikes, revolts, and even civil wars. What stands out in this model of political action is, on the one hand, their organizational capacity and their development of a distinct political language through which to articulate their demands; and on the other, their restrained use of physical force, generally employed as a last resort, especially when it escalated into extreme violence —and one should take into account that violence itself also functions as a means of communication.

José María Monsalvo Antón (*Collective Action, Rural Policies and Political Communication of the Villages and the Tierra (Salamanca, Ciudad Rodrigo, Ávila and other nearby Councils, 13th–15th Centuries)*) examines the political role played by the *Tierra*, that is, the collective of villages and their inhabitants, the vast majority of whom were *pecheros* —tax-paying commoners without privileged status—, subject to the municipal jurisdiction of a city or town, in this case, Salamanca, Ciudad Rodrigo, and Ávila. In these specific areas, the *Tierra* reached a notable level of institutionalization —especially when compared to other regions of Castile—, which allows for an in-depth analysis of the communicative processes that took place in this space: first, between the various villages and their inhabitants or representatives and the *Tierra* itself; and second,

between the representatives of the *Tierra* and the urban municipal authority to which they were subordinate. The examination of these processes reveals the existence of a distinct political culture among these non-privileged rural communities, insofar as it reflects specific values shared among them, independently of the city and even of the urban *pecheros*.

Adelaide Millán da Costa (*Preserving, Selecting and Organising the Political Communication Testimonies of Castelo de Vide, a Small Portuguese Town (Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries)*) moves beyond the analysis of communicative processes within the strictly local sphere —within the city or town itself, or in relation to its municipal jurisdiction— to explore the opportunities for communication and the instruments employed by the town of Castelo de Vide in its political interactions beyond its institutional singularity. The study focuses on the communicative exchanges established particularly with the monarchy and the nobility, especially in cases where these actors had economic or legal interests in the town or in neighbouring municipalities —where they could even exercise jurisdictional rights. The analysis centres on the documented flows of communication, seeking to identify the underlying causes and the actors who, in one way or another, participated in the various communicative processes.

Hipólito Rafael Oliva Herrer (*“Por lo que toca al rey y a mi pueblo tengo que morir” [For the sake of the king and my people, I must die]: A Reading from the Citizen’s Perspective of the Principles of Legitimation of the Urban Political System*) examines the communicative process between the kingdom’s community and the monarchy in order to analyse the type of relationship established within the framework of governance at the regnal level. On this basis, he explores the political weight attained by the kingdom’s political community —essentially, the Castilian urban world— within that relationship. This political weight is largely explained by the cities’ demonstrated capacity to identify their own political objectives and to articulate a specific form of communication. This specificity is rooted, in part, in the emergence of public opinion within the urban environment —sometimes peripheral to formal urban institutions, and in other cases, the result of the political representation achieved by commoners. It is also expressed through non-institutional forms of occupying public space and through the instruments of political expression adopted by these actors, including the use of various forms of violence. All of this contributed to placing limits on the decision-making

power of urban authorities and on their communicative projection toward other agencies, particularly the monarchy.

Eloísa Ramírez Vaquero (*Royal Words, Majestic Gestures: The Évreux's Dealings with Their Urban Elites in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*) shifts the analytical focus by making the monarchy and its officials the protagonists of the communicative process. In this study, she examines urban communication with the crown as a reactive process—a response to communication initiated from above. This communication did not always entail dialogue, or even the semblance of it, as was the case in the first third of the thirteenth century. However, with the introduction of the Champagne and Évreux dynasties, it gradually began to acquire more participatory features, not merely formal ones, as demonstrated by the urban world's capacity to engage in the reception of the new Évreux dynasty and to negotiate spaces for dialogue with the crown and its officials.

Gisela Naegle (*Reform, Feuds, Insults and Debates: Communicating Political Order in the Holy Roman Empire (15th Century–1525)*) devotes her contribution to examining the often-violent interactions between the urban world of the Empire and three German noblemen: Ulrich von Hutten, Franz von Sickingen, and Götz von Berlichingen. This analysis is set against the backdrop of the introduction of Protestantism and a period of intense conflict, marked by the Peasants' War of 1524–1526. The conflicts these noblemen sustained with the cities involved not only the extensive use of military violence but also the deployment of verbal and literary forms of communication, in which the use of invective shaped the model of political relations established with urban communities. Insults, denigration, and personal or political dishonour—including offensive references of a sexual or physiological nature—formed the basis of this communicative model and the structuring of political relationships.

In the second section of the book, dedicated to specialized communication agents, Óscar López Gómez (*Political Communication in Urban Government: Public Announcements and the Rhetoric of Power in Late Medieval Castile*) focuses his study on town criers. These figures, endowed with clear diction and powerful voices, so fully embodied the official information that municipal authorities intended to communicate to the urban community that, in some cities, members of dominant groups dissatisfied with those in power appointed their own criers in

an effort to take control of both communication and the public space in which it was performed. This public space was structured around locations where communication played a central role, such as public squares and marketplaces. —a space the crier had to master, for example, by using a musical instrument, to attract the largest possible audience and ensure effective communication. It was not uncommon for criers, when delivering particularly important messages, to be accompanied by members of the municipal authority or representatives of the clergy, in order to emphasize the significance of the announcement. These messages were often used to instrumentalize, for the benefit of urban authority, a broad political-communal lexicon, in which appeals to the common good, for instance, served as a mechanism for legitimizing urban governance.

Enrique José Ruiz Pilares (*The Intermediate Actors of Political Communication: Messengers from the Cities of the Kingdom of Seville during the Reign of the Catholic Monarchs*) examines the various figures who, in an institutionalized manner, participated in inter-agency communication processes. He distinguishes between the broad group of individuals who merely transported documents from one agency to another —the couriers—, and those who also engaged in the negotiation processes inherent to specific communications —the messengers. This latter group consisted of individuals drawn from the urban elites, with whom they clearly shared a political culture. This shared culture implied a similar model of intellectual formation —most had received at least basic education, and a smaller proportion had completed university studies— and a strong lineage-based competition for access to urban offices, including that of messenger. This competition, when it involved communication processes of particular importance —such as those with the monarchy— did not disappear but was limited in scope to individuals with connections to the royal apparatus, such as royal vassals. A similar pattern can be observed in communications with members of the high Andalusian nobility. The study explores the procedures for appointing and financing these personnel, concluding with a brief case study.

With a complementary approach, Víctor Muñoz Gómez (*Mediators between Powers: Agents of Communication in Seigneurial Towns (Castile, c.1375–c.1460)*) examines the role played by a broad category of mediating agents in towns and villages under noble lordship. This communication extends beyond the strictly local sphere to reach seigneurial agents, the lords themselves, and even the monarchy and its agents. One of the most striking findings —key to understanding and characterizing the

model of political organization within these seigneurial towns— is the ability of certain individuals, residents of these communities, to operate across multiple centres and scales of power, moving fluidly between municipal councils, royal service, and integration into noble clienteles. The study not only explores the sociopolitical status of these agents and their role in the communication process, but also, through an analysis of the foundations of each communicative act, seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the overall process.

The volume concludes with the study by Gonçalo Melo da Silva (*From the Town to the World: The Political Communication Network of Loulé at the End of the Middle Ages: Agents, Missions and Journeys*), which reconstructs the communication system of a municipal council, that of Loulé, in relation to its broader political environment. Town criers centralized internal communication, just as couriers, messengers, and procurators managed external communication —a sphere in which the occasional role of the spy also deserves attention, as a guarantor of information obtained surreptitiously. The author offers a detailed analysis of the selection procedures for these agents and the control exercised over them by the local elite, as well as the technical specificities of their missions and the benefits derived from the communication process —not only for the city itself, but also for the agents involved —ultimately, access to information also constitutes a form of power for these actors.

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Political order represents much more than the basic structure of domination operating within a given political entity. It is built upon the interaction of the various political bodies that comprise it, in accordance with what political-constitutional practice establishes in each case, and it is grounded in the communication that necessarily accompanies it. As demonstrated by the studies included in this volume, communication encompasses an extensive array of functions, procedures, agents, channels and instruments, as well as purposes or aims. Communicating the political order, therefore, entails much more than merely declaring and imposing a particular model of order.

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