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The Problem with Soft Power: A Vicious Referential Cycle ^[1]

International relations (IR), public diplomacy and soft power scholars and practitioners may be all too familiar with the concept's criticism and its shortcomings, such as its "unbearable lightness" (can power truly be soft?) and fuzziness (hard to identify and measure). Joseph Nye himself admitted that the term is often misunderstood, but perhaps he missed another major point, a self-reflective one.

I have been studying soft power for more than five years now, and I would argue that one of the major issues with scholarly research on soft power is that the vast majority of people writing about it refer back predominantly, if not exclusively, to Nye's work, which should be the starting point of the discussion, but not the end.

After all, as in other scientific disciplines, discovering a phenomenon does not mean that you grasp all the workings or nuances of it from the very beginning.

Briefly said, many scholars tend to build their conceptual and theoretical arguments on, or against, Nye's while generally ignoring remarkable developments from recent and not-so-recent years. Surely, Nye has his merit as the person who brought the term to us, and indirectly to global attention, and he has updated and revised his ideas in multiple instances.

However, if one solely refers to Nye, they will not only miss promising developments but also perpetrate the same shortcomings in an endless vicious referential cycle, which should be interrupted sooner than later.

How can this be done? To begin, scholars and practitioners should collaborate to identify and broadly agree on what constitutes the state of the art on soft power research. Due to the ever-growing material published on the matter, this is easier said than done. A good starting point could certainly be the Handbook of Soft Power, but there are significant areas where advances have been made. Regrettably, these not only pass under the radar but are also still ripe for investigation. What can some examples be?

It is about time to break this vicious and stagnant referential cycle while recognizing the achievements of these scholars to eventually set some additional standards for soft power studies and bring the discipline to the next level.

In two separate articles published in 2019, Bakalov tackled what could arguably be the thorniest aspect of soft power analysis — its conceptual shortcomings. In the first, the author lamented the gap between “concept-driven and case-centered studies,” while trying to find some common ground between the two. In the second, Bakalov attempted to set soft power in motion while proposing a “dynamic conceptual framework” through sophisticated diagrams that show its underlying mechanisms at work.

In 2020, Ohnesorge published a comprehensive volume that has the potential to become a seminal one in the discipline: Soft Power The Forces of Attraction in International Relations. In addition to better positioning soft power within the realm of IR studies, the author proposes a meticulous taxonomy to assess soft power dynamics in multiple ways, such as chronologically or comparatively, and also a precise methodological roadmap.

Vuving has instead pushed for some noteworthy theoretical advances in two papers, ten years apart. In 2009, the author wanted to explain “How Soft Power Works,” moving beyond the sole possession of resources while trying to clarify how they actually attract foreign audiences. In 2019, embracing a multidisciplinary approach, Vuving outlined a theory of soft power in which he describes the concept as power-with, as opposed to power-over, while explaining causal mechanisms of attraction as characterized by agential qualities, such as kindness, competence and commitment.

From a more empirical perspective, Carminati combined the observations of a selection of scholars to draw some attention to the overlooked tight interaction between soft and economic power, particularly through the international conduct of China. Paired with the above work, this pragmatic approach could shed some light on what constitutes attraction in the 21st century, its oft-neglected competitive side and how it affects different recipients, especially in the developing world.

Within and beyond academia, measuring soft power has been a contentious matter since its inception, but the Global Soft Power Index has picked up from the remarkable work of the Soft Power 30 to become an invaluable tool of analysis. It not only gathers an impressive amount of data to be both embedded into current and future research, but it is also open to criticism to further improve and refine its methodology to better reflect and assess global soft power dynamics.

It should be noted that these are only some prominent areas of investigation, while also acknowledging that it ignores valuable scholarly work that might have been written in other languages such as Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Russian, Arabic and more. That said, they can already constitute some fairly solid bases in addition to standing on the shoulders of a single giant, Nye.

Moving forward, I urge scholars willing to deal with the fuzzy, but fascinating, world of soft power to pay due attention and respect to Nye’s work. Yet, the concept is now more than 30 years old, and it deserves to reach a certain level of maturity and independence, which does not need to be adulthood, but at least a form of adolescence to recognize that some traits have been influenced by external stimuli, beyond “paternal” supervision.

These traits have been identified through the hard work of scholars all across the world closely observing how soft power dynamics of attraction have been evolving in different situations and regions, within and around the realm of international relations and diplomacy. It is about time to break this vicious and stagnant referential cycle while recognizing the achievements of these scholars to eventually set some additional standards for soft power studies and bring the discipline to the next level.
