

The Positivist Research Agenda of Soft Power: A Critical Review

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Abstract

The discourse on soft power within international relations (IR) is rife with contention, particularly regarding its definition. Admittedly, the question of defining soft power bears the foundational implication of demonstrating its very existence as in contrast to hard power in international politics. Scholars engage in a seemingly endless debate over what exactly constitutes soft power, often at odds with each other. This ongoing quest has birthed a veritable cornucopia of terminologies, resulting in a confusing mishmash of concepts that frequently overlap and contradict each other. Implicit in this academic fracas is the positivist assumption that soft power is an objective reality awaiting decipherment through conceptual dissection. However, rather than elucidating the nature of soft power, this collective effort has engendered confusion, hindering scholarly progress. The proliferation of terminologies has only served to obfuscate the matter further. In light of this shortcoming, a different, non-positivist approach to soft power is warranted for a better understanding, circumventing the conceptual conundrums of the positivist agenda.

Keywords: Soft power, international relations, positivism, research agenda, taxonomy

INTRODUCTION

It is commonplace in International Relations (IR) and related fields to say that soft power has become a popular concept that has been appropriated by the language and discourse of policymakers and analysts worldwide (Ohnesorge, 2023). Correspondingly common are the complaints of scholars about the inconsistent use of the concept in policy circles and politics at large, as well as in academic debates. Disturbed by the probable irrelevance of soft power, defined as non-coercive influence, as an actual phenomenon in international affairs as well as its so-called “fuzziness” (Kearn, 2011) and analytical weakness as a concept (Layne, 2010), a plethora of soft power scholars endeavored in a (mostly theoretical) research agenda aimed at seeking more sophisticated definitions of soft power, with the overarching goal of attaining viable ways to scientifically operationalize the analysis of soft power phenomena and thereby demonstrate the actuality of soft power in international relations and justify its dignity in scholarly lexicon.

This article critically reviews some of the most popular classical and more recent studies that are most often cited and found most representative of the soft power theoretical research agenda. This endeavor lays the ground for advancing a different approach to soft power for future research. Initially drawing from the much-discussed distinction between soft power resources and behaviors which was already present in Joseph Nye’s primordial elaboration of the soft power idea, the theoretical research agenda on soft power resulted in the continuous growth of ever more complex taxonomies of soft power components, working mechanisms, causal logics, and so forth. As the taxonomies proliferate, however, the paradoxical effect is that further confusion is added to the conceptualization of soft power.

While it is true that, on the one hand, the production of new taxonomies of soft power are aimed at clarifying whether and how soft power works, on the other hand the web of separate taxonomies

that emerge as a result thereof drives the scholarship away from converging toward a consensus on the terminology of soft power elements and processes. While the taxonomies overlap in some respects and diverge in some others, soft power research remains in a perpetual *pre-paradigmatic*, or non-paradigmatic, state with no common language, methods, and assumptions universally shared by the scholarly community. Ultimately, the separate attempts to demonstrate and clarify the existence and relevance of soft power in international affairs on the part of a multiplicity of scholars eventually result in endless confusion as concerns the common understanding of what soft power is and how does it work.

Inception: Soft Power Resources and Outcomes

It is canonically held that the story of the idea of soft power starts with Joseph Nye's coinage of it in the late 1980s amid the debate on America's decline (Raucher, 2001). The theory of soft power resulting from it has evolved over the years through Nye's various publications, including his well-known books, now age-old classics of the IR literature, and a plethora of scholarly articles and other publications for wider divulgation. In *Bound to Lead* (1990), Nye introduced the concept of soft power as an alternative to traditional notions of (hard) power based solely on military or economic might. He notoriously defined soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion, generically arguing that a country's soft power rests on resources such as its culture, political values, foreign policies, and international reputation. A comprehensive framework for understanding soft power was provided as late as 2004 with the publication of the book *Soft Power*, where soft power was defined by the "ability to shape the preferences and behavior of others through attraction rather than coercion" (Nye, 2004).

Nye identified three main sources of soft power: culture (including political values, institutions, and ideology), political values and policies, and foreign policy behavior. The importance of credibility, authenticity, and building networks in enhancing a country's soft power was also emphasized. In the *Future of Power* (2011) the analysis of power was expanded to include the concept of "smart power," which is the combination of both hard and soft power resources. The twenty-first century, it was argued, requires a smart combination of military, economic, and soft power instruments. It was argued that soft power complements hard power and can be a more cost-effective and sustainable means of achieving a country's objectives in the international arena. In the same book, Nye also provided one of the many available refinements of his definition of soft power: "the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes" (Nye, 2011: 13).

Classical Critiques

By the end of the 2000s the soft power concept had already attracted the attention of scholars in IR, sparking a momentous debate. Famous and recurrently cited in the relevant academic literature until nowadays are the two "classical" critiques by Niall Ferguson (2004) and Janice Bially Mattern (2005). Ferguson's critique of soft power is most notably expressed in his book *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*, which was published in the same year of Nye's *Soft Power*. In this work, Ferguson explores the role of the United States as a global power, challenges the assumption of the effectiveness of soft power, and arguing that military and economic strength are more crucial in shaping world affairs than the cultural and ideological influence associated with soft power (Ferguson, 2004).

From a social constructivist angle, Janice Bially Mattern published an article in the *Millennium Journal of International Studies* where she reconceptualizes soft power as "representational force" or coercion, advancing the argument that "soft power isn't so soft" because the communicational

process undergirding all soft power interaction involves a “competition over the terms of reality” or “verbal fight” that oppresses and threatens to the ontological security of the actor at receiving end of a given soft power policy (Mattern, 2005). This viewpoint leads to the conclusion that, at a conceptual and logical level, soft power is little more than but the continuation of hard power; thus, it hardly makes sense to talk about it.

Categorical Complications

It thus appears that soft power was already showing fundamental conceptual difficulties ever since that early phase of academic debate. These two critiques have been frequently mentioned in the debate that followed. In that context, a number of scholars have subsequently tried to reactively engage with this kind of critiques that threaten the very qualification of soft power as a concept worth discussing in academic analyses and debates. The threat to soft power’s qualification as an analytical concept arises from the difficulties in distinguishing it from hard power. Is soft power defined simply as those forms of influence activated by non-tangible resources and instruments (cultural, informational, communicational, and so on), or shall it be defined differently? As it has been recognized by a multitude of scholars, such definition turns out to be problematic because non-tangible instruments can also be employed in ways that scholars identify as coercive, thereby amounting to hard power.

Popular is Joseph Nye’s own specification that informational tactics such as disinformation and propaganda, notwithstanding their non-tangibility, do not qualify as soft power but are rather coercive measures that exert pressure on the targeted subject and constrain their freedom of choice (Nye, 2019). On the flip side, the utilization of the military instrument does not necessarily imply coercion if employed for benevolent and empowering purposes, such as disaster relief and humanitarian aid (Nye, 2013).

These specifications, whose logic resonate and fuel much substantial critique of soft power’s qualification as a valid concept for scholarly analysis, have triggered the attempt on the part of scholars to unequivocally determine the existence of soft power as a discrete empirical fact distinct from hard power and to demonstrate and measure its effects in international politics.

In an oft-cited article, Todd Hall acknowledges soft power as a current catchphrase for policy practice, with “[p]olicymakers in various countries hav[ing] adopted this terminology to advance and justify their international efforts towards cultural promotion and public outreach. [...] Correspondingly, the term soft power is frequently employed in academia as an analytical category referring to the various non-tangible resources that state actors have at their disposal to influence the behaviour of others” (Hall, 2010: 189-90). Hall subsequently formalizes the distinction between soft power as “category of practice” and as “category of analysis,” where the former stands for the policymakers’ intuition about the possibility of influencing international actors based on sources other than military might and economic inducements, and the latter as one of the “experience-distant categories used by social scientists”(Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) to make it possible to isolate the supposed phenomenon of soft power in scientific analysis.

After fundamentally criticizing and dismissing the mechanism of “attraction” which in Nye’s theory supports and justifies the whole idea of soft power, Hall nonetheless moves on to replace the causally (empirically) unclear categories of attraction with a reconceptualization of soft power mechanisms in terms of “reputational power” and “representational power.” In essence, while recognizing the “dual existence” of soft power as category of practice and category of analysis and admitting that “attributes that make an appealing category of practice do not necessarily match those that constitute a functioning category of analysis” (Hall, 2010: 194), Hall still ends up proposing an alternative and

assumedly more accurate and efficient taxonomy of soft power mechanisms. What this move implicates is the reinforcement of the positivist idea that “soft power exists out there” and can be scrutinized scientifically by more detailed conceptualizations and categorizations of inner mechanisms, thereby furthering the empiricist soft power research agenda.

Concerned by the “conceptual stretching” of soft power that “generated a catchword for any form of influence not using military command, which reduces the usefulness of the concept in analytical and policy research” (Rothman, 2011: 50) Seven B. Rothman endeavors in the reformulation of soft power not in dichotomic opposition to hard power but rather along a continuum between the hardest and softest poles. While Joseph Nye originally postulated the discrete distinction between hard or command power (comprising the mechanisms of “coercion” and “inducement”) and soft or co-optive power (comprising the mechanisms of “agenda-setting” and “attraction”), Rothman proposes the redefinition in terms of “harder powers” and “softer powers” that derive from a number of different resources, including: military, economic, institutional, rhetoric/success (ordered from the hardest to the softest along a non-discrete spectrum).

After that, he moves on to detail about two mechanisms by which the power of attraction supposedly works, namely, (1) rhetoric and discourse control, and (2) norm diffusion: “Through rhetoric, symbols, and other actions, individuals may change the dominant discourse or frame, altering the context for decision-making. By producing successful policies and ideas, actors copy and reproduce successful ideas and policies thus diffusing norms across state boundaries” (Rothman, 2011: 60).

In the case of this theoretical reformulation of soft power, we see again a scholarly attempt to re-elaborate the spectrum of powers and complicate the categorization of soft power mechanisms. While this is a welcomed research development for more accurate understanding and analysis of the soft power phenomenon, the overall outcome resulting from the proliferation of partially overlapping and diverging categories adds confusion from the perspective of a common taxonomy for the academic community to agree on what soft power is and how does it work, as is revealed below.

Dynamic Models and Further Complications

The problem of categorizing the elements of soft power has been lingering, at least, for one decade until a new generation of soft power scholars came up with (again) conceptual revisions and new models for soft-power analysis. Like all colleagues, Ivan Bakalov starts with the recognition of the widely acknowledged unfitnes of the soft power concept for academic service, mostly deriving from Joseph Nye’s “indefinite phrasing” and indeterminacy in the classification of and distinction between soft power “resources” and soft power “behaviors” (Bakalov, 2020). Reiterating and elaborating upon the already formulated continuum of hard and soft powers, Bakalov advances a difference-in-degree, rather than difference-in-kind, typology based on the tangible or intangible natures command (hard) power resources and co-optive (soft) power resources.

Next, he formalizes dynamic process-centered model for analysis stemming from the premise of the understanding of soft power as a relational and diachronic phenomenon. Contending with the existing one-way models of direct (resources → government elites → attraction → elite decision) and indirect (resources → publics → attract/repel → enabling/disabling environment → elite decision) (Bakalov, 2020: 507), Bakalov proposes a dynamic model accounting for the activation of “resources” (tangible and intangible) through “repertoires” (command and co-optation) producing “(intermediary) outcomes” that, in turn, generate “feedback” prompting new combinations of hard/soft power resources and repertoires.

Interestingly, the shifting of focus from static actors to dynamic processes admittedly bypasses the problem of causal inference afflicting the actor-centered models of analysis. It does not, therefore, represent a “theory,” in as far as it “does not stipulate any model explanation of outcomes,” but is rather a conceptual framework aimed at offering a descriptive representation of soft power at work. This necessarily presupposes the positivist assumption that soft power exists as an empirical object which can be described, analyzed, and explained by ever more refined and complex analytical models and classifications.

Finally – and most remarkably, due to the size of the work – as a doctoral thesis defended at the University of Bonn and later published for Springer as a monograph, Hendrick W. Ohnesorge proposes a “new conceptual paradigm” by elaborating yet another “taxonomy” dividing soft power into four “subunits”: resources (called “Subunit I”), instruments (“Subunit II”), reception (“Subunit III”), outcomes (“Subunit IV”). Subunit I comprise four “components”: culture, values, policies, and “personalities” (with the latter component is added by Ohnesorge to the three canonical resources of soft power postulated by Nye). Public diplomacy and “personal diplomacy” are recognized as the “instruments” of soft power (Subunit III); while on the side of the actor at the receiving end of the soft power interaction reception may manifest in the range of “attraction,” “apathy,” and “repulsion” (Subunit III), in turn determining the outcomes of “compliance,” “neutrality,” or “opposition” (Subunit IV).

This is how, in Ohnesorge’s own words, soft power is “deconstructed” while stressing, again, as a plethora of other scholars customarily do, the contextual and relational nature of soft power. As concerns the problem of causation in soft power, Ohnesorge recognizes the relevance of multicausality and advocates a “comparative historical method,” he elaborates a detailed list of “indicators” for soft power measurement for use in empirical analysis, by implication maintaining a positivist posture toward the study of soft power, albeit nuanced.

Overall Observations

The review of select advancements in the theoretical research on soft power outlined above reveals three overall tendencies. First, the positivist soft power agenda ostensibly originates as a reactive response to the critiques of soft power questioning the very tenability of the whole conception of soft power as a separate recognizable entity distinct from hard power. The unfortunate and commonly acknowledged “conceptual stretching” (Rothman, 2011: 50) otherwise phrased “conceptual muddle” (Hall, 2010: 151) caused mostly by Nye’s definition and multiple redefinitions of soft power, prompted whom we may call here the “positivist scholars” to endeavor in the quest of more conceptual clarity aimed at more substantively conceptualize what soft power is and render it an intelligible signifier of a phenomenal referent supposedly distinguishable in contrast to hard power – be it through discrete separation or along a non-discrete spectrum .

Second, this common, uncoordinated endeavor by separate positivist scholars has produced a multiplicity of conceptualizations and taxonomies of soft power components and mechanisms, analytical models of soft power mechanisms, categorizations of soft power (re)sources and instruments, and so on. In general, it can be noticed that what these analytical efforts share in common is a deconstructionist impulse, or “inward tendency”, to unpack, dissect, and single out ever more detailed and minute elements embedded in and forming what is referred to as soft power.

Third, the need and pursuit of theoretical clarity, stemmed as we know from the recognition of soft power as an “ambiguous signifier with a nebulous theoretical core” (Kearn, 2011: 66), stands in tension with the unavoidable discovery of the multiple, non-linear causation which is at play in all cases of soft power in the empirical world. The improved understanding of the actual operation of

soft power enabled by increasingly precise theoretical instruments of analysis inevitably leads to the recognition that soft power is in reality a complex non-linear phenomenon involving multiple circular processes of influence and feedback. In particular, the consensus on the relational nature of soft power has inevitably resulted in the production of dynamic analytical models and the acknowledgement of non-linear causality.

CONCLUSION

It can be observed from the present review that, quite paradoxically, the accumulation of manifold terminologies and conceptualizations of soft power and whatever inner elements and processes inherent in it generated by the positivists' taxonomical compulsion has not led to a general paradigmatic consensus on a commonly agreed conceptualization, terminology, analytical model, and methods for a scientific (causal) analysis of soft power. In this sense, we may conclude (at least provisionally) that the overall effect of a conceptual clarification through narrowing (as opposed to conceptual stretch and muddle) has not been produced, but rather the opposite. While the elaboration and provision of more accurate specifications on the characteristics and functioning of soft power are certainly intellectually noble and honorable endeavors *per se*, from a systemic point of view the reality is that the desire for conceptual clarification has not been fulfilled.

In other words, it has never been granted that putting the putative soft power phenomenon under the intellectual microscope and mentally dissecting it by terming newer and additional concepts would produce a shared consensus on what soft power is and how does it work. Rather, further conceptual expansion (i.e., stretching) and confusion could be entirely anticipated. For instance, from the systemic perspective of the academic community, the contribution of Ohnesorge's new listing of indicators for soft power measurement, no matter how richly adorned with delightful literary and scholarly references and quotes, remains unclear at a time when the indicators of yearly published indexes such as the Soft Power 30, the Anholt-Ipsos NBI, and Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index are already well-established, recognized, and utilized routinely by the relevant communities in academia, policy-making, and research in various fields.

In addition, it has been proven in the trajectory of the theoretical research that the more sophisticated the analytical tools get, the more they almost inevitably end up recognizing the non-linear causal relationships constituting the empirical phenomenon of soft power. The finding of soft power's non-linearity ultimately negates and prevents the required theoretical clarification of independent causes and effects, thereby failing to respond to the question of how soft power works.

This article argues that the conceptual and theoretical quagmires of soft power can hardly be ever solved by a positivist research agenda. However, it remains true that the primordial "intuitive plausibility" (Kearn, 2011: 66) of soft power in policymaking still actually produces tangible effects and constraints in inter- and trans-national relations and communication. An awareness of the actual role and implications of soft power in contemporary world affairs retains continued relevance to policies and discourses of sovereign states in global politics. Further study is therefore warranted to understand the discourses and practices of soft power by nation-states.

In light of this awareness, and against the backdrop of the failures of the existing positivist agenda, this study foregrounds the suggestion that a non-positivist approach is better suited to the understanding and application of soft power in international politics. A hermeneutic (interpretivist, non-positivist) approach should treat soft power not as an objective phenomenon that exists "out there" in the empirical reality of international politics in need to be dissected and analyzed by ever-more detailed and complex taxonomies, but rather as a social construct that has been formed and transformed across history and geographical locations by interested political actors.

In other words, the matter should be to isolate and suspend the “empiricist/positivist framing” of soft power as “a material entity that can be measured” reliant on the “truthful representation of facts” in favor of a “hermeneutic understanding” exclusively concerned with asking “what does soft power means?” for different actors in the international arena (Hayden, 2011; Callahan, 2012), suspending the positivist assumption of soft power’s objective existence in the empirical world and the impulse to define and describe the way it works and replaces it with the idea that it does not matter what soft power is and how does it work, but rather how the relevant actors think of it and what do they actually make out of its idea. To rephrase the constructivist adage: Soft power is what states make of it.

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