

De-Provincializing Soft Power: A Global-Historical Approach, 1990-2015

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"De-Provincializing Soft Power: A Global-Historical Approach" is a three-year research project designed to study the power of cultural persuasion in foreign relations in ways that look beyond the Transatlantic and Western framework in which studies of "soft power" originated in the early 1990s. The project introduces the cases of three emerging powers, Brazil, China, and Turkey, that have developed soft-power agendas in rivalry with the U.S., Europe, and, in at least one region—Africa—with each other. The project brings into conversation scholars in history, communications, cultural studies, and international relations to develop key indicators to understanding national practices of soft power, their cultural tap roots and historical legacies, as they were transformed in light of cyber-technology, multilateralism, and big shifts in relative economic, military, and political power. The principal activities are conferences held in successive years at Columbia's centers in Istanbul, Beijing, and Rio de Janeiro, each bringing together faculty investigators and student participants from the regions represented in the study. In building its team, the project will exploit Columbia's cross-school resources and draw on the Global Centers' ability to facilitate regional research partnerships. The conferences will help create "lateral" connections among the centers and encourage their use to address global as well as regional issues. Students' roles, an integral component of the project, are designed to produce meaningful interaction with Columbia faculty and peers abroad.

This project is meant to be both critical and generative, producing the material for a new global history of the politics of persuasion and the foundation for new policies. The project's principal outcomes will be a collaboratively written global history of soft power; student research; an open-access website; and an NEH Summer Institute for College Teachers, which following the NEH's well honed model will disseminate the project's results widely in U.S. higher education.

I. The Problem

In after dinner remarks following the 2010 European Institute seminar on "Strategic Communication from a Transatlantic Perspective," Admiral Eric T. Olson quipped something to the effect that, "It used to be that armies shoot and move. Then they had to shoot, move, and communicate. Now they have to shoot, move, communicate, and do soft power." The former Navy Seal was about to step down as commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, and he used this occasion to voice his concern that the Global War on Terrorism had tasked the U.S. military to handle what he regarded as civilian government and civil society responsibilities—community development, norms-making, nation-building—to the detriment of its "hard" or military-security functions. Soft power operations entered into the purview of public diplomacy and were the business of foreign relations, not military affairs. The Admiral was touching on a larger point, namely that over the 1990s, the public diplomacy arsenal built up during the Cold War and identified with the Voice of America, United States Information Agency, and other government agencies had become obsolescent. On the eve of the Global War on Terrorism, civilian government had done little to overhaul it, leaving the military to step into the breach.

The Admiral's remarks sparked the initial thinking behind this proposal to the President's Global Innovation Fund. First, we were struck by the degree to which "soft power" had become so explicitly framed in terms of national security imperatives. The concept had originally arisen in the early 1990s to advocate the use of America's wellsprings of persuasive power in the more complex world of multilateralism, cyber information technology, and international NGO networks to reach audiences culturally distant from the target publics of the Cold War and thus reduce use of the military option. Moreover, we found it practically impossible to put American interlocutors using the term "soft power" in dialogue with Europeans using the notion of "civilian" or "normative power," even if, with different terminologies and different historical experience, both were partaking in a Transatlantic conversation over re-securing core western liberal values and widening the NATO Alliance. Europeans came out far softer than Americans on this score, to the degree that the European Union had emerged in its "supra-power" form in recognition that it could never again build its global leadership on militarism and that its influence, especially as an alternative to U.S. bilateralism and military interventionism, came from flexing its normative powers internationally on global issues such as human rights, public health, and climate change. Finally, we saw that these rival models both reeked of the parochial to the degree that they treated the rest of the world as target audiences, rather than as having strong foreign-cultural agendas of its own, which were beginning to be mobilized for hegemonic purposes both at home and abroad.

In fact, over the last two decades, emerging powers have more and more explicitly been pursuing their own "soft" agendas on the international stage. Powerful new regional actors have been reassessing how to position their own particular cultural resources to enhance their influence to make it either commensurate or perhaps even superior to their economic, political, and military weight. Taking a global perspective, we want here to treat the wildfire spread of the term "soft power" as an indicator of a widespread creative anxiety over the power that a strong cultural agenda can exercise in pursuing national and multilateral interests, to understand why in this historical period of time, roughly since the 1990s, but especially in the years of the Global War on Terrorism, the rise of the BRICs, and the extraordinary reconfiguration of sovereignty under the aegis of cyber-communicativity, soft power has become identified as a marker of new kind of global intra-state political competition, and also, potentially, as a new force for multilateral global governance.

Our proposal for a three-year multilateral study of the concept and practice of soft power thus starts from the need to de-provincialize or de-locate it from the cross-Atlantic locus in which it was initially formulated and debated. While recognizing the importance of U.S. and European actors, the project builds in the cases of three nations that came of age internationally as part of the process of the multilateralization of global power since the 1970s. The cases chosen, Brazil, China, and Turkey, all offer distinctive characteristics in this domain in terms of the civilizational resources they bring to their foreign relations (coming out of metanarratives about their pasts, as empires or anti-colonialists), paradigmatic institutional

practices, and how they stake out territories of influence, often with an eye to one another's presence (as, for example, in Africa, where all three have staked strong presences). All have taken the soft power turn with an eye to rebalancing the power of the United States and Europe, framing their values in post-colonial terms.

The project will exploit Columbia's cross-school resources and draw on the Global Centers' ability to facilitate regional research partnerships to create an international team of researchers and students bridging the fields of history, international relations, and communications and cultural studies. The project builds on a sequence of multilateral conferences at Columbia's centers in Istanbul, Beijing, and Rio de Janeiro. In keeping with its main goal, to provide a de-provincialized narrative with a global historical perspective, that thus can engage a cross-national public of scholars, teachers, and students, the principal outcomes are a succinct, collaboratively written global history of soft power, appropriate to multi-language editions; student research; an open-access website; and an NEH Summer Institute for College Teachers, which following the NEH's well honed model will disseminate the project's results widely in U.S. higher education.

II. Conceptual Background

The term soft power is, on the face of it, conceptually simple. When Harvard international relations professor Joseph E. Nye, Jr. first broached the term in 1990, he was engaged in a revision of international relations concepts to deal with a multilateral world, and thus to move the realist analysis of power from its focus on the ability to change what others *do* by command power or force to the ability to change what others *want* by attraction or persuasion. The background for what at the time passed as a fresh if not conceptually noteworthy insight was the strenuous effort to craft a theory of geopolitics that explained the dynamics of the "new world order." Nye's hopefulness that the U.S. could reestablish its leadership in a multilateral world by deploying its stockpiles of soft power offered a reformist counterpoint to the triumphalism of Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" hypothesis (1992), which had bi-polar super-power conflicts turning into a global Pax Americana, or the fatalistic essentialism of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis (1993, 1996), which held that the humanistic West must gird itself militarily against religious and ethnic fundamentalisms, especially from the Muslim areas of the world. "Soft power" studies promised a way for international relations studies to address issues such as reputation, emotions, and cultural complexity, heretofore regarded as residual causes if they were treated at all. They provided a new frame for debates on policy and appropriations in the Global War on Terror, a means to overhaul Cold War diplomacy, and a legitimation for new policy-school curricula preparing students for careers in public diplomacy, "civilian diplomacy," and private sector "corporate" and "energy diplomacy." They propelled historical research, too, especially on American topics such as nineteenth-century Christian missionaries in Latin America and China, the Wilsonian legacy in the Third World, and postwar humanitarian and development projects.

In reality, the concept itself was weak. If hard and soft power were along a spectrum, critics asked, how did they relate to each other? How do nations, or any other entities, become attractive across frontiers? Was "soft power" only a neo-liberal expression, trendy in a United States trying to reestablish its hegemony? Some sought to refine further the notion of power, bringing in Gramsci (hegemony), Bourdieu (cultural capital), Foucault (micro-power), Butler (performativity), Grewal (network power); others argued the difference between compulsory, structural, and discursive power, each with coercive and persuasive elements in different measure. Soft power existed under totalitarian regimes, a few noted, and economic and market forces could be considered to be as hard as soft. Critics asked how to determine reception; what were the metrics of success. Skeptics with a good historical sense posed the question whether "soft power" wasn't simply another variant on imperialism's "civilizing mission," the virtues of "sweet commerce" and the "juste milieu," or a turn on Machiavelli's meditation on whether the Prince should be hated or loved. Nye himself relinquished the term as too nebulous to be used in policy; in 2007 talk in the Beltway turned to "smart power."

The paradox, however, is that as the concept of soft power was disseminated globally, it not only remained a point of reference in the literature of international relations but became a key means by which states conceived of their actions, that is, a lynchpin of "strategy." The concept has produced a real-world change in international relations, namely a more and more competitive politics of persuasion, engaging an increasing number of states, international organizations, and civil-society groups. More acutely aware of the history and changing character of American hegemony, emerging powers such as Brazil, China, and Turkey have become more interested in using their cultural, financial, and other resources to rebalance American hard power, while European countries have promoted moral norms as the remedy for the American pursuit of its hyper-power interests. New actors, moreover, deployed soft-power instruments such as cultural institutes and development aid to compete with each other in terrains such as Africa where the United States and Europe once had relative monopolies. In this new world, cyber-sovereignty—think the "Great Firewall" of China—is a means to block soft-power attacks, leaving states to accuse one another of using soft power illegitimately, to garner popularity abroad while maintaining an authoritarian regime at home. One state's effort to instrumentalize power in one area (France's threat to boycott the Beijing Olympics over Tibetan rights) may be met with another (Chinese boycotts against Carrefour, which paradoxically improved the image of Wal-Mart and perhaps America's image as the homeland of consumer democracy). The increasingly prevalent and sophisticated use of the politics of persuasion, however, has overwhelmed the conceptual framework for understanding it. In particular, the multipolar nature of competition—when China and Brazil compete directly, and the United States and Europe are just other players—has exposed the provinciality of the original conception of soft power, meant to restore America's leading position in the world. We see high empirical and analytical stakes in sticking with this key word, but also the pressing need to reconsider its history and practice by introducing new actors and angles of view.

III. Methodology: De-Locating the Transatlantic Paradigm

Our project thus proposes to de-provincialize research and teaching about soft power by working at three levels: the first is agenda building; the second, empirical analysis of the development of the concept and practices across cultures; the third, developing a critical historical narrative, to take stock of the transnational forces behind the isolation of cultural power as an arena of foreign policy action. The project recognizes the continuing importance of Euro-American alliances and rivalries in the practice of soft power, but introduces the examples of Brazil, China, and Turkey to reframe debate in global rather than Transatlantic terms. The three countries are significant regional powers with interests bridging several continents. All emerged as activist powers in the international system in the moment that soft power was becoming part of the global agenda. Each offers striking contrasts to American and European practices of soft power. All have generated substantial literatures in the topic,¹ and collectively lend themselves to questions about how they understand the relationship of instruments of force and persuasion; their key institutional models; how they draw on resources such as religion, language, emigrant diasporas, commercial culture, and their particular histories (imperial for China and Turkey, postcolonial for Brazil) for legitimacy, and how they instrumentalize them for strategy.

China is the leading proponent of soft power after the EU, having officially embraced the term over the last decade, and its "charm offensive" is the subject of policy debates and numerous studies by scholars and journalists. Despite devoting great resources to the military, it has the largest budget share of any nation for undertakings related to public diplomacy, notably its English-language press, Confucius Institutes, and massive investments in overseas development projects. Its soft-power agenda has significant historical roots in the Confucian concept of the "mean"; a high-cultural and institutional legacy supporting benevolent intervention; carefully tended relationships with diasporic communities; and projects in Africa dating to the 1950s, "cooperative development" cast as "the poor helping the poor." More recently, in addition to substantial investment in sports stadia and other social infrastructure in Africa, it has created a

¹ See bibliography in Appendix II for examples of the literature on the U.S., Europe, Brazil, China, and Turkey.

hub in Nairobi for China Central Television broadcasting and distribution of English-language publications, and has provided professional seminars and thousands of scholarships to bring students and business people to the PRC.

Turkey has been at least as ambitious as the PRC over the last decade. Initially propelled by the interest of both secular and modernist Islamic elites to move out of the European and U.S. spheres of influence, its soft-power policies have proceeded under the rubric of neo-Ottomanism. This is a complex strategy testifying to Turkey's position on the Euro-Asian divide, opening onto the Balkans, the Middle East, and Turkic-language areas of the former USSR. While Turkey too has a significant military, scholars speak of a special Turkish model of "soft power," deriving from the past, that during the twentieth century had to accommodate the conflicting relationship between Islamism and republican secularism. The recently founded Office of Public Diplomacy, responsible to the Prime Minister, oversees a network of Yunus Emre Cultural Centers. Turkey exerts power through religious networks, by participating in the thirty-eight nation Islamic Shura, and by supporting the para-governmental Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which provides assistance to other Muslim communities by organizing the *hajj*, educating religious scholars, and publishing religious translations. Having become a model of economic growth, its influence also works through the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency, notably, in East Africa. Much interest has also been generated by the growth of foreign audiences for Turkish television, especially soap operas, which have displaced American fare in the Balkans and Turkic areas of the former Soviet republics.

Brazil, which styles itself as the only true "soft power," prides itself on not having waged war with neighbors since 1870. Its policy elite describes it as a "negotiating power," in a jab at military interventionism. In building its power to persuade, Brazil has foregrounded its nearly two centuries of postcolonial independence and its ability to accommodate the interests of ten bordering countries without resort to war. The fact that Portuguese is the world's seventh most spoken language—ahead of French, German, Italian, and Japanese—has given it a leg up in connecting to Latin America, Europe through the Iberian Peninsula, and Africa through its Lusophone heritage. Elites also claim as resources its multi-cultural music, art and architecture, cinema and television, carnival, and (not least) football. They emphasize that Brazil has chosen to use all of these resources to position itself as a negotiator rather than aspiring hegemon, using formal diplomacy to stay on good terms with Washington and some of the governments to which Washington is most hostile such as Venezuela, Iran, and China, while deploying informal diplomacy framed as "horizontal cooperation"—such as the production and distribution of low-cost HIV medicines in Africa—to advance its economic goals.

Viewed in the context of global practices of soft power since the 1970s, these three countries offer more than counter-examples to American and European projects of hegemony. Taken together with the reassessment of the U.S. and European cases, they present the opportunity to re-imagine, historically and conceptually, the roles that cultural legacies, reputation, moral norms, and other aspects of the power to persuade play in geopolitics. This project thus is meant to be both critical—of existing frames of analysis and their use in fields such as history and international relations—and generative. Its empirical investigations are meant to produce a new conceptual frame, the material for a new global history of the politics of persuasion, and the foundations for new practices in the policy world, NGOs, and civil society.

IV. Organization of the Project

"De-Provincializing Soft Power" centers on three linked conferences held in successive years at the global centers in Istanbul, Beijing, and Rio de Janeiro. The conferences will be truly multilateral, reflecting the project's goal to reconsider the concept and practice of soft power from a global perspective. Each conference will have faculty and student participants from North and South America, the Middle East, East Asia, and Europe. A core group will take part in the project's initial planning meetings and all three conferences. We regard this multilateral orientation as one of the most innovative aspects of the project. To achieve this goal the project will rely on the Global Centers' potential to create regional research networks and connect them to networks in other Global Center regions and the U.S. We have consulted with Ipek

Taha (Istanbul), Joan Kaufman (Beijing), and Thomas Trebat (Rio) about this side of the project; they are enthusiastic. A timeline is in Appendix I.

The project will begin with an agenda-setting and logistical meeting in New York in September 2014, with faculty from Columbia and academic/scholarly interlocutors from institutions in Brazil, China, Turkey, Europe, and the U.S. Participants will draw up an agenda of questions to be addressed by the project as a whole and the individual conferences, to be successively revised during the next three years. They will begin planning for the think pieces that will animate each conference (see below) and will draw up an initial list of touchstone texts from each region, which will be the first element of the project's web site. They also will discuss local partners and participants in each conference, to be recruited during fall 2014.

The conferences will be held in May 2015 (Istanbul), May 2016 (Beijing), and May 2017 (Rio de Janeiro). Each two-day conference will be organized around questions posed in a think piece written by the Principal Investigator and a collaborator in Turkey, China, and Brazil, respectively. This pre-circulated essay will identify critical moments in the history of soft power in the region, key elements of current practice, and the touchstone texts that inform debate. Each two-day conference will have around 28 participants, evenly divided between faculty and students, as explained in detail in the timeline. In each case the largest number of participants will be from Columbia University and the region in question (e.g. the Middle East and the Balkans in 2015), while participants also will attend from Europe and the other regions (East Asia and Latin America in 2015). Faculty participants will pre-circulate their responses so that conference sessions can focus on discussion. Students will self-organize their own workshop (see below). Students and faculty will participate in the discussion at all sessions.

The conferences will create an international network for ongoing examination of the role of soft power in global governance, sustained after the project's end by its open-access website. By their nature, they will help create "lateral" intellectual connections among the three centers and encourage use of the centers to address global as well as regional issues. Each conference will be an opportunity for Columbia undergraduate and graduate students to collaborate with faculty on their research and to interact with counterparts at universities in Turkey, China, and Brazil. After the project's conclusion, the knowledge and relationships built through the conferences will support the writing of a succinct global history of soft power, jointly authored by the Principal Investigator and three participants from Brazil, China, and Turkey, and the creation of an NEH Summer Institute for College Teachers.

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