

Vortragzusammenfassung: “Soft Power in the 21st Century”

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“Soft Power” – a brief introduction

At the center of Joseph Nye’s theory, laid out in his 2004 book “Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics”, is a basic assumption: In international politics, international actors – usually states – do not always need force to get other international actors to change their behavior according to their interests. “A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – *want* to follow it” (Nye 2004: 5; emphasis added).

In contrast to hard power, with its sub-categories military and economic power, which both rely on force and coercion (e.g. military intervention, economic sanctions) to influence others’ behavior, soft power uses “an attraction to shared values and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values” (Nye 2004: 7). Hence, for a state to be able “use” soft power in its relations with another state, it must seem attractive to the other state. Nye calls said attraction a “soft power resource” and lists three main resources of soft power, namely a country’s culture, its political values, and its foreign policy (Nye 2004: 8-9). Nye’s theoretical concept has often been criticized for its lack of exact chains of causality. Nye acknowledges these difficulties and argues that this is due to, first, the fact that some soft power resources – in particular, culture (Nye 2004: 17, 44-45) – are not under governmental control, and secondly, due to soft power’s nature as an indirect instrument which takes effect by shaping the environment for policy and does not deliver concrete outcomes (Nye 2004: 99).

A country “expresses its values in what it does as well as what it says” (Nye 2004: 55). In order to use them as soft power resources, a country must lead by example and actually live up to its proclaimed values domestically, in order not to be deemed hypocritical (Nye 2004: 55). As regards the U.S., individualism, openness, tolerance, innovation, and opportunity, amongst others, as American political values that may be used as “soft power resources” (Nye 2004: 55). However, admiration for these values does not necessarily mean that other states would want to imitate how the U.S. implements these policies (Nye 2004: 56). Being perceived as hypocritical can hurt one’s soft power resources. Nye argues, for example, that in the 1950ies, racial segregationist policies in the American South undercut U.S. soft power in Africa (Nye 2004: 13, 55).

Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is closely intertwined with the theory of soft power (Gilboa 2008: 56). It is one form of engagement that an international actor might use to apply its soft power resources vis-à-vis its target actor (Nye 2004: 31). Public diplomacy as a soft power resource is

particularly suited to be used for relations with democracies with which one has friendly relations (Nye 2004: 105).

Within the theoretical framework of soft power, there are three dimensions of how public diplomacy may be used (Nye 2004: 107). The first dimension consists of daily communications to explain the context of domestic and foreign policy decisions. The distribution of these communications may be formalized (e.g. distributed through the press corps) or informal (Nye 2004: 108). The second dimension consists of strategic communication to develop a set of themes, similar to a political campaign. The international actor uses symbolic events and symbolic communication to promote certain themes or policies to the foreign public (Nye 2004: 108). The third dimension is used to develop long-lasting relationships with key individuals through scholarships, exchange programs or conferences (Nye 2004: 109). However, Nye argues that these three dimensions only work if shared values exist between the international actor using soft power and its target foreign public (Nye 2004: 111). “By definition, soft power means getting others to want the same outcomes you want, and that requires understanding how they are hearing your messages, and fine tuning it accordingly” (Nye 2004: 111).

Bibliography

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Further Readings

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