

A Critical Approach to Soft Power

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Abstract

The concept of soft power has been widely used since it was first coined by Joseph Nye in the 1990s. Since then, academics and politicians have addressed this ‘new’ approach to power and states have built their strategies according to this concept. Yet, this concept has also been criticised and this work will contribute to these criticisms. While it explains what soft power is and its instruments are, it also aims to argue its limitations under three headings: originality of soft power, immeasurable nature of soft power and its excessive focus on agent.

Keywords: Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, Critical Approach

Yumuşak Güce Eleştirel Bir Yaklaşım

Öz

Yumuşak güç konsepti Joseph Nye'in ilk ortaya atmasıyla birlikte 1990'lardan beri kullanılmıştır. Akademisyenler ve politikacılar bu konseptte başvurmuşlar ve devletler bu konsept doğrultusunda yeni stratejiler oluşturmuşlardır. Fakat aynı zamanda bu konsept birçok akademisyen tarafından eleştirilmiştir ve bu makale de bu eleştirilere katkıda bulunmayı hedeflemektedir. Yumuşak güç kavramını ve araçlarını açıklarken aynı zamanda üç başlıkta sınırlı kaldığı yerler tartışılacaktır. Bunlar yumuşak güç konseptinin özgünlüğü, doğasının ölçülemez olduğu ve yapana aşırı odaklanması olacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yumuşak Güç, Kamu Diplomasisi, Eleştirel Yaklaşım

INTRODUCTION

The concept of soft power created attraction among academics and politicians. It has widely been accepted and discussed within these fields since the 1990s when Joseph Nye first coined the term. Countries accepted this 'new' understanding of power and applied to their foreign policies. For instance, House of Lords in the UK Parliament (2013) established a committee and invited academics to the parliament in order to understand what soft power is and what the UK's soft power assets are. Recent special adviser to Turkish President and the presidential spokesperson of Turkish President, Ibrahim Kalin also wrote an article in 2011 on soft power and public diplomacy in Turkey (Kalin, 2011). More recently, the Global Soft Power Index attempts to measure the world's top 30 soft powers and it claims France is in the first place while Turkey is in the 30th place.

Although this theoretically underdeveloped concept is accepted by thinkers in the field of International Relations (IR), it is also criticised by academics as well. This article aims to contribute to critical approach to soft power and claims that soft power can be criticised in three points: first, it has a measurability problem. It is hard to measure soft power or to prove that one country's behaviour is a result of other countries soft power. Second, the article claims that the concept is not so original and has similarities with the other approaches in It and hegemony concept of Italian thinker, Antonio Gramsci. Third, there is ambiguity about the agent/structure of the concept. There is no difference between hard power and soft power in terms of its aims. It is not clear whether it is only in the control of a state or there can be other actors such as NGOs and popular culture icons or the structure in which the concept works within. In this article, thus, I will firstly explain what soft power and its sources are and then I will give more details those criticisms of soft power I mentioned above.

WHAT IS SOFT POWER?

The definition of power in IR has been scrutinised by many academics. Joseph Nye coined the term of soft power in 1990 (Nye, 1990: 188-197) and he stated that there is a transformation in the definition of power. According to him, power is becoming less fungible; the effect of coercion in power behaviour is losing its importance and it is leaving its place to co-optive power which tends to arise from resources such as cultural and ideological attraction. Indeed, intangible power resources such as information, knowledge and interdependence are becoming more important. Nye defines soft power as co-optive power or indirect power which can help in "getting others to want what you want" and it shapes preferences of others by attraction of intangible resources such as universalistic popular culture or political cohesion (Nye, 1990: 31-35).

After he conceptualises the soft power, he first describes hard power as economic and military capabilities which rest on inducements and threats (Nye, 2004: 5). These capabilities are tangible and material powers that are known by everyone.

Then, he describes soft power as the second face of power which is intangible, and rests on "the ability to shape the preferences of others", in other words; rest on attraction (Nye: 2004: 5). Nye (2004: 11) states that there are three sources of soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policy. He explains that culture can be high culture such as literature, art, and education, and popular culture; then he claims that if a country's culture includes universal values and promotes interests and values which other countries share, it can produce soft power because of the relationship of attraction (Nye, 2004: 11). Moreover, recent researches show that sources of soft power can be expanded as government, culture, diplomacy, education and business/innovation (McClory, 2011: 15). Nye (2004: 11) believes that universal values are crucial in producing soft power. He mostly applies the concept to the US foreign policy; therefore, he explains mostly soft power of the superpowers, or superpower candidates.

Foreign and domestic policies are also the sources of soft power, but sometimes they can undermine soft power if they are hypocritical or arrogant (Nye, 2004: 13-14). For instance, the US's human rights policies were rejected in Argentina because there was a military junta in the 1970s, while it increased its soft power in the 1990s when Peronists came to power, and they supported the US policies in the UN (Nye, 2004: 13). However, in the 2000s, there has been a decline of US attractiveness after the Iraq War because many people were against the war (Nye, 2004: 14).

Public diplomacy and nation branding are also evaluated as instruments of soft power. It can be simply explained as "direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking, and ultimately, that of their governments" (Nisbet et al., 2004: 15). It can also be described as "the process by which direct relations are pursued with a country's people to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented" (Sharp, 2006: 106). However, the definition and usage of public diplomacy has changed. While previously it was accepted as a tool under only state control, some scholars believe that NGOs, private individuals, and groups are using public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2008: 57). In addition to that, development in communication technologies makes public diplomacy more important because nowadays it is easier to reach foreign publics than before. The Internet was one of the most crucial developments in communication technologies and its role has risen, it has become a centre of information, and affected public diplomacy strategies through providing states, NGOs, communities, firms, and individuals with opportunities to exchange ideas about world affairs (Gilboa, 2008: 56). As a result, public diplomacy needs attention for countries which aim to increase their soft power.

Media is one of the most important channels for public diplomacy. It is believed that media is an instrument for bringing the nations together, imbuing a sense of community. Van Ham (2010: 91) states that "Where culture is the glue keeping societies together, media offer the required infrastructure through which these

social attachments are made and solidified. Global media companies can influence other media spaces and eventually affect international politics. For instance, scholars argue that because of the CNN effect "officials have lost control over decision-making to global television" (Gilboa, 2000: 276). In 1990s, global media networks showed images of people in humanitarian crisis areas such as in Iraq, Bosnia, or Somalia and triggered humanitarian interventions. However, it can also be claimed that those images were shown to legitimise the interventions. Moreover, some scholars such as Corcoran (2007: 90) claims that the mainstream media is constrained by the states especially after the 'war on terror' and the environment for media in 1990s cannot be seen in the 21st century; political elites interfere in the news agendas for their aims. It can also be argued that the major or elite media has a role in agenda-setting by selecting topics, distributing concerns, emphasising and framing issues and filtering information in order to serve the interests of the dominant groups in the society. They saw the dominant media as profit-seeking businesses, owned by conglomerates and funded by other profit-seeking advertisers who wanted their advertisements to appear (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Herman, 2000: 102). Then, when we think about public diplomacy as an instrument of soft power, it can be said that it is not that 'soft' because it is used to manipulate societies especially when we remind ourselves that this is the post-truth era.

When we look at the examples of public diplomacy, it can be seen that American newspapers, radio and TV stations such as Radio Sawa, Al Hurrah, or Voice of America have played a crucial role in transmitting the US values to the Middle East (Dalacoura, 2005: 964). Similarly, Turkey uses media instruments. The Anatolia News Agency (AA) and TRT, which are state-run agencies, started to publish in Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian through its office in Sarajevo; and in Arabic through its bureau in Cairo (Yesil, 2015: 50). TRT also launched TRT Arabic channel to broadcast in Arabic and is expected to reach 350 million people in the Middle East after signing agreements with the region's countries and TRT World channel to broadcast in English. In addition to those attempts, the Office of Public Diplomacy was established in 2010. As a result it can be said that Turkey invests for public diplomacy especially for the people in the neighbouring regions.

Similar to public diplomacy, nation branding can be another tool for changing perceptions of people on another. It is a rather new concept than public diplomacy and it started to be accepted widely. Although it is more close to public relations, there are some features which can be connected to soft power concept. Van Ham believes that nation brand thinking and brand asset management are changing the dynamics of US politics. It can be seen when US Secretary of State Colin Powell said about American diplomacy after 9/11: "we're selling a product. That product we are selling is democracy" (Van Ham, 2002: 250).

Although there are similarities between public diplomacy and nation branding, there are also some differences. Gilboa (2008: 68) states that while they are similar in terms of "image and symbols management, relationship building, and extensive

use of the mass media" they are different in terms of aims and outcomes. He claims that public diplomacy cannot be reduced to only slogans and images. Nevertheless, it can be claimed that creating or changing perceptions of a target society is the main goal of both therefore they are actually very similar in terms of aims.

There is also another concept called smart power which Nye defines as "the ability to combine the hard power of coercion or payment with the soft power of attraction into a successful strategy" (Nye, 2010: 9). Nye states that the US was a smart power during the Cold War, and successfully managed the hard and soft power balance (Nye, 2010: 9). It is an integrated strategy; it acknowledges military strength, invests in expanding the American influence and establishing legitimacy of American policies by creating alliances, partnerships, and institutions (Armitage and Nye, 2008: 3). Yet, this concept can be understood as nothing new about the power concept because it accepts material capabilities to measure power in international relations so it is close to realist theory by including hard power to the equation.

CRITICISMS OF SOFT POWER

Is it original?

This article states that Nye's concept of soft power shows resemblance with many other approaches in IR. In this subsection, thus, this study will give examples from other approaches. To start with, there is a similarity between Nye's approach to power and E. H. Carr's, a prominent Classical Realist in IR. Carr sees power as an end in international politics and divides political power into three categories: military power, economic power and power over opinion (Carr, 1946: 108). According to him, states use them to control others and ensure their security by changing others' actions. Although material resources such as military or economic power are in the centre of Realist theory, Carr believes that non-material concepts such as human psychology or public opinion are also important. Although state elites are the only actors for state behaviours they put an emphasis on individuals because leaders need approvals. Carr (1946: 132) states that "The art of persuasion has always been a necessary part of the equipment of a political leader. Rhetoric has a long and honoured record in the annals of statesmanship. But the popular view which regards propaganda as a distinctively modern weapon is, none the less, substantially correct". Then, when we think that public diplomacy attempts, today, work as an instrument for international propaganda, it can be said that it coincides with Carr's approach. Moreover, smart power, which is defined as combination of hard and soft power, also coincides with Carr's approach to power because he believes non-material power sources are essential as well in addition to economic and military power.

Another approach similar to Nye's soft power is Steven Lukes's three-dimensional power. In his famous book *Power: A Radical View* he defines this approach as: "A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but

he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants" (Lukes, 1974: 23). By this way, *A* prevents any potential conflict with *B* by shaping *B*'s preferences and make *B* think that *B*'s preferences are its own although they are actually *A*'s. Lukes states that thought control is an important process in this dimension and it can be done through the control of information, the mass media, and the processes of socialisation (Lukes, 1974: 23). In addition, people accept their role in this structure because either they can see no alternative to it, or they see it as natural, or it is sacred and beneficial (Lukes, 1974: 24). According to Lukes this is the most supreme and insidious exercise of power. Soft power can be considered in this third dimension. Since it is based on attraction and aims to affect and change the perceptions of others, it is compatible with Lukes's arguments.

There is also similarities between soft power concept and the Gramscian Approach. In the hegemony concept of Gramsci, political society and civil society are equally important because the exercise of hegemony needs "the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally without force predominating excessively over consent" (Gramsci, 1971: 80). The ruling class has to use the private sphere, or civil society, to justify and maintain its dominance, and for this it needs the active consent of the subordinated class (Bieler and Morton, 2004: 92). In the Gramscian sense, then, the political and civil spheres are intertwined: "Hegemony filters through structures of society, economy, culture, gender, ethnicity, class and ideology" (Bieler and Morton, 2004: 87). The private sphere of a society, such as the church, media and education, become a part of the places where hegemony functions (Bieler and Morton, 2004: 92). Therefore, hegemony, according to Gramsci, is "intellectual and moral leadership whose principal constituting elements are consent and persuasion rather than coercion" (Fontana, 1993: 140). In this concept, Gramsci believed that intellectuals have a specific role which is to help a certain class to form a particular structure of a knowledge and values system, and to transform them into general and universally applicable conceptions (Fontana, 1993: 140). Intellectuals are the intermediators between the dominant and the subordinated class, and they function not only as the creators of a particular way of life and a particular conception of the world, but also as translators of the interests and values of a social group into general values and interests (Fontana, 1993: 141).

Then, both approaches demonstrate the importance of consent rather than coercion. While Gramsci emphasises the role of intellectuals from media, church, popular culture and etc. as a part of hegemony, Nye thinks they also create soft power. Neo-Gramscian scholars within IR have focused mostly on world order, the hegemony of states over other states, by addressing Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, common sense and historical bloc. Cox (1983), for instance, adapted Gramsci's understanding of hegemony to understand the problems of the world order. Gill (2012) also engaged with the problems of the world order and focused on US hegemony on the global scale by offering a critique of US organic intellectuals. As

in Cox's approach, Gill thought that world hegemony is a result of an internal or national hegemony which expands to become international. Thus, it can be said that Nye's approach is very similar to those scholars from Neo-Gramscian School.

Christopher Layne also claims that soft power coincides with IR theories, the role of norms is a part of democratic peace, institutionalism, and constructivism (Layne, 2010: 54). However, Nye explains that soft power is not a theory, it is an analytical concept which fits realist, liberalist, and constructivist perspectives; therefore, it should not be compared with other theories (Nye, 2010: 219). Yet, this is not a sufficient explanation of its originality.

Can it be measured?

One of the problems of soft power is its inability to measure. It is not possible to prove that one country changes its behaviours because of other country's soft power. When IR theories are examined, it can be seen that Realists, whether classical or structural, focus on power and the international system as the only variables for explaining state behaviour. As Kenneth Waltz (1979: 126) observed "In anarchy, security is the highest end" and "power is a means and not an end". Power is mostly defined as military and economic capabilities of the states. Neoliberals focus on institutions, practices and interdependency, used a systemic approach as neorealists, and focus mostly on economic capabilities to overcome insecurity created by the anarchical nature of the international system. Then, both theories claim international system and material capabilities are the causes of changing behaviours of the states and overlook soft power sources. With these approaches it is easier to show a state behaviour. For instance, international agreements could be a proof or nuclear capabilities of one country could be a cause of a change in state behaviour.

In Nye's approach on the other hand, "soft power is fundamentally about improving the USA's image among populations in other countries. Its premise is that the better America's image in the world, the more allies it will have, the more support its policies will receive from other states, and the more secure it will be" (Layne, 2010: 53). Yet, it is not possible to prove that one country changes its actions according to other country's image. More specifically, it can be better explained with an example. When we look at the relations between Turkey and the Middle Eastern countries we see that Turkish culture such as television series are very popular and President Erdogan is respected and loved in the region. It attracts many people from this region to popular destinations in Turkey therefore we can say Turkey has an influence over the 'hearts and minds' of the individuals in the Middle East. Yet, it is not possible to claim that a Middle Eastern country changed its behaviour and support Turkey, in the UN for instance, because of Turkey's popularity in the region. Layne also states that soft power resource operates is fuzzy, whether shared values or multilateralism affect the minds and hearts cannot be understood, the outcome might be the consequence of democracy or institutions (Layne, 2010: 54).

Here it should also be mentioned that as it is stated in the beginning of this article there are some attempts to measure soft power of countries. One of these attempts, The Global Soft Power Index constructs its research on polling. This index ranks countries in terms of soft power and its research is based on questions asked to people from 25 countries (the sample for Turkey is 500 people). It evaluates the results according to eight factors including favourability towards foreign countries, perceptions of foreign cuisines, desire to visit foreign countries or perceptions of luxury goods. Yet, this research does not solve the problem mentioned above. For instance, it says about Turkey:

"The country's strengths lie in the Engagement subindex where it performs particularly well in development assistance, its willingness to resettle millions of refugees, and permanent missions to multilateral organisations. Moreover, Turkey commands a critical geopolitical position as the Europe-Asia bridge. It has also made intelligent use of some soft power assets, like the way Turkish Airlines serves as a strong brand ambassador. But Turkey would benefit from working on its international perceptions – it ranks at the bottom of our polling data this year. Negative perceptions have likely not been helped by the failed military coup; a referendum to secure greater powers for President Erdogan; and country-wide restrictions on media, civil society, and academia" (McClory, 2017: 50).

Although it says many things about Turkey's soft power assets and what creates positive and negative perceptions about Turkey, we cannot claim that since Turkey has a global brand it has more power among other states or since it has problems in its democracy, it has less power in the region. Thus, this attempt to measure soft power cannot say anything about the ambiguity of soft power.

Too much focus on agent?

Last criticism of Nye's concept in this article is that Nye focuses on either agency of actors such as the US or structure which determines what it means to be attractive, he does not conflate agent and structure; because he sought to develop a power concept for the US (Lock, 2010: 36). Since Nye focuses on agents more than structure and it draws our attention from subject to agent soft power turns into almost tangible resource like hard power materials which can be enhanced or produced (Lock, 2010: 36). Bilgin and Elis (2008: 12) also states that this agent-focused approach makes the soft power concept 'not so soft' because Nye focuses on the stockpile of soft power of the US and is not worried how US soft power affects the rest of the world. This makes the concept inconsistent, because its definition is changing, for instance whilst the first definition of soft power was based on only attraction, Nye included economic and military power when he defined smart power, and he claimed that everything can be soft power nowadays (Layne, 2010: 55). In his article in *Foreign Policy*, Nye (2006) even asserts that "A well-run military can be a source of admiration".

Nye focuses on agents more than on subjects of power; he did not consider relational or structural forms of power and those forms of power conflate with each

other (Lock, 2010: 34). For instance, on the one hand, Nye stated that the US can use its cultural products such as films and television shows to promote democracy and the rule of law in China. On the other hand, universal values and ideologies such as democracy can be used as attractions when those values and principles are being shared by others (Lock, 2010: 34-35). Lock explains this problem as that while in the former there is a relational form of power in the latter there is a structural form of power and this creates ambiguity in the nature of soft power.

Moreover, In Nye's concept, the distinction between agencies is not clear as well. Which agents, state or society, in terms of wielding soft power is not clear (Zahran and Ramos, 2010: 20). Soft power cannot explain the linkage between civil society sources of soft power and different states. According to Nye, states are not the only agents who have soft power; there are other actors such as corporations, popular idols and civil society groups, and states do not have control over them (Zahran and Ramos, 2010: 20). When we think of Turkish television series for instance, they are very popular in many countries and it is believed that they create soft power for Turkey. Yet, they are not controlled by the Turkish state, thus, they should not be accepted as if they are tools of Turkey. This also creates ambiguity when we think about agents that create soft power.

CONCLUSION

This article first explained what soft power is and second brought three criticisms about it. Soft power has a changing definition and its sources expand since it was first used by Nye. Other concepts such as public diplomacy, nation branding and smart power are also articulated with soft power and accepted as its instruments. Soft power concept is widely used by politicians and academics. Although it is tempting for them, it has limitations.

This limitations were investigated under three sections. First, soft power's originality was examined and other approaches in IR were addressed for this purpose. Intangible sources of soft power can also be found in Classical Realism in IR. Three-dimensional power approach of Lukes is also similar to Nye's concept and there are common points between Gramscian hegemony concept and soft power. Thus, it can be said that soft power is not so original. Second, immeasurable nature of soft power was examined and as a result, it was demonstrated that it could not be possible to prove which soft power sources had influence on state behaviours. Intangibility of soft power makes harder to prove the influence over hearts and minds. Third, Nye focused on agent and was not interested in structure and subject. It examined soft power as if something tangible and this made soft power as if it was hard power. Moreover, agents in Nye's concept were not clear as well and it made soft power ambiguous.

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