

Thoughts on Soft Power, Culture and the Handing Down of Knowledge

Jean-Michel Bertrand

*My first experience of America was through pictures.
Comic books, especially Mickey Mouse and
Disney magazines...*

*"The American Dream", a dream
is also made from pictures"*
Wim Wenders, *Emotion pictures*

"The worst tyrant is the one that is loved".
Baruch Spinoza

In 1976, a few months after the death of Mao Tse Tung, members of the "Gang of Four" were removed from office, arrested and tried. The defeat of this group of leaders marked the end of the Cultural Revolution and the implementation of a new economic policy that formed the origin of the development of Chinese capitalism.

A little later, in 1979, Coca Cola launched an offensive on the Chinese market. This factual and commercial reality was then thought and commented in the Western press through the brand's dual prism – let's not forget that the part of an advertisement that sells a product is often less obvious than the part that aims to propose a set of values and a lifestyle – and a major symbolic act. So the collective unconscious: the peaceful arrival of Coca Cola was meant to signify a fundamental transformation in the relation to time and as such to the world expressed in the claim "Thirst for today", meaning a present made

of hedonism, self-affirmation, aspirational energy, in an generational party atmosphere. And the symbolic or representative dimension was, obviously, Coca Cola's capacity to mean "America" and to be perceived as its metonymic equivalent.

So China adopted Coca Cola and, in part at least, an idea of happiness that comes from social success, individualism and shopping; translating a fascination for western brands (and, in part for the West itself). Of course, America is no longer seen as the evil Satan, but advertising "soft power" has limits that are evident from the example chosen: China did not become a democracy, instead it launched into a high-powered economic competition supported by an affirmed nationalism. The elements of cultural influence, as with most acculturation phenomenon, blended with more ancient traditions and representations to give rise to practices or desires coded by more specifically economic or political parameters.

This overly partial and limited example nevertheless indicates, if it were needed, that the notions of soft power and influence need to be questioned beyond the obvious conclusions they appear to provoke. In addition, after a quick examination of the notion, we will put the emphasis on two vectors of influence, "culture" in its broadest sense and teaching or education, by trying to grasp the nature of the transformations that affect these two particular areas thus providing them with the possibility of playing a role in the attractiveness or the image of a given country.

Soft power, symptom or concept?

While today, we readily emphasise the effects and importance of ideology, representations, cultural or media models, even teaching in the pacific exercise of diplomacy, it is important, to begin with, to underline that this power is just one element of an affirmation

that is inseparably military, economic and “cultural” in nature. In other words, the term “soft” despite its pleasant character, must not foster an illusion and make people forget that it is followed by the term “power”: the notion expresses a world vision of overlapping power struggles and, most importantly, a wish to dominate.

Joseph Nye, the ex-President of the National Intelligence Council (1993-1994) and ex Deputy Secretary for Defence, one of the best known theorists on the subject of soft power, recently insisted on this point, without being overly naive. The point he made, lacking in the ambiguity and the stupidity of the apologists for soft power *à la française* (who see it as the expression of a peaceful, generous and creative world!) indicates that in reality, from a political point of view, “soft power” is a weapon in the affirmation of a national power as the United States (or any other country) can not pretend to reign through only military strength or traditional economic imperialism.

This is what Nye said in a recent interview with Olivier Guez published in the Autumn 2010 edition n° 129 of *Politique Internationale*: “The United States can no longer go to war alone as the doctrine of 2002 “let” them. This is why the parallel between Obama and Eisenhower seems to me to be relevant. Ike was the first to warn of the over-reaching of the armed forces and their over-deployment. He was the first to underline the importance of a healthy and vigorous economy... (Obama), I can confirm it, is the soft power President! He is the first in the history of the United States since Kennedy in any case. The Obama effect meant that the minute he was elected, before he even said a word, the United States immediately became attractive to most of humanity again! Soft power can be measured by the capacity of a power to attract others into its orbit and, as a result, to increase the possibility of obtaining concessions that suit them. Thanks to persuasion and attractiveness, this

soft power enables the creation of an environment that is favourable to the interests of the country exercising the power. It puts them in a position of strength. But on one condition: if it is accompanied by a more traditional hard power. One won't get very far without the other in the today's world”.

Well, at least he is clear on the subject, as he is on the notion of soft power itself which in reality only indicates a process without enabling in-depth reflection on the methods of influence used, their principles (notably the commercialisation of the world) and their forms. In other words, the notion is not as such a concept or, it is a concept that is low on comprehension as it is not bolstered by even the most elementary or vague theory of power. It cannot compare for example with the demanding and critical re-elaboration of the notion of power by Michel Foucault or that of the societies of “control” defined by Gilles Deleuze. But perhaps it is no longer necessary to understand it and it is enough to measure the effects, just like many market surveys and accounts that offer to differentiate (and vaguely interpret) between input and output, declarative or purely factual data?

It is true that Foucault, Deleuze and others had the ambition to totally rethink the relatively simplistic theory of power inherited from Marxism, while, ironically, the theory of soft power harks back in reality – but after the fact – to the way Marxism characterised the dominant ideology, as an ensemble of values, ideas and visions spread (through religion, sport, mass culture, the media and sometimes school) in order to mask class antagonism and above all, to promote conceptions of the world and life that were favourable to the interests of the “haves”. When faced with this accusation of the orchestration of culture and the media in order to control minds, democrats bring up the argument of free will, neutrality, plurality and diversity of expression of vision and values in the social space. It seems that the

disappearance of a Marxist opposition means it is no longer necessary to express liberal fiction in the same terms.

Soft power and American model

There is a final point made by Nye that merits our utmost attention: he points out that the notion is not “new” (The Romans, for example were practitioners among conquered peoples by imposing their Gods and hosting festivals and mass distractions). It is obvious that the United States still remember the time when Hollywood participated in the promotion of a positive image of America around the world. It was a cinema that spread fashions in the broad sense of the term, that is to say, how to dress (jeans, tee-shirts, jackets, cigarettes, but also a certain Bostonian elegance), how to behave (ways of loving for example), an idea of freedom or pleasure, music, and a way of speaking. It managed to make people dream by using a star system that proposed the collective admiration of symbols of beauty and success. So it succeeded in, to use the quote falsely attributed to André Bazin by Jean-Luc Godard in the credits for *Le Mépris*, “replacing what we see with a world that corresponds to our desires”¹.

Which brings us to Hollywood and the cinema; this is the double consistency or the double face of the notion of soft power that covers many aspects that should really be clearly differentiated before reflecting on their mutual articulation and shoring up. On the one hand, film provides a country with a sheen, the country becomes a brand (Hollywood meant America was liked and consolidated its image of democracy, when in fact the country only abolished racist laws known as “The Jim Crow laws” in 1954 and mixed-race marriages were only made legal in 1967), and on the other hand it influences the consuming public by spreading “ideological” values whether voluntarily or not.

What Hollywood films managed to do remarkably effectively was to blend entertainment, lightness or gravity and showmanship, while broadcasting a particularly normative or political worldview. In fact, a great number of these films are based on a narrative that opposes a peaceful, ordered situation that is disturbed by a nefarious force (Indians, baddies, assassins, perverts, soviet spies, etc.), until a lawman (or just the law) comes to re-establish the status quo and the primacy of the law. This storyline that opposes good and evil, the normal and the pathological, and that worships the family (the pillar of society) is eminently and surreptitiously political as it means often justifying the basis of American society and organising coalescence between the private or family sphere and society as a whole. To the point that Kubrick’s *The Shining* that depicts a pathological family (paranoia, hysteria, and split personality) in a hotel (built on an Indian cemetery) symbolising both the splendour of America and repression was decoded correctly as a critique or deconstruction of the American myths proposed by Hollywood. Hollywood, early Disney, jazz music and later on pop music constitute the smiling side of American culture – because it was aiming openly or secretly at art, or at least knew how to express itself with humour and fantasy, it was capable of playing with the distance and codes of representation – which became a mass culture threatened by a lack of authenticity. It became a culture manufactured according to a marketing logic that replaced art, experience and formal research with standardised and targeted products with no other aim than to fulfil a “mediocre” demand that it also helps to define (“Industry adapts to the vote it inspired itself”)².

In addition, it is not just a judgement of taste that must be used to analyse the formation and effects of this industrial mass culture dedicated to leisure and entertainment. Indeed, it is not enough to recognise its existence then to

revoke it in the name of the principle of distinction. It bears witness to a crisis of authority, legitimacy and a blurring of the lines between art and culture as well as a deep transformation in the relationship to art, to its finalities, to its “use” or to what it is concerned with, or what it concerns. We can evidently refer to the remarkable analyses developed by Hannah Arendt notably in *Between Past and Future*, to that of Adorno, but also to Baudrillard or Agamben to reflect on this situation, the moment in the story which Nietzsche predicted with unprecedented lucidity. Arendt notably relates the destruction of culture by commerce (there is not, according to her, any real mass culture, just a culture transformed into leisure) and a crisis of transmission, of legitimacy, of authority, swept away by the disappearance of borders³ in a movement of generalised equivalence⁴. As Disney symbolically proves (Comics gave rise to theme parks, then to cities of hotels in which to spend weekends and holidays), leisure merchandise now feeds “cultural” soft power in export commodities.

In addition, we would be wrong to reduce the mechanism of soft power to the circulation of ordinary goods that conform to a profile dictated by the global market. Art is also now run by prestige events and the opening of contemporary art fairs in Miami, Dubai, Shanghai, just like the establishment of high visibility museums and art foundations are living proof. The powerful have made art into the sign of their power (not so much national as worldwide and the ultimate vocation of which is to work in favour of brand image).

We should listen to Bernard Lamarche-Vadel – whose classes at the IFM have been laudably published by the latter – evoke, in a conference given at the Villa Arson, the sea-change in the market and the relation to art to understand what played out in the eighties in this area also. Lamarche-Vadel highlights four main points: the collective metamorphosis

of a society for which culture and art (about which the bourgeoisie cared little) became the absolute asset with which one had to be identified, the possibility to manufacture and launch artists, like products or brands according to established procedures or recipes, the pre-eminence of friendly communication and, in the end, the change in status for pieces of art. The identification that Lamarche-Vadel mentions can be understood in both meanings of the term: art became that which enabled the completion of a self-satisfied society that self-actualises through consumption; and the desire for art is how its “enlightened” members give themselves and identity. We understand why “art” became above all decorative (“Culture or art became the absolute provider of wellbeing. This society that already had a fridge, a BMW, was missing something: paintings for the walls”). A painting as a complement to a range, or to a collection to which “design” objects were soon to be added, wrapped in the same appetite for “aesthetics” and distinction⁵. The other big change pointed out remarkably by Lamarche-Vadel was the new capacity to manufacture artists from this demand. All of the institutions (museums, galleries, patrons, and dealers) are complicit in maintaining structured networks that work with one another to ensure the promotion of their earmarked artists through well-known channels. As a result, the relationship between artists and their buyers has changed radically. Before this, art as an experience or experiment had no recipient as such; it only met a recipient through choice, mutual election and recognition of the meaning of a work and what it tries to depict. Today, the end user is explicitly targeted and even makes their expectations known. This explains the disappearance of enlightened criticism, the indifference it arouses today and the end of all great debate. Agreement must be produced so the committed critic has been replaced by arguments that are more in line with the

rhetoric of communication. And, when real criticism is present, it is run by a system that over determines it and only accepts its presence as a piece of amusing exoticism.

Let us finally point out, to complete the comments by Lamarche-Vadel that, in its principle, art is used as a reference and a paradigm to a socially sanctified quality: "Creativity". The success of this term that is on everyone's lips and in many company's training requests is as massive as it is vague. The constant referring to this notion requires it to compensate for the mainstream and often "suitable" dimension of the dominant culture. Indeed, talking about creativity means any little ("creative") variation gains the grandeur and qualities of a creation, that is to say, something that creates a real split or event. Shortening a dress, mixing a dance track, choosing the colour of a bicycle, painting Guernica, defining the concept of the subconscious or coming up with the theory of relativity are all expressions of the marvellous faculty that is creativity! We must totally ignore the distinction between difference of nature and difference of degree to think in these terms and to give the same value to "creation" and creativity. But why bother weighing ourselves down with epistemological warnings when it is a question of taking part in the promotion of the creative industries and to inform the prism through which they should be seen⁶.

Soft power and the mutation of teaching and knowledge

The annexing of culture and art by the market economy in its current forms and extensions finds its equivalent in the world of teaching and most notably in third level education that has, in recent years, seen some considerable upheaval and an unprecedented change in scale. The education market, as it is a market now and functions like one, is valued at over 2000 billion Euros and is accompanied by

another global market, that of student mobility. This mobility corresponds to a quest for an education that is competitive on the global jobs market. Attracting foreign students is one of the decisive aspects of the exercise of soft power. The hypothesis being that being educated in a given country leads one often to adopt the values, way of living or thinking of the host country and results in a long-term attachment and admiration. This change in the characteristics of third level teaching, whether it is short term, MBAs or PhDs deserves its own essay. We will settle for outlining the salient traits to begin with and reminding ourselves what all of the stakeholders and institutions involved agree on (WTO, OECD, The Council of Europe all play a decisive role in this process).

Over the past forty years we have seen a constant drop in State commitment to education, the main public service, and mainly in secondary and at third level. This withdrawal or fall-off is benefiting private, fee-paying institutions whose main vocation is to train students to be immediately employable and open to accepting the level of "flexibility" demanded of them by companies. These private universities, Schools ("grande" or smaller and modest), institutes or foundations are organised in networks and most of them have an international development bent. The emergence of a transnational franchised education system is made possible thanks to agreements with reputable foreign universities. The courses on offer (often remotely) lead to degrees or diplomas "labelled" by the "mother" schools. We must however underline the fact finally that these establishments are spurred on by a competition the parameter of which is a reputation for "excellence" measured above all by the employment rate and starting salaries of graduates.

What is at stake in the development of soft power in terms of education is the development of establishments that break, at least in

the domain of the human sciences, with the university model and disciplinary demands. Traditionally, universities claim a quadruple vocation: the handing down of knowledge that is considered to be humanity's heritage, the development of a real capacity for thinking about questions and issues, spotted as such within disciplines or fields of knowledge, research and the training of an elite that can then go on to take their place in a given society, both professionally and as citizens. This tradition has, in part, been swept away by the commercialisation of education that above all obeys a logic dictated by the economy and business and not by scientific, academic or societal considerations (it would be absurd to compare society with the economy as the neo-liberals tend to in their surprising reductionism). This logic leads to training rather than education, not so much free and reflective knowledge than techno-practical methods and recipes or "skills" that businesses say or think they need⁷. The glaring paradox of this approach that thinks itself pragmatic is that it eventually produces the opposite effect. Indeed, employability, pushed to its zenith, restricts all possibility of adaptability to the market and the business world, as these tend to change and shift their goalposts regularly. The fact of trying to conform to an economic configuration that is itself running out of steam, the system of training downgrades skills that are already obsolete and sterilises itself in the process. On the other hand, a more erratic, or "traditional" form of education opens up intellectual and professional opportunities that are broader in the medium term⁸.

If these points seem a little too general, or without sufficient foundation, a few equivocal examples can easily illustrate them. Students from business schools will daily use notions or concepts (identity, personality, subconscious, narrative, imaginary, symbolism, structures, concepts⁹) without having the slightest idea of their deeper meaning, the theoretical fields

in which they were born, the controversies or multiple approaches they led to and above all without having had the time to read and work directly on the texts and authors by themselves. This remains the only and best way of forming a mind and developing a real capacity for comprehension.

There would be no problem accepting the existence of teaching of this nature, if the distinction was clearly established and if the schools promoted by aggressive soft power were not tempted to deny the existence of this difference in nature, by trying to reconcile the concrete, the pragmatic and the efficient that they can claim with a pretension of theoretical excellence that can only marginally be in their grasp and which is also too often lacking in tired universities that are undergoing a process of "adaptation".

In a world that demands consensus above all, it is not easy to propose a free debate in these terms and to offer some critical perspective on the notion of soft power that has a strong claim on the process of the commercialisation of the life of the mind. But it is important to underline the complexity and heterogeneity of the situations that economic demands are trying to legitimise in the name of the reality principle. It would appear essential to us to note, as a conclusion, that capital, or the instrumental reason is incapable of supplying us with the founding discourse of its own truth or its meaning and regiments every aspect, every dimension of the existing as of our existences¹⁰. Simply because, as Michaël Fœssel¹¹ tells us, the constitution of a common world is only possible by dragging existences away from the sole verdict of economic or social effectiveness.

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1. The phrase from *Le Mépris* is as follows: “Cinema, according to André Bazin, replaces the world that we see with one that fulfils our desires. *Le Mépris* is the story of that world”. In fact, the author of this phrase is the critic Michel Mourlet who in 1959 wrote in *Les Cahiers du cinéma*: “Cinema is a perspective that replaces our own world to give us a world that is in line with our desires.” The question is, why did Godard attribute this quote to Bazin when he had to know the real author? Benjamin Simmenauer, to whom I owe this precision, mentions Godard’s wish to blend Bazin’s thinking (the defence of neo-realism) with Hollywood (the “dream factory”). All with the aim of filming the world as it is, and as it could be. With “Godardian” editing making it all possible.

2. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *La dialectique de la raison*, Tel Gallimard, 2007, Paris.

3. What’s left of convention and a fear of appearing grotesque prevent one from saying in urbane dinners that one prefers to read Marc Lévy to Proust. But there are other areas where post-modern confusion is full steam ahead. To the extent that a polished egg or a kitschy heart by Jeff Koons can produce admiring declarations and be considered much more agreeable than Beuys’ “strange” installations. An artist like Murakami is a good example of this huge trend. He is not embarrassed to declare that he loves Disney and has no time for Picasso. Which is not really surprising when one knows his work.

4. But, according to her, there are much more serious things: the use that those she refers to as the “philistines” make of a work of art they claim to revere and destroy the moment they own it: “the point of the matter is that, as soon as the immortal works of the past became the object of social and individual refinement and the status accorded to it, they lost their most important and elemental quality which is to grasp or move the reader or the spectator over the centuries ... The great works of art are no less misused when they serve purposes of self-education or self-perfection than when they serve any other purposes. It may be as useful and legitimate to look at a painting in order to perfect one’s knowledge of a given period, as it is useful and legitimate to use a painting in order to hide a hole in the wall”. Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, Viking Press, 1961.

We should note that if the use of culture to signify social status is often criticised and thought to be vulgar, the argument that it is important to read and to be cultivated to get good grades is of the same nature, in as much as it is based on the social utility of the appropriation of culture and the importance of “cultivating oneself”.

5. It is not surprising then that in the big contemporary

art fairs, objects from the big global luxury brands can be exhibited such as chairs by Marni, in 2102, in Miami.

6. But the creativity gurus usually don’t bother with epistemological warnings: haven’t they been selling seminars to business clients for the past twenty years based on NLP and the left-brain right-brain theories that would shock any neuroscientist.

7. This is not about doubting the good will, effort or interest in culture or research of many actors in the various institutions, but to qualify the overall framework in which they operate.

8. Spiritual nourishment has this in common with earthly nourishment: anything that tends to be preserved or ready to eat or even pre-chewed tends to lack quality.

9. There is, in the systematic use of the word “concept” in marketing, something that is so laughable that it is enough to show the difference between knowledge and professional practice: before, a concept was patiently forged by those who had dedicated their lives to thought. The concept of time, for example was worked on by Saint Augustus, Kant and Bergson. Today, a concept has become nothing more than painting a shop front blue or the sole of a shoe red. This made Gilles Deleuze indignant, and did not amuse him one bit: “From one trial to the next, philosophy comes up against rivals that are more and more insolent, more and more calamitous than Plato, at his most comical could never have imagined. Finally, the depths of shame are reached when computers, advertising, marketing and design take over the word concept itself and say, it’s ours now, we are the creative ones, we are the “conceptors”. We are the friends of concept; we put it in our computers”. (Gilles Deleuze, “Qu’est-ce que la philosophie ?”, *Revue Chimères*, n° 8, May 1990)

10. It is not possible, as Jean-François Lyotard points out, to merely supply the axioms (“which are but decisions about what has meaning, the choice of meaning) and to demand that everyone agree with the axioms on offer, otherwise “rationality is threatened”. The position can not be held to pretend to annex truth, while even to found the possibility to tell a truth (in logic, mathematics, and economics) means that “the discourse that tells the truth can not be included in the discourse that establishes the conditions for truth or axioms”.

11. Michaël Fœssel, *La privation de l’intime*, Paris, Seuil, 2008.