

## Short note

# SOFT POWER AND THE CIVILIZING LOGIC OF GLOBALIZATION: A CULTURAL CRITIQUE OF NEO- CIVILIZATIONAL DYNAMICS

## Soft power e la logica civilizzante della globalizzazione: una critica culturale della neocivilizzazione

HADJER BEN SALEM<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Soft power, Civilizing mission, Postcolonial theory, Cultural hegemony, Global South, Symbolic power.

**Parole chiave:** Soft power, Missione civilizzatrice, Teoria postcoloniale, Egeemonia culturale, Sud del mondo, Potere simbolico.

### 1. Introduction.

According to Joseph Nye's (2004) theory of soft power, there is a capacity to affect other people's preferences through cultural seduction rather than coercion. Soft power's key tools, including media, education, and cultural diplomacy, are often praised as means by which to promote dialogue and mutual understanding; however, deeper analysis reveals a fundamental contradiction at the heart of soft power: it usually operates by universalizing dominant (largely) Euro-American cultural norms that recreate global hierarchy based on colonization. While recognizing that there are multiple ways of being in a "Western" society, this paper is concerned only with the forms of cultural and political models that have been exported most consistently, particularly from North America and Western Europe. Globalization is an example of this contradiction - while it offers some promise of providing opportunities for intercultural exchange, it also tends towards normalizing specific values historically connected to dominant centres of power such as liberal democracy, consumerism, and linguistic dominance. The colonial civilizing mission established the West

---

<sup>1</sup> University of Biskra. Contact: [hadjer.bensalem@univ-biskra.dz](mailto:hadjer.bensalem@univ-biskra.dz)



as the universal exponent of rationality and civility; although formally dismantled, its logic persists in transmuted form through soft power's ideological reach.

The connection between soft power and colonial civilizing logics has been productively explored by Parmar (2012) in the context of philanthropic foundations, Thussu (2010) in international communication, and Pennycook (1998) in language policy. These analyses, however, remain sector-specific. The present note advances beyond them in two ways. First, it synthesizes media, education, and cultural diplomacy into a unified analytical framework, demonstrating that these mechanisms are not parallel but interlocking: media creates aspiration, education enables access, and cultural diplomacy confers legitimacy. Second, by incorporating the decolonial tradition (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2000, 2011; Lugones, 2008; Wynter, 2003) - largely absent from prior soft power critiques - it reveals that soft power reproduces not merely specific cultural values but a civilizational episteme: a hierarchical ordering of knowledge and human worth originating in colonial modernity.

## **2. Theoretical Framework.**

The analysis draws on four theoretical traditions. Soft power's structural limitations are identified through Lukes's (2005) three-dimensional conception of power, which demonstrates that shaping preferences constitutes a more insidious form of domination than direct coercion - precisely because it renders hierarchical influence invisible.

Postcolonial scholarship provides the historical anchoring. Said's (1978) *Orientalism* shows that colonial domination operated through the production of knowledge that constituted colonized peoples as inferior. Fanon (1963) identifies colonization as a psychic and cultural attack on the identity of the colonized. Mbembe (2001) argues that colonial rationalities persist structurally in postcolonial governance frameworks. Madouni (2021) extends this analysis to the present, demonstrating how Western cultural values continue to penetrate postcolonial contexts through digital technologies, generating cultural dependence and epistemic alienation.

Cultural hegemony theory, specifically Gramsci's (1971) account of how subordinate groups internalize dominant values as "common sense," illuminates how soft power generates consent without overt coercion. When Euro-American ideals - individualism, liberal democracy, specific conceptions of progress - are naturalized through media, schooling, and diplomacy, hierarchy is reproduced through apparent consensus.

The decolonial tradition anchors the paper's deepest claim. Quijano's (2000) "coloniality of power" demonstrates that the racial and cultural classifications established under colonialism continue to structure global capitalism. Mignolo's (2000, 2011) "colonial

difference” reveals the fundamentally epistemic nature of this hierarchy: certain ways of knowing are devalued as “local,” while Euro-American reason is elevated as “universal.” Lugones (2008) extends the analysis to gendered and racialized dimensions of civilizational classification, and Wynter (2003) argues that the “over-representation of Man” - a specifically European bourgeois conception of the human - underwrites the very idea of civilization against which other peoples are measured. Together, these frameworks establish that soft power’s operation is structural rather than incidental: it reproduces a civilizational episteme whose origins lie in colonial modernity..

### **3. From Civilizing Mission to Soft Power.**

The colonial civilizing mission (mission civilisatrice) legitimized imperial domination by framing Western modernity as the apex of human development. French colonial administrators in West Africa constructed legal systems for peoples cast as “primitives” (Conklin, 1997); British liberal imperialism deployed a discourse of self-governance to justify colonial administration (Mehta, 1999). Both were explicitly hierarchical, naming the colonized as inferior without pretense.

Contemporary soft power discourse operates according to a structurally identical logic while employing a radically different rhetorical register. Where civilizing missions invoked explicit racial superiority, soft power invokes “universal” values - democracy, human rights, development, innovation - that originate within Euro-American experience yet are positioned as globally applicable. Nye’s (2004) claim that cultural appeal generates attraction through values replaces overt colonial coercion with seductive invitation; yet, as Lukes (2005) argues, these invitations are not neutral. The objects of attraction have been constructed within a geopolitical order shaped by historical inequalities in cultural production, whereby US and Western European cultural commodities systematically dominate global representations of success and the good life (Thussu, 2010).

The transformation is morphological rather than substantive. The civilizing mission positioned the West as the telos of universal history; soft power positions it as the horizon of global aspiration. Colonial discourse named the colonized as inferior; soft power invites global audiences to aspire to Western lifestyles, consume its media, learn its languages, and adopt its institutional forms. Both operate through Gramscian cultural hegemony: the naturalization of historically contingent values as universal common sense. The shift from overt imposition to seductive attraction does not dismantle civilizational hierarchy but makes it more durable by rendering it seemingly consensual and chosen..

## **4. Three Mechanisms of Neo-Civilizational Power.**

### **4.1. Global Media.**

Global media platforms function as powerful cultural institutions that shape aspiration and normalize values. Wayne's (2020) analysis of Netflix's global production strategy demonstrates that the platform's algorithmic curation and commissioning logic systematically favor narrative forms associated with Hollywood conventions - individual protagonist, linear causality, resolution-oriented closure - over collectivist, cyclical, or open-ended traditions. Cultural specificity is incorporated as surface aesthetic texture while the underlying ideological form remains consistent with Euro-American liberal individualism.

This reproduces what Schiller (1976) identified as "cultural imperialism," now operating through platform infrastructure rather than direct broadcast dominance. Thussu (2018) observes that while Bollywood, the Korean Wave, and other non-Western media industries have achieved global reach, the structural conditions of international media distribution - intellectual property regimes, platform ownership, algorithmic recommendation systems - continue to advantage dominant centers. The global diffusion of specific genre conventions implicitly positions certain modes of selfhood and social organization as universally modern, reproducing civilizational hierarchy through narrative form rather than ideological statement.

### **4.2. Language and Education.**

Language and education occupy a structurally central position in the neo-civilizational apparatus because they shape the cognitive and epistemic frameworks through which content is evaluated. English operates not merely as a useful lingua franca but as a global "ivilizing" language whose position is bound to its historical association with modernity and legitimate knowledge. Phillipson (2009) demonstrates that promotional discourse for English language programs systematically links linguistic assimilation with opportunity and progress, positioning multilingualism as an obstacle to development rather than a resource. Pennycook (1998) shows that English language pedagogy carries embedded colonial assumptions: particular forms of argumentation, citation practices, and epistemic authority are treated as natural features of academic competence rather than culturally specific norms. Canagarajah (2002) extends this analysis to global academic publishing, demonstrating that university rankings and international journal hierarchies compel scholars from non-Western contexts to adopt these norms to gain professional recognition, structurally reproducing the colonial hierarchy between "universal" and "local" knowledge.

### 4.3. Cultural Diplomacy.

Cultural diplomacy institutions - the British Council, the Alliance Française, the Goethe-Institut - occupy a distinctive position because they make explicit the link between cultural promotion and national interest. Rizvi (2007) demonstrates that these organizations construct cultural “sharing” and “partnership” in ways that consistently position the values of the host nation - specific conceptions of democracy, artistic excellence, and civic virtue - as desirable models for global emulation. The rhetoric of partnership masks a fundamentally asymmetrical relationship: these institutions offer their national culture as the gift of civilization, not as one perspective among equals in a genuinely horizontal dialogue. In Gramsci’s (1971) terms, they function as ideological apparatuses that naturalize the values of dominant states as the common sense of global modernity.

The emergence of China’s Confucius Institutes is instructive precisely because it challenges Western dominance while structurally replicating the same logic. Brady’s (2012) analysis demonstrates that Confucius Institutes deploy culture systematically in the service of national legitimacy - exactly the strategy of Western cultural diplomacy, but oriented toward a different civilizational center. This structural equivalence supports the paper’s broader argument: the problem is not Western cultural diplomacy specifically but the form of soft power as civilizational promotion, which reproduces hierarchical logic regardless of which civilization is being promoted.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion.

The three domains analyzed above do not operate independently; they constitute a structurally interlocking neo-civilizational apparatus whose cumulative effect exceeds what any single domain could achieve alone. Media creates cultural aspiration; education provides the epistemic infrastructure to access and be recognized within the global knowledge economy; cultural diplomacy confers institutional legitimacy upon what media and education naturalize. The apparatus is ideologically effective precisely because each of its components can be presented as benign in isolation: Netflix as entertainment, English education as opportunity, the British Council as cultural exchange. It is only when they are analyzed in their structural interconnection that their collective function as a civilizational hierarchy-reproducing system becomes visible.

The paper acknowledges counter-tendencies that deserve substantive engagement. The global success of Bollywood, the Korean Wave, Nollywood, and Turkish television demonstrates that non-Western cultural industries can achieve massive international audiences, generating genuine counter-flows (Iwabuchi, 2015; Oliveira, 2011). These

developments confirm that soft power is a genuinely contested terrain, not a smoothly functioning hegemonic machine, and that cultural industries outside the West have achieved real global agency.

Nevertheless, these counter-tendencies do not dismantle the neo-civilizational argument; they sharpen it. The success of non-Western soft power strategies has largely reproduced the structural form of civilizational promotion rather than dismantling it. The Korean Wave promotes Korean cultural values as globally attractive; Chinese cultural diplomacy promotes Chinese civilizational identity as a legitimate global alternative. Each substitutes a different civilizational content within the same hierarchical form: the promotion of one's culture as a desirable model for global emulation. This structural replication confirms that the problem is not the specific content of Western cultural dominance but the mode of global cultural governance that soft power as a concept and practice instantiates - a mode that distributes cultural authority hierarchically regardless of who sits at its center.

The central theoretical claim is therefore this: soft power represents a morphological transformation of the civilizing mission. It preserves the hierarchical structural logic while radically altering its mechanisms of operation. Civilizing missions were explicit racial hierarchies operating via administrative coercion; soft power operates implicitly via the mechanics of aspiration, epistemic normalization, and consensual legitimation. This transformation does not weaken the hierarchy - it makes it more durable by rendering it seemingly chosen rather than imposed. If civilizational hierarchies are reproduced through the distributed operation of a neo-civilizational apparatus, then resistance requires a structural analysis that reads across domains simultaneously and a critical politics that addresses the apparatus as a whole. This note proposes such a cross-domain framework as a contribution to that project.

### References.

- Brady, A. (2012). *Marketing dictatorship: Propaganda and thought work in contemporary China*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Canagarajah, S. (2002). *A geopolitics of academic writing*. University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton University Press.
- Conklin, A. L. (1997). *A mission to civilize: The republican idea of empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930*. Stanford University Press.

- Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth* (C. Farrington, Trans.). Grove Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith, Eds. & Trans.). International Publishers.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage.
- Iwabuchi, K. (2015). Reshaping global cultural flows: The “repacking” of cultural difference in global media. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(6), 575–591.
- Larkin, B. (2008). *Signal and noise: Media, infrastructure, and urban culture in Nigeria*. Duke University Press.
- Lugones, M. (2008). Coloniality of gender. *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise*, 2, 1–17.
- Lukes, S. (2005). *Power: A radical view* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Madouni, A. (2021). The cultural invasion and its impact on security breakthroughs of the nation. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(8), 843–863. <https://doi.org/10.17569/tojq.1003799>
- Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. University of California Press.
- Mehta, U. S. (1999). *Liberalism and empire: A study in nineteenth-century British liberal thought*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2000). *Local histories/global designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*. Princeton University Press.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2011). *The darker side of Western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options*. Duke University Press.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs.
- Oliveira, G. (2011). The geopolitics of Brazilian telenovelas. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14(2), 173–188.
- Parmar, I. (2012). *Foundations of the American century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller foundations in the rise of American power*. Columbia University Press.
- Pennycook, A. (1998). *English and the discourses of colonialism*. Routledge.
- Phillipson, R. (2009). *Linguistic imperialism continued*. Routledge.
- Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of power and Eurocentrism in Latin America. *International Sociology*, 15(2), 215–232.
- Rizvi, F. (2007). Internationalization of curriculum: A critical perspective. In M. Hayden, J. Levy, & J. Thompson (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of research in international education* (pp. 390–403). SAGE.

- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Schiller, H. I. (1976). *Communication and cultural domination*. International Arts and Sciences Press.
- Thussu, D. K. (2010). *International communication: Continuity and change* (2nd ed.). Bloomsbury.
- Thussu, D. K. (2018). *International communication: A reader* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Wayne, M. (2020). Netflix, globalization, and the digital intermediaries of culture. *Critical Studies in Television*, 15(3), 233–253.
- Wynter, S. (2003). Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation-An argument. *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3(3), 257–337.