

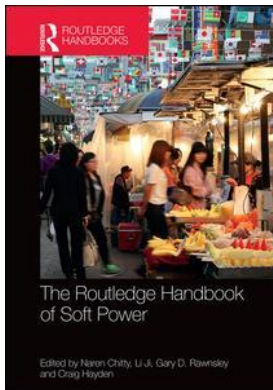
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## The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power

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### Alternatives to soft power

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## 2

# ALTERNATIVES TO SOFT POWER

## Influence in French and German external cultural action

*Robin Brown*

### Introduction

This chapter starts from a simple observation: despite scepticism from academic theorists and policy commentators about its coherence and utility ‘soft power’ remains firmly entrenched in policy discourse. The popularity of the concept among policymakers stimulates more research which, in turn, gives further life to the concept (Bially Mattern 2007; Solomon 2014; Fan 2008; Breslin 2011; Hall 2010).

This leads to a puzzle. How is it that a term that appears so lacking in scientific utility can be so attractive in the policy sphere? One explanation is the ambiguity of the concept of soft power. Despite Joseph Nye’s efforts to define it, the usage of ‘soft power’ in policy discourses is slippery. This has the effect that both a successful fashion industry and the diplomatic role of the armed forces can be treated as ‘soft power’ (Select Committee on Soft Power 2014).

This chapter starts from a particular interpretation of this ambiguity; that ‘soft power’ fills a gap in the language of international affairs as an academic field and as a practical activity. Soft power offers a way of talking about non-coercive modes of influence in international politics. Given that such influence is absolutely basic to international relations the existence of such a gap is surprising but it reflects the legacy of discussions of ‘power’ in International Relations (Berenskoetter and Williams 2007; Barnett and Duvall 2005). This gap explains the tension between the theoretical critiques of soft power and the attractiveness of the language to policymakers; the idea is useful because it captures something about international politics that other languages miss. The consequence of this position is that ‘soft power’ is likely to retain its grip on policy discourse unless researchers can offer alternative ways of conceptualizing and practicing influence.

This chapter begins the process of exploring alternatives by introducing and examining what will be termed here the foreign ‘cultural projects’ pursued by France and Germany over the past century. In Germany the term *auswärtige kulturpolitik* (AKP) – literally ‘foreign cultural policy’ – was coined just before the First World War to label the existing practices and the potential of civil society in building German influence in the

world. Even today there are strong continuities with what is now called *auswärtige kultur – und bildungspolitik* (AKBP) – foreign culture and education (Auswärtige Amt 2011). In France ideas of *rayonnement* (projection or radiation), *politique culturelle* (cultural policy) and *action culturelle extérieure* (external cultural action) continue to be all terms found in official or semi-official contexts today, but they have even older roots. In both cases these activities have consistently attracted substantial parts of the resources devoted to foreign affairs, have been seen as an integral part of national statecraft and encompass a broad range of activities; arts, language, literature, science, education and media development among others. These activities have attracted little attention in English language literature and are rarely seen (even in France and Germany) as having anything to do with American concepts of public diplomacy and soft power.

This exploration offers three benefits. First, through these lenses ‘soft power’ becomes just one of a number of possible ways of thinking about influence in international politics, and its distinctive assumptions become visible. Second, debates over these cultural projects have at times paralleled issues in the discussion on soft power, for instance in the relationship between national attractiveness and diplomatic influence. Third, the durability and continuity of the continental practices offers a rich field for exploring sources of success and failure in the construction of influence.

This chapter uses the term ‘influence’ more frequently than ‘power’. Within the social sciences ‘power’ carries the connotation of control that comes from the Weberian definition of power as the ability to overcome resistance (Weber 1968). The type of confrontation put forward in Weber’s concept is relatively rare and the achievement of clear-cut success is even rarer. Thus, focusing on power as control has the effect of narrowing the field of attention to the extent that most efforts that countries make to shape their environment become invisible. Influence is understood more as the ability to make a difference without implying that it can control outcomes. Even in the absence of control in this sense, countries see some degree of influence as worth pursuing.

The first part of this chapter outlines a history of the French and German cultural projects while the second part addresses similarities and difference with ‘soft power’.

### Inventing ‘cultural action’

Modern concepts and practices of cultural action emerged from the growing tendency in nineteenth-century Europe to see the world as a set of nations and to identify all the attributes of a ‘country’ as expressions of the nation (Greenfeld 1992; Greenfeld and Eastwood 2005; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). This process was a product of the development of the modern apparatus of the nation-state – an expanding bureaucracy, compulsory education and conscription – coupled with the nineteenth-century communications revolution; the telegraph, the railway and the steamship (Mann 1993; Silberman 1993; Mattelart 1996 [1994]). The promotion of aspects of the nation – for instance, language, art and science – abroad became the promotion of the nation in the world. This might be valuable in its own right but was also a mode of promoting the prestige and influence of the nation (and its state) in the world. Thus modern practices of cultural action were strongly associated with the nation-state.

Within this general context for the emergence of national cultural projects both the French and German cases had characteristics that reflected their particular histories. The French crown had traditionally supported the work of Catholic Orders in the Levant, but with the early nineteenth-century religious revivals this presence within the Ottoman

Empire was resuscitated by the resurgence of popular religiosity. The French public donated in support of the missionaries, who in turn saw the possibility of operating schools as a way to counter the presence of American protestant missionaries (Burrows 1986; Viaene 2012). These Christian groups provided the model for the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) that from 1862 channelled support from Jewish communities in western Europe to a network of French-speaking European-style schools in the Middle East (Tsur 2012). In 1883 the AIU became the model for the Alliance Française (AF). For the founders of the Alliance there was no doubt about the relationship between the *rayonnement* of the French language and the prestige and influence of France in the world: the revival of France after its defeat by Germany in 1870–1 was a cultural as well as a political or military project. In the next two decades the committees of the Alliance became a major presence in the independent countries of Europe and the Americas (Chaubet 2006). The AF was, and remains, a private organization but it was closely aligned with the concerns of French diplomacy, soon after its founding the foreign minister was writing to his embassies asking them to provide whatever support they could to AF (Chaubet 2006, pp. 69–70). In the years before the First World War the Quai d’Orsay dispensed a small but growing volume of subsidy to schools in the Middle East and then to cultural activities elsewhere around the world (Roche and Pigniau 1995).

Unlike France, the newly united Germany had a sizeable diaspora – spread across a world of nation-states. An early concern of the Reich was that the Germanness of that diaspora was under threat, for instance through insistence on education in the national language, hence the first target of German cultural action was the support of German language schools in Europe and beyond (Düwell 1976, 2009). It was not until the decade before the First World War that German cultural action began to attempt to extend its reach via establishing schools that would attract local children (Düwell 1976, pp. 64–9; Stremmel 2015).

Even before the First World War German and French diplomats and cultural commentators were each intensely aware of what the others were doing to promote their country. Although Britain and the United States did not launch official cultural programmes until the 1930s, the activities of British and American missionaries and commercial actors were seen through a lens of national expansion (Chaubet 2006, pp. 124–31; Düwell 1976). France was well aware of the reputation and attractiveness of German universities; as early as 1892 the Alliance was working to facilitate exchanges with French universities. In 1910 the government created l’Office National des Universités et des Écoles Françaises (ONUFE) to boost the international relationships of French institutions. The ONUFE also created links between French universities and the first wave of cultural institutes that were being created to provide a platform for *rayonnement* (Chaubet 2006, p. 74).

After 1900 Germany gave more attention to reaching beyond its diaspora, and numerous societies sprung up committed to promoting links with foreign countries. Much of this activity was funded by business, which saw cultural links as opening the way for exports and investment as well as a way of promoting Germany – this close relationship between cultural and economic promotion was also seen in France (Kloosterhuis 1994).

Despite the increasing scope, complexity and state support of these cultural activities they were practiced rather than theorized, but in 1912 the German historian Karl Lamprecht wrote to the Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, arguing that the Reich needed an *auswärtige kulturpolitik*. Germany could achieve its proper place as a world power without a military confrontation if it pursued a comprehensive strategy that deployed its diplomatic, cultural, educational and economic resources to build German influence

in the world. Bethmann-Hollweg was sympathetic but doubtful that Germany was mature enough to succeed in the face of French or British cultural power. Nevertheless he instructed the government machinery to boost its efforts to promote German influence (Chickering 1993; Düwell 1976).

If Lamprecht had been unable to convince Bethmann-Hollweg before the First World War, after the conflict Germany had little choice but to make use of the cultural toolkit. Again civil society groups sprang into action, both to support the German diaspora (now expanded by the revised borders of Europe) and to build relations with other countries. Hence organizations to build links with higher education institutions abroad, support schools, and, in direct imitation of the French, to promote the German language; the Goethe Institut, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) and the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung all trace their roots to this period (Düwell 1976; Trommler 2013; Hiden 1977; Michels 2005). A unique enterprise was the Kriegsschuldreferat (War Guilt Department), an office within the foreign ministry dedicated to undermining Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles that assigned sole responsibility for the war to Germany. The department set up disguised front organizations to aid its work and supported historians, both German and foreign, that were working on the origins of the war and were thought to be critical of the underlying thesis of Article 231 (Evans and Baylen 1995; Wittgens, 1995).

Although one thrust of AKP under the Weimar Republic was to replace a bombastic promotion of the superiority of Germany and its culture with, in theory, a more open, dialogical notion of cultural exchange (Düwell 1976, pp. 210–13), the period also marked a continuity of the competition with the French. As home of a large fraction of the sovereign states of the era, Latin America continued to be an arena of competition, although, as was the case with all these projects, what the Germans offered was appropriated in line with local needs – Spengler’s *Decline of the West* was a hit in Latin America less as an expression of German genius and more as a harbinger of an era where the region could liberate itself from European cultural models (Goebel 2009; Matthieu 1991).

France attempted to forge relationships with the new states of central and eastern Europe in order to contain Germany. For Paris it was clear that these bonds would be stronger if they were based on cultural relations as well as political and military alliances; the result was the deployment of a network of Alliance Française committees, schools, and cultural institutes backed up by new central organizations to support the circulation of lecturers, writers, artists and musicians. In both Germany and France the cultural function was further institutionalized in the foreign ministry, and parliamentarians in each country gave earnest attention to the activities of the other. South-east Europe became another arena of competition, and both countries anxiously scrutinized the arrival of Italian efforts at projecting influence (Chaubet 2006; Piniau 1998; Düwell 1976; Santoro 2001; Gross 2012; Michels 2004).

Although the involvement of the state in these activities was growing in terms of the creation of specialized departments, expanding budgets and aspirations there was little capacity to formulate and execute a coherent national strategy. At the end of the 1930s France attempted a better coordination of foreign policy, external information activities and cultural activities but struggled to make a new system work (Guénard-Maget 2014; Young 2004). The situation in Nazi Germany was worse; the fragmentation of the regime and the party created a chaotic situation where different organizations constantly worked at cross purposes and undermined German influence even as they attempted to promote it (Kallis 2008; Lumans 2009; Diamond 1974; Frye 1967).

For both France and Germany 1945 meant renewed efforts to construct their position in the world that made their cultural projects more, not less, important. The importance attached to these efforts was perhaps indicated by the elevation of the cultural department of the Quai d'Orsay to the level of directorate-general – equivalent to the political section of the ministry. As de Gaulle had commented on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Alliance Française, the twin pillars on which France's standing would rest were French arms and French thought (Roche and Pigniau 1995). For Germany the aim was to build relations with the west and, given recent history, the cultural project had to be an important part of this (Düwell 2009; Kathe 2005; Michels 2005).

The impact of decolonization expanded the field of action. For France, culture was a basis for its privileged relationship with its former colonies, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Roche and Pigniau 1995; Walsh 1999). Although Germany was relieved of the burden of being a colonial power in an anti-colonial age it was faced with a challenge from the 'other Germany' and until the end of the 1960s waged an intense campaign to prevent other countries recognizing East Germany. Aid and cultural relations (at this point closely related) were important tools and the Goethe Institut rapidly expanded its network of posts (Kathe 2005; Pence 2012; Balbier 2009).

Although France and Germany were the pioneers of the cultural project after 1945, the way that enterprise was understood was modified by their exposure to American models and practices. America's initial foray into official culture was via the State Department's Department of Cultural Relations (established in 1938); its priority had been on collaboration in higher education. The effect of the wartime experience had been to expand the repertoire of cultural relations. Thus culture took in mass media and popular culture as well as vocational education, training and the exchange of experts to address a full range of social challenges (Espinosa 1976; Arndt 2005; Hart 2013; Ninkovich 1981). This expanded vision of culture was an important inspiration in both France and Germany. In France many of the key figures in the new Direction Générale des Relations Culturelles (DGRC) had spent the war in the United States and the name of their new directorate reflected that influence (Jeanpierre 2002: 116; Faucher 2014). In Germany the influence took longer to be felt but was an important aspect of the 'expanded concept of culture' that would emerge during the 1960s (Kathe 2005; Peisert 1978).

From the 1950s the foreign ministry-led 'external cultural projects' were challenged by the emergence of development and culture as policy areas in their own right. Development is tied to culture and education which meant that there were overlaps between what 'cultural' agencies did and what aid agencies did. The creation of a Ministry of Culture in France in 1959 created a competitor for the right to control external cultural policy and, under André Malraux in the 1960s or Jack Lang in the 1990s, the Ministry of Culture has at times operated a parallel foreign policy (Lebovics 1999; Pigniau 1998; Martin 2010). The changing names of the organization originally known as the DGRC track the changing scope of French policy. In 1956 the rise of technical assistance saw the name change to Direction-Générale des Affaires Culturelles et Techniques (DGACT); in 1969 science was the new priority and DGACT became the Direction-Générale des Relations Culturelles, Scientifiques et Techniques; in 1999 the Direction-Générale de la Coopération International et du Développement; and in 2009 it became the Direction-Générale de la Mondialisation, du Développement et des Partenariats, composed of the three directorates of business and international economy, development and global public goods and cultural, academic and research cooperation.

Although Germany's AKP activities and network of overseas representation expanded rapidly during the 1950s and 1960s they lacked clear conceptual bases. Instead they responded to the needs of economic recovery, integration into the Western Bloc and countering the expansion of East Germany's international presence. It was not until the 1970s that Germany received a comprehensive policy framework, and the result was an influential package of ideas that continues to guide the German project. First, AKP was the 'third pillar' of German foreign policy along with politics and economics. It shared responsibility for the achievement of Germany's foreign policy goals and had a special responsibility for contributing to the legitimacy of the (West) German state. Second, there was a clearer division of labour between the civil society organizations, such as the Goethe Institut that carried out foreign cultural activities and the foreign ministry. The former were responsible for the conception and conduct of cultural programmes but it was the Auswärtige Amt (AA) which was responsible for policy and strategy. Third, foreign policy was about partnership building, collaboration and dialogue and this needed to be reflected in the approach of cultural programmes. Fourth, AKP would be built on an 'expanded concept of culture': it could no longer only be about Goethe and Beethoven but had to engage with the challenges of modern society (Auswärtige Amt 1970; Deutscher Bundestag 1975, 1975; Kathe 2005). In France the Rapport Rigaud of 1979 echoed some of these ideas but both countries found that it was easier to proclaim the end of one way *rayonnement* than to actually put it into practice – proclamations of the birth of partnership would be a standard feature of official documents down to the present (Rigaud 1979).

After 1945 French and German cultural activities grew rapidly, funded by economic growth and the expanding number of newly independent states. In the post-Cold War era, pressure on public expenditure combined with geopolitical change – the break-up of the Soviet Union and the increasing importance of countries such as China as both targets and competitors – created new demands on the projects. The result has been a long-running series of reports and investigations in both countries that have sought ways to reconcile the demands on the system without any signs of a willingness to rethink the entire enterprise (Kathe 2005; Auswärtige Amt 2000; Cour des Comptes 2013; Chaubet 2010).

One of the consequences of the tension between growing demands on the French cultural project and the limits of resources has been the demand for a more strategic approach that aligns *rayonnement* more closely to foreign policy goals for a *diplomatie d'influence*; for some commentators this would be a 'French soft power', for others it is something different, but the key claim is that France needs an approach to statecraft that focuses all of its resources: culture, language, education, science and expertise on supporting its diplomatic objectives (Gazeau-Secret 2010; Foucher 2013a; Rochebloine 2009).

### Comparing cultural projects and soft power

How do these projects differ from soft power and what lessons can we learn? Reich and Lebow's recent challenge to soft power: "What is the leap of logic that leads from attraction to American culture or its products to support for American foreign policy?" provides a useful way of framing the discussion (Reich and Lebow 2014, p. 34).

From the perspective of the cultural projects the 'logic' is that of the nation. For the founders of the French and German projects there was an obvious connection between language, culture, science, diplomacy, prestige and power. The history of these projects

is a retreat from the ‘strong’ nationalist claim – exemplified in early twentieth-century German assertions of the superiority of their culture – towards something more like Billig’s ‘banal nationalism’, an everyday assumption of the nationalness of the world (Billig 1995). This national assumption is more muted in German documents but remains quite explicit in some French discussions (Foucher 2013b; Direction Générale de la Coopération Internationale et du Développement 2007). This assumption of nationalness is an assumption of difference, which will imply competition as well as collaboration. Cultural action in its ‘expanded’ form is seen as simultaneously an expression of the nation, a way of doing good in the world, a way of building relations and a way of benefitting the national community.

From a national perspective Nye’s categorical separation of ‘power’ into soft and hard appears capricious. A national perspective is not the integration of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ into ‘smart’ power but rather a holistic perspective on national influence (Cohen *et al.* 2007). The cultural and the economic are mutually reinforcing (Cour des Comptes 2013, pp. 135–8; Auswärtige Amt 2011, p. 17). The economic reputation of a country is part of its overall reputation; economic success breeds interest in its culture while cultural knowledge stimulates interest and trust in economic activities. There are more prosaic connections; for instance, knowledge of the French or German language makes it easier to forge connections or to access training and education.

Reich and Lebow (2014) draw an opposition between popular culture and support for foreign policy, but in comparison with the concepts of influence that run through the cultural projects this excludes numerous sources and areas of influence. Influence can occur across all policy areas – not just foreign policy. It can occur in areas that straddle private and public sectors. For instance, France has recently created an agency for French international technical expertise (Expertise France) as a way of countering the advantages of Anglo-Saxon countries in winning international contracts. When a country decides to carry out a major infrastructure project and brings in consultants to frame the problem and design the tender process, Anglo-Americans are likely to approach the problem in a particular way that advantages Anglo-Saxon legal models and technologies and disadvantages French models and companies. This has economic effects and may also have longer term effects of locking in these models through the infrastructure itself and the training of personnel (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et Européennes 2011; Tenzer 2011). From a national perspective, promoting attractiveness of a country to investors, importers, tourists, students and academics is also a legitimate activity – one that is directly advantageous in economic terms but where success in these dimensions also plays back into other forms of attention.

In both countries there is an emphasis on what might be termed social infrastructures of influence. Both France and Germany are among the largest spenders on public diplomacy and cultural relations work (Auswärtige Amt 2013; Cour des Comptes 2013). Much of their resources are devoted to the maintenance of networks of schools and cultural centres. Beyond that, both countries have been concerned to ensure the presence of their languages in national school systems and have supported the export of books, teaching materials and teachers. School systems and language teaching open a route to higher education in France or Germany. In the years after 1989 France attempted to ensure the construction of systems of education in central and eastern Europe where French was firmly entrenched – for instance by supporting the university departments where the next generation of French teachers would be trained. Further, France fought for acceptance of the principle that European schoolchildren should study two foreign languages. It was recognized that the first language would be English but that the second language would



be French or German and that here French had better chances of prevailing (Direction Générale de la Coopération Internationale et du Développement 2007). The cultural project is more about the infrastructures of international relations than any tool that can be swiftly repurposed. At the heart of this idea is the creation of networks of relationships constructed over the long term but where influence may be a consequence of these relationships rather than an end in itself. This creates a situation where influence is embedded in the fabric of international relations.

This concern with power raises another point. Nye's discussion is phrased in terms of the US achieving its objectives – that it is about a transactional mode of power – x did this (which it would not have done otherwise) because of our soft power. For the cultural project the influence is less about transactions but about the framework of relationships within which transactions take place. The assumption is that because of, for example, Germany's cultural work a country will treat Germany as a familiar and trusted partner and will pay attention to it – economically, politically, culturally – and take account of its sensibilities and interests. This does not mean that the countries will not have disagreements but that those will take place in a context of trust and familiarity. The impact of this should be compared with a situation where such work has been absent – relations will be conducted on the basis of limited knowledge and will be strictly transactional. The focus is more on structuring the context in which transactions occur. One of the French objections to the concept of soft power is precisely this focus on 'power'; countries smaller than the US clearly have some impact on the world but they are not in a position to exercise power in the strong sense (Foucher 2013a). France's support for the International Organisation of La Francophonie, or La Francophonie, both as an organization and a phenomenon, is an extreme example. Although it may appear to be a fact of life that there are French-speaking countries in the world, this situation is not one that exists outside history. France must work to protect *francophonie* against the advance of other languages.

### Conclusion

The major objective of this chapter has been to outline some of the characteristics of French and German cultural projects in international politics in order to support the argument that discourses of soft power derived from Nye are only one way of thinking about influence. My argument is not that the cultural projects are 'right' but that by making the comparison it is possible to show some of the assumptions of soft power.

The key insight is the impact of the hard/soft bifurcation. 'Hard' has two connotations as coercive and material – that is, military and economic. 'Soft' is non-coercive and ideational, hence the vogue for reworking it in linguistic or representational terms. The problem is that this separation actually misses large parts of statecraft which involve negotiation and/or the non-coercive use of economic resources. French or German leaders would deny that they are in a position to use coercion (although the Greek government in 2015 might disagree with that) but would also point to the importance of mutually beneficial relations – one of the reasons why French influence is distinguished from power. The result is that opportunity, not just attraction, is a major part of influence. The cultural and the economic are mutually reinforcing; this does not mean that the cultural is simply marketing, it is also about familiarity with language, culture, systems, ways of doing business and the relations with people that emerge from this process.

Soft power emerges from a particular, theoretically driven, understanding of world politics rather than from a historical account. The dominant line of cleavage in American

International Relations has been between realists who posit a world of states dominated by material power versus a liberal position that focuses on the transformation of the states system. Realism claims the permanent importance of material power while liberalism looks for evidence of the importance of other factors in order to demonstrate the transformation the implications of the ‘cultural project’ and its history offers an alternative to both of these positions. World politics is indeed influenced and constituted by non-state actors but these actors still have national identities. The irony is that the cultural position is much closer to everyday understandings of national influence than it is to the theoretical complications of soft power.

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