

# **Soft Power and Strategy: Developing a ‘Strategic’ Concept of Power**

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In coining the term ‘soft power’, Joseph Nye has contributed one of the best known and most widely referred-to concepts within the discourse of US grand strategy. Nye introduced this term in 1990 in his book *Bound to Lead*, and has since developed the concept within a series of publications (Nye 1990: 32; 2002; 2004; 2007; 2008). Nye’s (1990: 8) earliest work on the subject challenged those who presumed that US power was in decline and argued instead that America’s power was far more comprehensive than was evident if one merely examined traditional power resources such as military capability, economic wealth and geographic and population size. Nye’s key point here was that, in an increasingly interdependent world, ‘hard power’ resources, including military and economic assets, were of less utility than they had been in earlier eras of international politics. Of growing importance in the modern era was, according to Nye (1990: 32), ‘soft power’; the power associated with attracting others and getting them ‘to want what you want’.

If the value of a concept were to be measured by the breadth and frequency of its use, Nye’s notion of soft power could only be considered a success. However, while popular usage of the term has bloomed, this concept has also drawn a significant volume of criticism. In both public and academic circles, critics of soft power have highlighted the existence of ambiguity regarding this term. When asked about the importance of America’s soft power, for example, then-Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld claimed not to know what it was (cited in Nye 2006). In academic circles, the notion of soft power has been criticised for being too blunt (Lukes 2007), too soft (Ferguson 2003) and too vague (Bially Mattern 2007). In general, therefore, there has been a call for greater clarity regarding the concept, a call that has been acknowledged and repeated by Nye himself (2007: 163).

This chapter seeks to add to both the criticism of this concept and to the efforts that have been undertaken to clarify and extend it. In this chapter I argue that Nye’s conception of soft power is problematic to the extent that it is ‘unstrategic’. By this I mean to say that Nye’s conception of soft power, at least in its early form, tended to ignore the role of the subject of power, thus resulting in the emergence of an unconvincing account of soft power. Furthermore, I argue here that the unstrategic conception of soft power produced by Nye results from the conflation of relational

and structural forms of power that is evident in his work. Because these different forms of power are conflated, neither is articulated in a clear manner and the role of the subject of power in relation to both is under-explored.

It is important to note that more recently, and especially in his writings on power and leadership, Nye (2008) has begun to address these problems. More precisely, Nye has sought to distinguish between relational and structural forms of power and to acknowledge the role of the subject of power through his claim that the analyst of power must consider the roles of leaders, followers and the context within which those actors operate. While this most recent work represents an important step forward in the development of the concept of soft power, it is by no means a final one. This chapter seeks to build upon Nye's attempts to remedy these flaws in his earlier work by advancing a strategic conception of power. A strategic conception of power centres on the relational qualities of power but it situates those relations of power within broader social structures. Furthermore, when we understand strategic theory as a theory of interdependent decision-making, a strategic conception of power must also encourage a profound concern for the role of the subject of power within power relations.

This chapter proceeds in three stages. In the first section I seek to demonstrate the unstrategic nature of Nye's concept of soft power. In particular, I begin by highlighting the conflation of relational and structural forms of power that is evident in some of Nye's work on soft power. I then demonstrate the limitations of Nye's accounts of each of these forms of power and the tendency within his work to downplay the role of the subject of power. The second section of this chapter seeks to address this weakness in Nye's early work on soft power by advancing a strategic conception of power. In order to do so, I begin by considering Nye's more recent work on leadership before turning to the work of Michel Foucault in order to advance a strategic conception of power. The final section of this chapter seeks to illustrate this strategic conception of power with regard to the foreign policy of the United States of America.

## **The 'Unstrategic' Nature of Soft Power**

Before critiquing Nye's conception of soft power, it is worth considering his attempts to define this concept.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his sustained attempts to advance the notion of soft power, Nye has presented it as a supplement to that of hard power. This distinction is itself grounded in the assumption that 'everyone is familiar with hard power' (2004: 5). Hard power rests on an actor's capacity to get others to change their positions through either the making of threats or the proffering of incentives. In other words, hard power is the power associated with 'sticks' and 'carrots'. It is in this context that Nye asserts the importance of a third mechanism through which actors can gain the results that they want within politics. This third mechanism is that described by Nye as 'attraction'. Soft power is therefore exercised through the use of attraction; the co-option of others so as to get them to want what you want. Nye (2007: 162-3) suggests that this form of power is neither new nor restricted to the realms of international or even national politics. Instead, he asserts that in personal relationships, business relationships, or indeed in the relationships between states, the

mechanism of attraction represents an important tool that can be utilised by actors in their efforts to attain the outcomes that they desire.

Nye also seeks to clarify the distinction between hard and soft forms of power through his identification of the different resources upon which such forms of power depend. Again, Nye's assumption here is that the concept of hard power is relatively straightforward. The capacity to threaten a person or state would seem to rest in one's possession of the means of exercising physical violence; strength in the case of an individual, military forces in the case of a state. Similarly, it is clearly the possession of wealth – either in terms of money or other valuable resources – that is the necessary prerequisite for the exercise of hard power in terms of inducement. When it comes to the exercise of soft power, however, a state must rely upon a different range of resources, including 'its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)' (Nye 2007: 164). Thus, soft power is defined by Nye as a capacity that can be exercised by an agent through the use of attraction. Furthermore, that capacity is dependant upon the agent's possession of certain cultural and political values as well as upon their foreign policy practices.

The result of Nye's earlier efforts at clarifying the concept of soft power is the advancement of a definition of soft power as an agent-focused form of power exercised through the mechanism of attraction. However, this apparently simple definition masks a great deal of ambiguity and a number of significant conceptual problems. More precisely, on closer inspection it becomes clear that the source of ambiguity regarding Nye's understanding of the mechanism of attraction results from his conflation of relational and structural forms of power. Furthermore, this ambiguity results in two additional problems. Firstly, because these very different forms of power are conflated in Nye's work, neither is clearly articulated. Secondly, Nye's accounts of each of these forms of power tend to provide little conceptual space in which to consider the role of the subject of power. It is in this latter sense that we can regard Nye's conception of soft power as being unstrategic. As has been noted above, Nye's more recent work on this subject has begun to address these problems. However, it remains necessary to precisely identify these problems if we are to subsequently evaluate Nye's more recent efforts to remedy them.

To conclude that, especially in his early work on the subject, Nye tended to conflate relational and structural forms of power within his conception of soft power is by no means self-evident. After all, in seeking to clarify his intentions, Nye (2007: 163) has suggested that his goal has been to produce an agent-focused rather than a subject-focused concept of power; no mention is made of relational or structural forms of power. Regardless of such claims, however, the conflation of relational and structural forms of power becomes evident when we examine the inconsistent explanations of soft power within Nye's writings. Nye varies between two different accounts of soft power. On the one hand, there is the suggestion that soft power can be used to change the values held by others (Nye 1990: 32; 2002: 9; 2004: 5). It is in this context that Nye discusses the promotion of principles such as 'democracy'. To illustrate this point, Nye (2007: 165) refers to the potential use by the United States of film and television shows to promote democracy and the rule of law in China. On the other hand, however, Nye (2007: 164) has stated explicitly that principles such as

democracy represent resources that a state such as the US can utilise in order to attract others, but that it will only be able to do so where those principles or values are shared by others. In this case, soft power is not about changing the values held by others so that they are more similar to one's own, but instead about changing the policies of others where broad cultural and political values are already shared.

The problem here is that these two illustrations of soft power actually refer to very different forms of power. In the former case, it is an actor who exercises power by changing the values of another. Here, therefore, power exists within the context of a relationship between the two actors. In the latter case, what we are really referring to is a form of structural power or, in other words, the power that is 'exercised' by social structures such as shared norms or values. What is most important here is that, to the extent that we wish to conceive of soft power in terms of the exercise of the mechanism of attraction, both of these forms of power must be considered.

In order to understand this point it may help to consider a more mundane example; here, that of attraction between two teenage school children, A and B. We can easily imagine that, in their attempt to attract B, A might engage in certain practices, such as the purchasing and wearing of fashionable clothing. On examining this situation, the analyst of power may well decide that A has gained power through their attempts to exercise attraction. A may well feel a sense of empowerment as a result of their choice to wear fashionable clothing and, indeed, there may even be a discernible shift in the status of A and in their capacity to gain outcomes that they want within the context of the schoolyard. Alternatively, however, if the analyst of power were to consider this example from the perspective of A's parents, they may well conceive of A's behaviour in terms of their submission to social structures or norms that constitute and regulate the meaning of 'attractiveness'. If we adopt this perspective, we are less likely to view A as an agent exercising power and more likely to conceive of them as being subject to the power of social structures. Thus, the analyst of power seemingly has a choice to make. Should power be attributed to the individual who seeks to attract another by engaging in certain forms of behaviour or should they instead attribute power to the social structures that dictate what it means to be attractive?

This choice may seem relatively trivial when raised with regard to the infatuation of teenagers (though the situation would doubtless seem anything but trivial to the teenagers concerned). The very real importance of this choice becomes more evident when we consider the mechanism of attraction in the context of US foreign policy. It is in this context that heated debate has occurred. On the one hand, analysts of power such as Nye have argued that the US can exercise power more effectively within international politics if it promotes certain values and abides by certain norms. According to Nye, such acts of agency can make the US more attractive and more powerful. On the other hand, Neoconservatives in particular have railed against such arguments, contending instead that such a policy merely results in the submission of the US to international norms (see, for example, Brooks and Wohlforth 2002: 31). In the example above, the teenager sees an act of agency intended to make them more attractive and more powerful whereas the parents see an exercise in conformity. In the case of the US, Nye emphasises the agency of Washington, whereas others see America being tied down by countless norms and rules.

My point here is not to attempt to settle this debate but is instead to highlight the importance within the concept of soft power of two very different forms of power, one associated with the agency of actors such as the US and one associated with the social structures which determine what it means to be attractive. The importance of distinguishing between these two forms of power has been made clear by a number of recent works on the concept of power as it applies to the field of international relations (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Guzzini 2005), yet within Nye's work on soft power these two distinct forms of power are often conflated. The result of this conflation is the emergence within Nye's account of soft power of two problems. The first of these is that neither of these forms of power is adequately conceptualised and the second is that his accounts of soft power evidence a tendency to down-play the role of the subject of power within power relations. Each of these problems requires consideration.

Nye does not provide a compelling account of a relational form of power primarily because his work centres on the claim that one might adopt *either* an agent-centred concept of power *or* a subject-centred concept of power (See especially Nye 2007: 163). Nye draws the distinction between agent and subject because he seeks to develop a conception of power that is applicable in the context of US foreign policy making. More precisely, Nye (2002: 17) has sought to explain how the US can maintain its preponderance of power within the international system. The trouble with pursuing an agent-focused concept of power is not that it precludes one from ever considering the role of the subject of power but instead that it predisposes us to shift our attention towards the agent and away from the subject, thus resulting in an oversimplified understanding of power. This problem is evident within Nye's work in terms of his tendency to describe soft power as something that is capable of being possessed by an agent, thus implying that it is a resource rather than a feature of a relationship. As a result, soft power becomes something almost tangible, something that can be 'enhanced', 'curtailed', 'produced' or 'squandered' (see Nye 2002: 72-3 and 2007: 163). The suggestion that power is something that can be possessed is conceptually problematic (Reus-Smit 2004: 55), and it moves Nye dangerously close to those scholars who have defined power in terms of resources. Nye (2007: 164) explicitly warns against this so-called 'vehicle fallacy', but his determination to describe an agent-centred concept of power repeatedly leads him back in this direction.

If Nye's discussion of the relational component of soft power suffers from certain limitations, so too does his account of structural forms of power. This is particularly evident with regard to his discussion of structural power and its relationship to the soft power of the US. The power associated with social structures such as common values, institutions or culture is clearly crucial to Nye's account of soft power. What is particularly troubling here, however, is that Nye's work often seems to suggest that such social structures can be possessed by a particular actor. Thus, for example, he speaks of America's universal values as representing a resource that can be deployed by the United States (Nye 2004: 11). While this position acknowledges that social structures are produced by agents, it ignores the fact that social structures are ontologically distinct from those actors and cannot be said to be possessed by them. What Nye ignores is that social structures are properties of a society rather than resources 'owned' by individual actors (Guzzini 1993: 465-6). Therefore, while we may often associate certain democratic principles with the US, and even acknowledge

that such principles may in part have originated within the US, this does not mean that either the meaning or the legitimacy of such principles are or can be controlled solely by the US.

If Nye's conflation and confusion of relational and structural forms of power leads him to advance conceptually limited accounts of each of these forms of power, it also leads to a second problem, namely his tendency to restrict the conceptual space in which consideration of the role of the subject of power may be undertaken. It is in this sense that Nye's early account of soft power may be criticised on the grounds that it is unstrategic. Before considering this problem in further detail it is necessary to clarify what is meant here by the term 'unstrategic'. After all, Steven Lukes (2007: 97) has criticised Nye's account of soft power precisely because he deems it to be too strategic in orientation. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that Lukes' argument rests on a flawed conception of strategy. Strategy, for Lukes, describes the means by which agents advance their interests in a zero-sum or conflictual context. Thomas Schelling has demonstrated convincingly that strategy should not be thought of in this way. Instead, Schelling argues that while the term 'strategy' sounds 'cold-blooded, the theory [of strategy]...is not essentially a theory of aggression or of resistance or of war'; it is, instead, 'the conditioning of one's behaviour on the behaviour of others, that the theory is about' (Schelling 1980: 15). It is in this context that, according to Schelling (1980: 16), we might think of the theory of strategy as representing the 'theory of interdependent decision.' Thus, to argue that Nye's conception of soft power is unstrategic is to assert that his conception of power lacks an adequate account of the interdependence between the agent and subject of power.

My concern here is not that Nye chooses to focus empirically on the exercise of power by an agent rather than on the role of the subject of power. Indeed, when discussing the innumerable examples that are used to illustrate his understanding of soft power, Nye (2004) does indeed refer to the role of the other in terms of the interpretation of culture, values, and communicative strategies. Instead, my concern is that Nye's attempts to conceptualize soft power threaten to dismiss any meaningful role for the subject of power. This is true with regard to relational forms of power, where Nye explicitly chooses an agent-centred instead of a subject-centred view of power, and structural forms of power, where Nye grants possession of (and agency with regard to) social structures to the United States but not to others.

Interestingly, the importance of allowing space within a conception of power for the agency of the subject is evident within many contemporary works on power, including accounts of both agent-focused and structural forms of power. With regard to the former, the key move is to consider agency as inherently forming part of a power relationship (Lukes 2005: 73; Reus-Smit 2004: 56). This moves us away from treating power as a mere resource and towards a consideration of power as a capacity that must necessarily exist within the context of a relationship between multiple actors. This point is made starkly by Foucault (1982: 220), who argues 'that "the other" (the one over whom power is exercised) [must] be thoroughly recognised and maintained to the very end as a person who acts.' Likewise, Barnett and Duvall (2005: 45) suggest that an agent-focused form of power must be conceived in the context of 'behavioural relations or interactions.' When seen in this light, therefore, Nye's conceptual separation of agent and subject is likely to encourage flawed analyses of US power.

If the subject of power is granted conceptual space within many of the more convincing accounts of a relational form of power, the same is true in many accounts of structural power. The general point here is clear: while social structures constitute (and constrain) certain agents, they are also themselves products of the practices of agents (Giddens 1984: 28-9). The untenable alternative to this position is one of structural determinism whereby we treat subjects as ‘cultural dupes’ incapable of agency (Clegg 1989: 138). Turning again to the mechanism of attraction, which is central to Nye’s concept of soft power, we can appreciate that the possibility of attraction rests upon the existence of social norms defining what it means to be attractive. These norms, while constraining and enabling the practices of agents are also constituted by those practices.

What is crucial, however, is that we cannot presume that such social norms represent a possession or resource of those whom are deemed attractive. It is exactly this mistake that is made by Nye when he suggests that certain values and norms represent power resources of the US. Nye’s insistence that certain norms or values represent the resources of the powerful serves to create a false distinction between agents and subjects and their respective relationships to social structures. Janice Bially Mattern (2007) also notes this problem in Nye’s work, though she addresses it from another angle. Bially Mattern (2007: 103) criticises Nye for advancing an ontological contradiction through his treatment of attraction as occurring through a process of social construction on the one hand, and naturally on the other. Nye (2007: 163) has challenged this criticism by suggesting that it is entirely appropriate to treat the attractiveness of, for example, the principle of democracy as being ‘natural’ in the short term even while acknowledging that, in the long term, such attractiveness may fade. This response is less than convincing. What is produced here is a fundamental distinction between, on the one hand, an empowered United States which has, through an exercise of agency, raised the principle of democracy to its current exalted status and, on the other hand, those actors who are now subject to the ‘natural’ attraction exerted by democracy. Such an account is troubling; both on empirical grounds and in terms of the exceptional status granted to the US (something that is itself redolent of the rhetoric of the Bush administration). Unlike the US, other states are treated here as mere subjects of the power of social norms regarding the attractiveness of democracy. The role of such subjects as agents in their own right is dismissed here, thus adding to the unstrategic nature of Nye’s conception of soft power.

## **Developing a Strategic Account of Soft Power**

The challenge that has been set by the previous section is to develop an account of power that builds upon Nye’s notion of soft power without repeating the twin errors that result from his conflation of relational and structural forms of power. The first such error is that by conflating these two distinctive forms of power Nye fails to produce a convincing account of either. The second is that Nye tends to dismiss the role of the subject of power, either by drawing an overly simplistic distinction between agent and subject or by conceiving of social structures as the possessions of the powerful.

The challenge of incorporating both relational and structural forms of power within a single account, and without advancing simplistic accounts of either, is by no means a simple one to overcome. Indeed, a number of prominent works on the concept of power within IR have concluded that we need to disaggregate rather than combine the two forms of power mentioned above if we are to understand either (Barnet and Duvall 2005; Guzzini 2005). If we were to adopt this approach in the analysis of the exercise of soft power through the mechanism of attraction, we would be forced to examine either a given set of power relations (such as the attraction of A to B) or a given system of structural power (such as a system of norms regarding the meaning of attraction). What would be lost here is precisely the interplay between these two elements of power that is of most interest within the notion of soft power.

Nye's most recent work on leadership and power has begun to remedy some of the weaknesses of his earlier work by advocating the analysis of leaders, followers and the context in which the power relationship between the two exists. By considering the role of followers as well as leaders, Nye's work has begun to take seriously the role of the subject of power. Furthermore, Nye has begun to explicitly distinguish between relations of power and the social structures that both enable and constrain such relations. Nye (2008: 32-7) recognizes the role of the subject of power most obviously in his lengthy discussion of the relationship between leaders and followers. Nye also addresses the relationship between agency and structure in the context of leadership, particularly through his discussion of the relationship between leaders and the cultural contexts in which they operate. Thus, building on Edgar Schein's work on organisational culture, Nye (2008: 92) argues that while 'the culture of a group sets the framework for leaders', so too 'leaders create cultures when they create groups and organizations.'

Nye has thus sought to address the two concerns raised in the previous section, yet within his discussion of each of these issues lies room for greater precision and clarity. On the one hand, for example, when discussing the relationship between leaders and followers, Nye (2008: 35-6) notes that 'followers often have the power to help lead a group.' Similarly, when discussing the relationship between leaders and (organizational) culture, Nye (citing Schein, 2008: 92) concludes that 'managing culture is one of the most important things that leaders do. If leaders do not "become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them."' What emerges from Nye's discussion of these issues, therefore, is some measure of ambiguity. In defence of Nye, it must be noted that the relationships that he is examining – power relations and the relationship between agency and structure – present thorny intellectual problems that have challenged numerous scholars of power (Haugaard 2002). However, there is no avoiding the uncertainty raised by his attempt to explain these relationships. If followers can also lead, how are we to understand leadership? What do we mean by the term 'manage' if we are to accept both that leaders manage culture and that cultures manage leaders?

The remainder of this chapter seeks to advance and then illustrate a strategic conception of power, one which more clearly explains the relationships between actor and subject on the one hand, and agent and structure on the other. In pursuing this objective, it is useful to turn to the work of Michel Foucault. To do so on the grounds that Foucault (1980; 1994) produced important work on the concept of power may appear as justification enough. However, what is truly important with regard to



Foucault's work on power is that there is much to be learned from his writings regarding the possible features of a strategic account of power. Foucault's efforts to articulate a strategic concept of power emerged in the final stages of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977), and was more fully explained in a series of later works, including *The Will to Knowledge* (1978), 'The Subject and Power' (1982), and *Society Must Be Defended* (2004). Within such writings, Foucault's objective was to challenge the 'juridical' conception of power which, according to him, represented the prevailing account of power within the western social sciences. The juridical model conceives power as flowing down from a sovereign who sits above society and exercises power in the form of repression (Foucault 1978: 85-9). In this sense, power has systemic properties that are structured around a central point, namely the sovereign. Furthermore, power's exercise can best be attributed to that sovereign and best be described in terms of the placement of constraints upon members of society.

Foucault's (2004: 15) first step in breaking free of this conception of power is to conceive of politics – and of power – in terms of a reversal of Clausewitz's famous dictum that war is the continuation of politics through other means. By asserting that politics should be conceived of as the continuation of war by other means, Foucault (1978: 92) seeks to encourage us to conceive of power in a most important manner; as a function of force relations. This moves us away from attributing power to an individual or institution and towards an analysis of power relations between multiple individuals. Foucault (1982: 217) does not deny the disequilibria amongst those engaged in power relations: 'let us not deceive ourselves; if we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others.' However, what he does seek to suggest is that power 'is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action' (Foucault 1982: 220). Put simply, Foucault's point is that the existence of power implies the existence of a subject that is, at least in theory, capable of resistance. In other words:

...a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that 'the other' (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognised and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up.

(Foucault 1982: 220)

This understanding of power generates the need to analyse power relations less in terms of the resources of a single actor, and more in terms of an 'antagonism of strategies' (Foucault 1982: 210-1).

How then, can Foucault's strategic conception of power aid us in remedying some of the problems identified in Nye's account of soft power? Before considering this question in further detail, it is worth noting that there are enough similarities between these two accounts of power to suggest that some attempt at integration may be fruitful. On the one hand, both scholars have sought to describe a form of power that is effective precisely because its effects are elusive. Nye highlights the value of generating consent for one's policies through the exercise of soft power not in terms of this being somehow more ethical than the exercise of, for example, military force

(Nye 2007: 169-70), but instead because it is a particularly efficient form of power. Similarly, Foucault (1978: 86) has argued that power 'is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.' Furthermore, both scholars are interested in explaining a form of power that operates not merely by presenting the subject of power with incentives or disincentives, but instead by changing how subjects understand the world in which they live. For Nye (2008: 29), this involves shaping the preferences subjects whereas for Foucault (1982) this involves the constitution of certain types of subjects. It is because of such similarities that a consideration of Foucault's strategic conception of power promises to supplement rather than negate the notion of soft power.

Foucault's work on power offers insight into the nature of relational and structural forms of power (including the place of the subject of power within the context of each) and into the relationship between these forms of power. Such an account of power forces us to conceive of agency in terms of its position within relations of power. Foucault's account of power as constituting force relations nicely captures the point made persuasively by Schelling (1980: 16), namely, that strategy ought to be conceived in terms of interdependent decisions. This prevents us from being able to dismiss conceptually the role of the subject of power; rather the proper subject of analysis here is the relationship(s) between the strategies of multiple actors. Effective strategy often (though not always) requires one to anticipate and then seek to condition the behaviour of one's adversary. It is in this sense that Foucault's distinction between the exercise of (direct and physical) violence and the exercise of power becomes relevant. 'A relationship of violence acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks on the wheel, it destroys, or it closes the door on all possibilities', whereas 'what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future' (Foucault 1982: 220). In so doing, however, we need to appreciate that, even for the powerful, involvement in a relationship of power requires 'the conditioning of one's behaviour on the behaviour of others' (Schelling 1980: 15). This is true because within power relations there can be no final or complete dismissal of the subject who acts.

This may appear to be a rather abstract point, yet it has practical implications. The key point made above is that the successful exercise of power, by definition, requires the subject of power to decide to act in a manner consistent with one's intention. It is at this moment of decision that the subject of power becomes an actor rather than a mere object. This matters because it is conceivable that even the making of the most severe threat may not result in a successful exercise of power. Thus, for example, while we might often assume that threatening someone with death will leave that individual with no real decision to make, all we need to do to appreciate the error of such an assumption is to consider the case of a soldier manning a checkpoint faced with a suicide bomber. In such a situation, the capacity for action of the subject of power becomes absolutely obvious. If we turn to a situation where an actor seeks to exercise power through the mechanism of attraction rather than coercion, the scope for agency available to the subject of power appears even larger. Interestingly, Foucault's (1982: 222) descriptions of a relationship of power in terms of an 'agonism', a 'reciprocal incitation', and state of 'permanent provocation' also seem peculiarly appropriate to a description of a relationship of attraction. In seeking to attract another individual, one

must engage in an attempt to anticipate what that individual finds attractive. The interdependent nature of such agency is obvious here. One is seeking to exercise power over another through the conditioning of one's own behaviour based on one's expectations about how that other interprets 'attractiveness'.

The strategic nature of this account of agency becomes clearer if we draw upon the example of a wrestling match. Clausewitz famously referred to war as being akin to a wrestling match due to the clashing of forces that takes place in either contest. Alternatively, Foucault's reference to the 'agonism' that is central to a strategic power relationship 'is based on the Greek *ἀγώνισμα* meaning "a combat". The term would hence imply a physical contest in which the opponents develop a strategy of reaction and of mutual taunting, as in a wrestling match' (Foucault 1982 (translator's note): 222, footnote 3). We can certainly identify the agency of one wrestler within such a contest, but that agency cannot be adequately explained or understood without reference to the other wrestler. The exercise of strength and power by one wrestler within such a contest is fundamentally dependent upon and, indeed, shaped by the resistance that the agency of the other provides. Again, what is obvious here is the interdependence of the agents engaged in the contest. Thus, despite the fact that a wrestling match is necessarily an example of zero-sum behaviour, we must still conceive of the exercise of power within this context in terms of a clashing of interdependent strategies.

A strategic conception of power also alters our understanding of social structures. In general terms, we might define social structures as intersubjective norms regarding meaning. More specifically, within power relations defined in terms of an 'antagonism of strategies', social structures might be understood as providing the 'terrain' upon which such strategies are developed. It is in this sense that Guzzini, drawing upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, uses the notion of 'fields' to describe the realm of political behaviour constituted by particular sets of social structures or norms. Thus, Guzzini (2000: 166) describes fields as 'the playgrounds where agents realize individual strategies, playing within, and thereby openly reproducing, the rules of a given game.' Karin Fierke (1998: 17), drawing on Wittgenstein's notion of 'language games', makes a similar point by suggesting that it is within such games that agents engage in strategic political action and manoeuvre.

Two points warrant particular attention here. On the one hand, such norms and rules must be conceived as both constraints which proscribe certain forms of behaviour, but also as constituting certain behaviour as meaningful. It is in this sense that we can appreciate Foucault's suggestion that power is both restrictive and productive. Wrestling rules and norms, for example, certainly dictate those forms of behaviour that are either formally proscribed or informally frowned upon. At the same time, however, norms regarding techniques, moves and strategies also enable actors to engage in behaviour that can be recognised as wrestling. If we return to the example of attraction in the school yard, we can appreciate in more detail why it is that the social norms regarding fashion both enable A to exercise power within their relationship with B and constrain A by determining what it means to be attractive. Likewise, the US is both empowered and constrained by norms that constitute international legitimacy in terms of liberal and democratic principles.

On the other hand, the understanding of structural power advanced here also challenges Nye's (2004: 7) suggestion that social structures represent resources that can be possessed and exercised by an agent in a manner that is analogous to the ownership and deployment of wealth or military force. Unlike objects such as tanks which possess a tangible material reality, social structures are incapable of being possessed. Social structures consist of norms or rules regarding meaning and are therefore intersubjective. As we shall see below, this ontological status holds important implications with regard to the relationship between agents and social structures. Furthermore, being intersubjective, social structures are incapable of being possessed by a particular actor. It is true, as scholars such as Foucault (1989) and Bourdieu (1994) have attempted to show, that one of the primary effects of social structures is to differentiate between types of subjects and to empower some and not others. Clearly, for example, norms regarding both status and legitimacy empower the US more than they do certain other states. However, while social structures may advantage some more than others, because they are inherently linked to meaning, and because meaning is intersubjective, they cannot be possessed by a particular actor (Guzzini 2005: 498). Instead, such social structures are constituted through the practices of both those who are advantaged and those who are disadvantaged by their structuring effects.

If a strategic conception of power helps us to address some of the problems with regard to Nye's accounts of both relational and structural forms of power, it also helps us to appreciate the relation between them. As has been noted above, it is this issue which represents one of the most potentially important aspects of Nye's account of soft power. The question, at least as far as Nye is concerned, is how US policy-makers can construct certain social structures which will constitute America as an attractive state, thereby empowering the US within the context of its relations with others. In order to begin to address this question, we must consider in more detail the ontological status of social structures. As has been noted above, social structures can be thought of as constituting a field (or fields) in which the (interdependent) strategies of actors are pursued. This terrain consists of the intersubjective norms and rules that constitute meaning and therefore enable actors to engage in power relations. However, the practices of such actors can also reconstitute these social structures, thereby changing them and the effect that they may have in the future. This is possible because social structures are norms regarding meaning, and meaning itself cannot be finally fixed due to its dependence upon language (see, for example, Fierke 1998; Campbell 1998; Jackson 2005). It is because of this 'play of meaning' that social structures – rules or norms regarding, for example, the meaning of attractiveness – can be reinterpreted and reconstituted.

To say that change is possible is not to say that it is easy. To change a social structure, such as an international norm regarding attraction, requires far more than a mere individual intention to do so. Two initial constraints on the potential for change are worth noting here. Firstly, an attempt to alter certain rules must be understood by others if it is to become socially significant, thus returning us to the inherent limitations of undertaking socially meaningful action. Secondly, even if such an attempt is understood, it must be accepted by others. In short, because social structures or norms are intersubjective rather than subjective, changes to them must also take place at a social rather than an individual level.

Intriguingly, there is a certain resonance between this claim regarding the play of meaning within social structures and the claim made by strategic theorists regarding the role of uncertainty in war (Reid 2003a; 2003b). Clausewitz is famous, amongst other things, for emphasising the importance of unpredictability in war (Gray 1999: 94). According to Clausewitz, it is ‘the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam’ (cited in Reid 2003b: 67). This play of chance and probability even applies to the physical terrain upon which war is fought (Clausewitz 1976: 109; Luttwak 2001). If the landscapes upon which wars occur provide such potential for uncertainty and reinterpretation, so too do the social structures that constitute the terrain upon which power relations are played out. Furthermore, the antagonistic relationship of strategies that exists within relations of power (or attraction) means that meaning, and thus the character of social structures themselves, represents that which is to be fought over as well as that which defines how two actors fight.

To briefly summarise the limited account of a strategic conception of power discussed above, it is possible to argue that power must be conceived of in relational terms (rather than as a property of an agent). Agency exists within such a relationship, but it is an agency of a curious kind. The agency of one actor within a power relationship is ultimately dependent upon the existence and agency of that actor that we may, by way of convenience, label as the subject of power. Thus, even if we were to focus our empirical analysis of power on the practices of a particular actor, our analysis would necessarily refer to the subject of power due to the interdependent nature of relations of power. Furthermore, to the extent that we might seek to analyse social structures that, amongst other things, serve to define the meaning of attractiveness, we must acknowledge the inherent ambiguity of those social structures, and the play of chance and probability that such ambiguity opens up.

## **Applying a Strategic Account of Soft Power**

There is no disguising the unfinished nature of the account of power discussed in the previous section. This final (and necessarily brief) section seeks to add some much needed clarity to this conception of power by considering how the application of this strategic conception of soft power might benefit our attempts to understand the power of the United States.

The first advantage offered by the adoption of a strategic conception of power concerns our understanding of the relational element of power. More precisely, a strategic conception of power helps us to avoid the common error of assuming that power is something that is possessed by states such as the US. Nye is less guilty than many others of making this error (see, for example, Joffe 2006; Mead 2004), yet it creeps into his work at times. This may result from his determination to develop an agent-centred conception of soft power that is tailored to the practical requirements of policy makers. Nye (2004: 105-25) avoids this error most consistently when discussing the specific details of Washington’s foreign policy, such as those regarding its use of public diplomacy. Other aspects of his work remain less immune to this error, however, especially those in which he seeks to ‘measure’ the power of the US relative to others (Nye 2002: 17-35; 2004: ch. 3). At such times Nye comes closest to treating power as something that is possessed by agents.

What then is wrong with the power-as-possession thesis? Put simply, the more that we treat power as a possession of actors, the more we are likely to then seek to identify what attributes or resources an actor has that make it powerful. The dangers here are twofold. Firstly, to equate power with certain resources is to perpetuate the 'vehicle fallacy' that scholars (including Nye) have repeatedly warned against (Reus-Smit 2004: 50-1). The problem here is obvious; actors with great power resources do not always exercise power over others in terms of getting them to do what it is that they want them to do. Secondly, the assumption that power is possessed by one actor implies that we can successfully evaluate the exercise of power by the US simply by examining what it is the US does and without even considering those over whom American power is exercised. Those who approach the analysis of US power with the intention of improving US foreign policy would do well, therefore, to note Colin Gray's (1999: 18-19) warning that 'strategic history demonstrates the prevalence of the error of neglect of the enemy.'

While the errors considered above are evident in elements of Nye's work on soft power, they are more bluntly evident in the post-Cold War writings of some Neoconservative scholars. What stronger notion of power-as-possession can one get than, for example, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth's (2002: 33) assertion that American power represents an 'iron fist' to be wielded by Washington? Their work also provides an example of scholarship that suffers from the 'vehicle fallacy'; at the heart of their article lies an attempt to measure the power of the US in terms of the various resources that it possesses. The limitations of such an approach are immediately evident when one compares the almost giddy celebration of American military superiority apparent in the article to the very real challenges faced by the American military in its attempts to construct a stable Iraq (Herring and Ringwala 2004; Baker and Hamilton 2006). Furthermore, the ignoring of the relational nature of power and the problems that follow from this are nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in neoconservative writings on the pursuit of primacy. To assert that US power is not merely the means by which foreign policy is pursued but also the very end pursued through that foreign policy is to demonstrate a most blatant misunderstanding of the concept of power. Thus, calls by scholars such as Charles Krauthammer (1990/91) and William Kristol and Robert Kagan (1996) for the pursuit and maintenance of unipolarity again ignore the fact that power is exercised in the context of relationships; it is not a mere possession of actors.

The adoption of a strategic conception of power would aid us in avoiding the problems referred to above because it requires us to consider the relationship of power between agent and subject. Again, this relationship is best characterised in terms of an agonism of interdependent strategies. To acknowledge this interdependence is not for a moment to suggest some measure of equality. Thus, to say that our analysis of US power ought to incorporate consideration of the subject of that power is not to make an ethical claim regarding the rights of the other. Instead, it is to make the practical claim that the exercise of power over another is likely to be less successful to the extent that we ignore the fact that the other is an agent capable of action. Such an approach moves us away from the making of general claims regarding the primacy, dominance or preponderance of the US and towards the analysis of specific relationships and the (interdependent) strategies that the US pursues within them.

The second advantage offered by the adoption of a strategic conception of power relates to our understanding of structural forms of power. Such an understanding of power requires the rejection of the notion that social structures or norms can be possessed by a particular agent. Recall that Nye (2004: 11) asserts that universal values such as those regarding democracy represent resources of the United States. Though he goes on to qualify this position, we can immediately see the similarity between this claim and that of Kristol and Kagan (1996: 27), who championed the promotion of the American principles of democracy, free markets and respect for liberty. Chris Reus-Smit (2004: 55) highlights the errors of this position through reference to the reactions of Indian leaders to British efforts at promoting just such principles: 'they took the ideas of liberalism and democracy they imbibed in the imperial heartland and fashioned them into anti-imperialism and nationalism.' A strategic conception of power forces us to appreciate the intersubjective – rather than the subjective – nature of social structures such as norms and values. It encourages us to consider how the practices of multiple actors serve to constitute certain structures, and not merely how such structures benefit certain actors.

A strategic conception of power also encourages us to avoid the assumption that social structures are fixed or natural. Again, if we recall that Nye (2007: 163) has argued that it is reasonable to take for granted the (near) universal attractiveness of democracy, we can see similarities between his position and that of those close to the Bush administration who have also claimed that American values are, by their very nature, universal (see, for example, Rice 2000: 49). The great danger in making this assumption is that we ignore the socially constructed nature of social structures and thus limit our capacity to imagine resistance to such structures or how such resistance may be overcome. This danger has been most obvious in relation to the early experiences of the Bush administration with regard to democracy promotion in Iraq: because members of the administration had so frequently claimed the universal acceptance of certain values there was little conceptual space in which planning could take place for the promotion of such values within Iraq (Fukuyama 2006: 115). A strategic conception of power envisions social structures as terrains upon which political contestation takes place. Crucially, however, because of the play of meaning that is inherent within intersubjective structures, the nature of these terrains cannot be conceived as being either natural or necessarily permanent. Therefore, while social structures may constitute and regulate the practices of certain actors, they are themselves capable of being challenged, reinterpreted and reconstituted by those very actors. Rather than merely acknowledging the existence of prominent social structures, a strategic conception of power encourages us to ask how certain structures have come to be powerful, what practices might be employed to promote such structures, and where and how such structures are or may be challenged.

If a strategic conception of power helps us to avoid these specific problems, it also differs from prevailing accounts of power in terms of tone. The adoption of a strategic conception of power demands humility, both from the analyst of power and from the foreign policy practitioner. Once we conceive of relational power in terms of an agonism of interdependent strategies, we are forced to acknowledge both the insufficiency of simplistic measures of power in terms of the resources of particular actors and the potential challenges associated with analysing complex and specific power relations. Similarly, when seeking to analyse the effects of social structures (such as norms regarding what it means to be attractive) we must acknowledge the

potential for actors to challenge and reconstitute those structures and to thereby render our analyses of them redundant. Humility is essential in our analysis of power not because such a posture is somehow ethically superior to hubris, but instead because it represents a practical necessity when we understand power correctly. To return to Nye's conception of soft power, it is well worth noting the presence within his work of exactly such a sense of humility. This represents a true strength of Nye's work. It also affirms the possibility of achieving the objective that is pursued within this chapter; that is the critique and development, rather than the mere replacement, of Nye's conception of soft power.

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<sup>1</sup> Again, it is important to note that the critique presented in this section focuses on Nye's earlier attempts to define soft power – his more recent work on leadership (Nye 2008) is considered below.