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SOFT POWER AND THE AMERICAN CLIMACTERIC

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An important component of American influence has been labeled by Joseph Nye, an academic and one-time official in the Pentagon, as “soft power”. This is a reference to the broad reservoir of good feeling that many people around the world have toward the United States. America’s contributions to world culture in the form of films, TV, popular music, and a wide array of consumer products are known throughout most of the world. While American pop culture is criticized by elites and intellectuals, many people tend to have a positive view of Americans, though not always of their government. Joseph Nye noted that people were often willing to act in ways favorable to the US, so that soft power could in some instances, make coercion unnecessary. Thus, it could be a substitute for “hard power.”

While many countries have sought to acquire soft power through such programs as the Goethe Institut, the British Council, or la *Francophonie*, American soft power was the unintended consequence of American capitalism. Private entrepreneurs seeking to make money by providing Americans with entertainment, found they could also make money by exporting their efforts abroad. American cultural products such as movies and television shows made their way to foreign audiences, audiences which were more than receptive.

The capital of the American entertainment is Hollywood. Initially, the founders of the great film studios, chose to locate in southern California, a state which offered varied terrain, substantial light, and even more substantial distance from the New York based Edison Trust, which used its control of patents to stifle competition. Hollywood films, unlike their European counterparts, were always intended to make money. Since this meant finding stories that could appeal to people hailing from diverse ethnic backgrounds, the components of America’s heterogeneous audience, America films gave priority to stories with broad resonance and universal themes. This gave American film exporters an advantage in selling their stories around the world. This access to the world market, in turn allowed American studios to amortize their costs across the entire world market. They could afford to spend huge amounts when making their movies, and the lavish production values resulted in even greater audiences. American movies came to dominate the world box office and so became an important conduit of American culture.

American television shows spread around the world for different reasons. While television in Europe remained dominated by public broadcasters until the 1970s, American efforts for the small screen had been commercially oriented from the beginning. The business model for television meant that production companies sold shows to the main US networks at a loss. A minority of these shows were renewed for several seasons, and series that had already aired once could be sold again to secondary markets in the US (reruns) and to international customers. This wide distribution allowed the American television producers to offer their shows for license fees that were much lower than those charged by their international competitors.

The proliferation of channels due to the spread of cable and satellite networks abroad, meant that foreign audiences were extremely fragmented and foreign broadcasters were limited in what they could charge advertisers. Consequently, these broadcasters were very sensitive to cost. Thus, even though European and other audiences preferred to see their own cultures on TV, broadcasters, they were fed a steady diet of American programming. The result again was the spread of American culture as an unintended consequence of market incentives.

The resulting outcome is that foreign audiences have become more familiar with American folkways and practices than they are of their own countries and cultures. French criminals address the judge as “votre honneur” rather than “monsieur (madame) le juge”. German law students ask their professors why they are not being taught to address a jury, unaware that the German legal system does not rely on juries. Perhaps most concerning, audiences abroad which have a high exposure to American films have experienced a shift in voting behavior, where the Americanized audiences now vote more to the right.

Technology, however, can be disruptive in unpredicted ways. Digital streaming has changed the way Hollywood companies make money. Whereas in the past studios promoted individual films, the incentives for streaming companies are different. Companies like Netflix are mainly interested in selling subscriptions to foreign customers. They are selling *bundles* of films and television shows, not individual movies. Most importantly, people still want to see their own culture on TV, so to make Netflix subscriptions appealing to customers abroad, they need to offer content from the subscribers’ own country. Consequently, Netflix needs to offer Brazilian content to Brazilians, Korean content to Koreans, and French content to French people. Netflix

purchases more than 80 % of its new content from non-American producers. And because Netflix needs to make these investments pay, they include Brazilian content in American subscriptions, Korean content is offered to Brazilians, while French content is made available to Koreans. The pattern is multiplied around the world.

Overall, the business model for streaming is changing the incentives to sustain American cultural dominance. Greater cultural diversity is the likely outcome of streaming technology. In this probable new world of cultural equality, the persistence of American soft power cannot be assumed. It will take a while, but the multipolar world that many have applauded as part of the American climacteric, has its cultural counterpart. And since we are all enriched by exposure to other cultures, this is not a bad thing.

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