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"Soft Power" in the Roman Empire? A reassessment of Cicero's "*vis benevolentiae*" through contemporary political science

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The aim of this paper is to show that the concepts of soft power in contemporary political science are very similar to those expressed by the Roman politician and orator Cicero in the late 1st century BCE. I will then show how these concepts can be used to analyse ancient international relations and contemporary politics. This paper will be divided into two sections: the first will show the modern definition of soft power; the second will explain Cicero's concepts and analyse a case study in ancient Greece in the 2nd century BCE concerning Roman foreign relations. It is my essential contention in this paper that no history of Roman imperialism—a momentous period in Mediterranean history spanning over a millennium, which changed fundamentally the course of European, North African and Near-Eastern history—can be complete without discussion of 'soft power', an important concept too often (wrongly) ignored in the study of Roman history in general.

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"Soft Power" in the Roman Empire? A reassessment of Cicero's "*vis benevolentiae*" through contemporary political science

Jacopo Napoli

1. Definition of Soft Power

Joseph S. Nye invented this term towards the end of the Cold War, when there was a debate about the decline of US GDP compared to that of Japan, China and others. Most authors were convinced that power was primarily based on military, economic and demographic factors, but Nye believed that there was something else and that the United States could still play a relevant role in the modern world, despite the new rising powers, through different means. Thus, Nye invented the term in the late 1980s and published it in an article in *Foreign Policy* in 1990. He described soft power as "intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions. This dimension can be thought of as soft power, in contrast to the hard command power usually associated with tangible resources like military and economic strength".[1]

One of the main problems of power is: how does it work? How do resources, tangible or intangible, turn into real power? Military, economic and demographic factors are certainly important, but how can they be utilised, if not directly? In other words, an abundance of 'traditional' resources does not immediately empower a country. Nye believed that this problem had to be solved and proposed a solution to fill this gap through the concept of soft power. When Nye first brought the concept of 'soft power' to international attention in 1990, his seminal article theorised that a broader range of 'power resources' would preserve the superpower status of the United States, while that of the Soviet Union would fade: military, economic, scientific, cultural and ideological resources were (and are) strongly present in the United States and could ensure its dominance on the international stage. Nye observed that on many occasions cultural and ideological 'attraction' would to some extent replace the traditional means of military force and access to resources.[2] His theory sought to show that convincing people and countries to voluntarily do what other states want by non-military means is an excellent tactic, and that this is true even if 'hard power' techniques are still relevant in today's

[1] Joseph Samuel Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), p. 32.

[2] Joseph Samuel Nye, "Soft Power." *Foreign Policy*, 80 (1990), pp. 164–171.

world when confronting opposing sides of opinions and situations. In the three decades since Nye's article, this concept has been applied to the growth of many other countries, such as Japan and China, but has also attracted criticism.

Some critics – such as proponents of the 'neo-realist' school, who focus primarily on the enduring importance of 'hard' power – argue that this concept does not work well, conceiving international relations primarily as power relations, with constant conflict and little cooperation. One of the most strident critics of the concept of soft power, the historian Niall Ferguson, has written that an 'attraction' model of soft power cannot work, using the example of the popularity of Coca-Cola in parts of the Islamic world: many Muslims, Ferguson argues, may like Coca-Cola, but this does not necessarily predispose them to like the USA.[3] Nye explained years later that Ferguson had misunderstood his arguments: "Of course, the fact that a foreigner drinks Coca-Cola or wears a Michael Jordan T-shirt does not in itself mean that America has power over him. This view confuses resources with behaviour. Whether power resources produce a favourable outcome depends upon the context. This reality is not unique to soft-power resources: having a larger tank army may produce military victory if a battle is fought in the desert, but not if it is fought in swampy jungles such as Vietnam [...]. Consider Iran. Western music and videos are anathema to the ruling mullahs, but attractive to many of the younger generation to whom they transmit ideas of freedom and choice. American culture produces soft power among some Iranians, but not others."[4]

Indeed, Nye is convinced (and has maintained for the past three decades) that "a country's soft power can come from three resources: 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)".[5]

Modern scholarship identifies several means through which soft power can exert an attractive influence upon other states, for example cultural achievements, political values, and foreign policy decisions. In the realm of culture, we may think of the importance of Hollywood movies in the popular imagery, or the fame derived from international sport, a vision supported by commentators like Joffe.[6] This is not accepted by others like Hall, who believes that this is a simplistic view; Hall argues that the 'messaging' of

[3] Niall Ferguson, "Think Again: Power", *Foreign Policy*, 134 (2003), pp. 18–24.

[4] Joseph Samuel Nye, "Think again: soft power", *Foreign Policy*, (2006) <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3393> [accessed 20 October 2022].

[5] Joseph Samuel Nye, "Think again: soft power", *Foreign Policy*, (2006) <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3393> [accessed 20 October 2022].

[6] Josef Joffe, "Who's Afraid of Mr. Big?" *The National Interest*, 64 (2001), pp. 43–52.

cultural products can be viewed in a different light according to the context and receive a different evaluation of their significance by the receiving culture.[7]

For political values, Nye uses as an example the European Union's focus on human rights and democracy, which are perceived as attractive by numerous international stakeholders (states, NGOs, populations or segments of them). Another example we can consider is the Soviet Union: it had the advantage of being an alternative to the United States during the Cold War and its ideology of helping the poor classes against the abuses of the rich was very powerful. Their soft power could easily have been very strong, and led many groups of people around the world to support them in the clash between opposing world-views and great powers: we can remember that Italy, a NATO member, had for a long time the strongest Communist party in Western Europe, yet it was courted by both the United States and the European Union. McClory and others agree with this view.[8] Hall instead objects to this vision, claiming that in many cases the political values involved are in fact not very well established in the country seeking to project soft power by means of those same political values; and furthermore, that in many situations the receiving countries follow those political values only to their advantage, rather than to the advantage of the country seeking to project soft power through this means.[9]

In foreign policy, we may call to mind the United States' denouncement of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, thus acting in a manner perceived as consistent with the UN charter—an action which enhanced US soft power and garnering international support in certain quarters. In contrast, Nye observes that when the USA invaded Iraq in 2003, there was a decrease of the USA support, because many considered the war unjustified: this shows that a perceived hypocrisy in maintaining values can undermine a state's attempt at soft power projection.[10] This vision is supported by many, like Vuving and McClory.[11] Hall and neo-realists, on the other hand, are not supportive of this idea, on the grounds that it is not clear when the support created for the country seeking to develop soft power through its foreign policy is motivated primarily by attraction to it or rather by the particular strategic interests of the receiving countries.[12]

Nye himself has stated that it is sometimes difficult to understand where attraction comes from in describing soft power strategies: he admitted, in the case of

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[7] Todd Hall, "An Unclear Attraction: A Critical Examination of Soft Power as an Analytical Category." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 3, 2 (2010), pp. 189–211.

[8] Jonathan McClory, The New Persuaders. II*: A 2011 Global Ranking of* Soft Power, Institute of Government, p. 19.

[9] Hall, An Unclear Attraction: A Critical Examination of Soft Power as an Analytical Category, pp. 202–204.

[10] Joseph Samuel Nye*, Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. 14.

[11] Alexander Vuving, "How soft power works", *SSRN Electronic Journal*, (2009), pp. 1–19; McClory, p. 11.

[12] Hall, An Unclear Attraction: A Critical Examination of Soft Power as an Analytical Category, p. 204.

the European Union, that people can also be attracted by the image of economic success it projects. Accordingly, many have tried to widen definition of soft power to include economic instruments. A number of recent works have attempted not only to broaden the categories of soft power, but also to devise new concepts that include broader definitions. Vuving, for example, thinks that economic power can be used as hard or soft power, depending on how it is used.[13] He also believes that economic instruments can be used to strengthen soft power, as a 'power currency' that can generate it. According to him, China has developed a particularly effective power base through economic measures, e.g. by offering aid (and he notes that China's conditions for refusing to recognise Taiwan are often better for autocracies than Western countries' demands to respect human rights).[14] In this way, China can have a new tool in competing with other countries on the world stage. Vuving also identifies that non-state actors can be used as an outsourced currency of soft power: his main examples are NGOs, which can be used to provide humanitarian aid and thus to improve the image of their original host or headquartered country: Vuving treats such displays of "benignity" as another soft power currency which can be used to engender attraction to the projecting country.

Emma Bell is another scholar who has expanded her approach to soft power in her case study of the United Kingdom (2016). Like Nye, Bell takes as an example the fears for the future of a weakened power whose military and economic means are in decline (in this case the United Kingdom at the beginning of the 21st century). However, Bell proposes that British influence in other countries can still be secured "via companies which promoted British economical and political interests through corporate imperialism".[15] One example is that of Argentina in the late 19th and early 20th century, which began to use the gold standard to attract more British investment, with the result that, as Bell says: "Economic dependence thus entailed a degree of political dependence".[16]

A more recent example is that of BAE Systems, the British arms manufacturer, which plays a diplomatic role between Great Britain and the countries that buy arms. The sale of military equipment can have many repercussions on the international situation. As Nicholas Beadle, a research associate at the Royal United Services Institute, put it, selling arms to countries with little chance of defending themselves is useful for establishing good relations and exerting political influence, and "what is being done on the military

[13] Vuving, How soft power works, p. 7.

[14] Vuving, How soft power works, p. 14.

[15] Emma Bell, "Soft power and corporate imperialism: maintaining British influence", *Race & Class*, 57 (2016), p. 1.

[16] Bell, Soft power and corporate imperialism: maintaining British influence, p. 4.

side, including defence sales, is all part of supporting national interests more effectively than in the past, and it is very positive".[17] In summary, the last few decades have seen a strong interest in Nye's concept of soft power. The aforementioned attempts to redefine and reapply it to different historical scenarios demonstrate, in themselves, the continuing importance of the concept, but also its mutability and the potential inaccuracy of its application. Furthermore, an aspect that I think has been overlooked by the authors is the role of individuals in establishing connections that can turn into soft power.

Turning now to investigate the role of 'soft power' in the Roman world, it will be argued that the following two components of Nye's, Vuving's and Bell's definitions of the concept are also applicable to the ancient context and are clearly visible in our evidence: firstly, the trust that can be generated through non-violent means, leading one country to do what another country desires, as per Nye's definition (especially applying foreign policy as a soft power resource); secondly, the actions of non-governmental agents such as merchants and other individuals in spreading soft power (in a manner similar to Vuving's description of the "benignity" of NGOs, above), rather than the actions of states as such. I will include in this type of actions the personal trust that an individual actor could inspire in others: as I will demonstrate, the transformational charisma and personal esteem represented in a single actor could in fact generate soft power and attraction in the ancient world just as in the modern.

2. Soft Power in the Roman Empire

At the end of the 1st century BCE, Rome was bloodied by civil war. After the death of Caesar and the failed attempt to restore the Republic, the orator and politician Cicero wrote the work *On Duties*, in which he spoke about how Rome had created its empire and the problems of the Republic; due to the difficult period in which he wrote, it was more of a moralistic discourse than a treatise on how to manage foreign policy. Cicero was one of the leading politicians in Rome at the time and his works can give us an excellent insight into Roman ideologies and politics.

Now, it is by various motives that people are led to submit to another's authority and power: they may be influenced (1) by good-will; (2) by gratitude for generous favours conferred upon them; (3) by the eminence of that other's social position or by the hope that their submission will turn to their own account; (4) by fear that they may be compelled

[17] *House of Lords Select Committee on Soft Power and the UK's Influence*, Oral and Written Evidence vol. 1(A–G), p. 198, http://www.parliament.uk/documents/lords-committees/soft-power-uk-influence/soft-power-ev-vol1-a-g.pdf.

perforce to submit; (5) they may be captivated by the hope of gifts of money and by liberal promises; or, finally, (6) they may be bribed with money, as we have frequently seen in our own country. [23] But, of all motives, none is better adapted to secure influence and hold it fast than love; nothing is more foreign to that end than fear...[26]... Let me add, however, that as long as the empire of the Roman People maintained itself by acts of service, not of oppression, wars were waged in the interest of our allies or to safeguard our supremacy; the end of our wars was marked by acts of clemency or by only a necessary degree of severity; the senate was a haven of refuge for kings, tribes, and nations;...[29]... And since it is manifest that the power of good-will (*benevolentiae vim*) is so great and that of fear is so weak, it remains for us to discuss by what means we can most readily win the affection, linked with honour and confidence, which we desire.[18] This text clearly shows that Cicero understood the value of persuading people to follow Roman interests in a way that is more suggestive of 'soft' than 'hard' power. He expected individual politicians to do this as well, but argued that in his time this was no longer the case, rather than only using military violence when dealing with other polities. He was against the use of economic power to bind people, considering it immoral and unworthy for both sides involved (but apparently still considered it valid), and he was also against the use of fear and violence (hence hard power) in domestic relations. His remarks are very similar to those made by Nye, although they were made by a Roman orator who supported Roman imperialism. He mainly referred to soft power as relations, calling it *diligi* (to be loved), but in chapter 29 he called it *vis benevolentiae* (strength of goodwill). Unfortunately, since his entire dissertation concerns the problems of tyranny in Rome, he does not give any examples of Roman foreign policy.

Therefore, I will only provide a case study as an example of how Cicero's principles were applied by the Romans in the creation of the Roman Empire. When Rome entered into war against king Philip V of Macedonia, the consul Titus Quinctius Flamininus (henceforth simply 'Flamininus') was sent to deal with him, and he was able to defeat the king and forced him to flee. The king then started to cruelly plunder all the Greek countryside, in order to deny the Romans the prospect of booty. The biographer Plutarch (who wrote approximately three centuries later, but with the use of contemporary sources), records that Flamininus' personal attractiveness as a representative of Roman 'good faith' (*fides*) and honesty in diplomatic affairs exerted a profound impact upon the suffering Greeks at this point. Flamininus had ordered that his Roman troops behave with scrupulous discipline, avoiding plunder and looting and treating the Greek inhabitants of the area with

[18] Cicero, *On Duties*, trans. by Walter Miller, (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1913), pp. 220–29.

respect: "For as soon as they reached Thessaly the cities came over to them, the Greeks south of Thermopylae were all eagerness and excitement to find Titus [Flamininus], and the Achaeans, renouncing their alliance with Philip, voted to join the Romans in making war upon him. The Opuntians, moreover, although the Aetolians, who were at that time fighting most zealously on the side of the Romans, asked permission to take Opus in charge and protect the city, would not grant the request, but sent for Titus and gave themselves with the fullest confidence into his hands."[19]

In this scenario, the Greek inhabitants of the region perceived the stark contrast between the positive action of Flamininus on the one hand and the negative action of Philip of Macedon—their near-neighbour and a fellow Greek—on the other hand. Their trust in not only Flamininus but also the Roman state in general increased, and they were attracted to the latter, rather than to their allies such as the Aetolians (a nearby league of Greek city-states). Furthermore, Flamininus later met the king and demanded that he surrender all the garrisons he had placed up to that point in the Greek city-states he had forced into his sphere of influence. When the king refused, Plutarch records that

> "Then at last it became clear even to the partisans of Philip that the Romans were come to wage war, not upon the Greeks, but upon the Macedonians in behalf of the Greeks. Accordingly, the other parts of Greece came over to the side of Titus without any trouble."[20]

This clearly demonstrates that Rome developed a strong power of attraction thanks to Flamininus' clever foreign policies: he made a savvy demonstration to the Greek states that trust in Rome was more advisable than in Macedon and Philip, and in consequence gained from these states an alliance, even in Thessaly, which had long been part of Philip of Macedon's sphere of influence. By demonstrating his *benevolentia* (kindness) and *fides* (good faith), Flamininus himself became a source of attraction and significantly advanced Roman influence within a large number of Greek communities by non-violent means.

The increase in Roman influence by this means was so significant that later, when the Romans had vanquished Philip of Macedon and took it upon themselves to 'reorganize' much of mainland Greece (197–196 BCE) in order to address the power-vacuum left by Philip's defeat, some Greek communities began to grow wary of Roman power. The Aetolian League, for example, began to claim that Greeks were just changing master, from Macedonians to Romans, and especially because it appeared that Rome now desired to

[19] Plutarch, *Life of Flamininus,* trans. by Bernadotte Perrin, Vol. X, Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1943), p. 5.

[20] Plutarch, *Life of Flamininus,* pp. 5–6.

keep its own garrisons in some towns. Once again, Flamininus personal charisma and display of *benevolentia* and *fides* won the day for Rome. According to the Greek historian Polybius, who wrote around half a century later, "as the adverse comments of the Aetolians obtained wide currency, and were accepted by some, Flamininus was forced to enter upon many elaborate arguments in the meetings of the [Roman] commission [formed for the reorganization of mainland Greece], trying to convince the commissioners that if they wished to acquire unalloyed praise from the Greeks, and to establish firmly in the minds of all that they had originally come into the country not to gain any advantage for Rome, but simply to secure the freedom of Greece, they must abandon every district and free all the cities now garrisoned by Philip."[21]

In the end, the Romans left most of the cities without garrison, except according to Polybius three settlements of particular strategic importance for defending mainland Greece from an anticipated invasion by another hostile actor, the king of Syria. Plutarch, on the other hand, states that the Romans freed all the cities in the region and left them without garrisons.. This situation clearly shows that Flamininus was thinking in terms highly approximate to what Nye, over two thousand years later, described as 'soft power' in foreign policy terms. Flamininus was aware of the importance of keeping his promises to the Greek communities of the area, thus guaranteeing both himself and Rome the projection of *vis benevolentiae* and investing Rome's intervention in the region with a particular moral authority. In being seen to 'liberate' mainland Greece from Philip of Macedon *and* from Roman military occupation, he demonstrated Rome's reliability. The alternative (of garrisoning or occupying large swathes of the region) would have appeared, in my view, unpalatable to Flamininus: the consequences of such a decision could be compared to Nye's description of what happened after the United States' invasion and occupation of Iraq, causing people to lose faith in the Americans.

It seems that Flamininus was able to make many friends in Greece, so he was able to keep some cities in Roman hands through his mere presence, fame and influence: his personal soft power became an instrument of Roman soft power more broadly. As Plutarch wrote: "In the case of Titus and the Romans, however, gratitude for their benefactions to the Greeks brought them, not merely praises, but also confidence among all men and power, and justly too. For men not only received the officers appointed by them, but actually sent for them and invited them and put themselves in their hands. And this was true not only of people and cities, nay, even kings who had been wronged by

[21] Polybius, *Histories*, trans. by Evelyn S. Shuckburgh, (London and New York: Macmillan and co. 1889), pp. 18, 45.

other kings fled for refuge into the hands of Roman officials, so that in a short time — and perhaps there was also divine guidance in this — everything became subject to them. But Titus himself took most pride in his liberation of Greece.[22]"

We can observe that Plutarch writes something that seems related to Cicero's *vis benevolentiae*: Flamininus was able to build a huge network of people who knew and trusted him, thus increasing his personal soft power. At the same time, this personal soft power of Flamininus positively supported Rome's interests and orders in the region, thus its soft power, giving it an advantage in the confrontation with the Greek polities. Furthermore, when later the king of Syria (mentioned above) fought in Greece against Rome, Plutarch wrote: "The Romans, greatly alarmed by reports of defection among the Greeks and of the power of Antiochus, sent out Manius Acillius as consular general for the war, but made Titus his lieutenant to please the Greeks. The mere sight of him confirmed some of these in their loyalty to Rome, while to others, who were beginning to be infected with disloyalty, he administered a timely medicine, as it were, in the shape of good will towards himself, and thus checked their malady and prevented them from going wrong."[23]

As Nye would say, this is an example of Roman soft power through the use of foreign policy, in particular mediated by single individual actors: everything indeed seems to be connected to Flamininus as an individual, rather than to the Roman machinery of government or the Roman state as such. Many Greeks were still attracted to him, even if he was not anymore one of the highest Roman authorities: they invested their personal trust in him, and through this, Roman soft power was attracting Greeks and preventing them from leaving the alliance with Rome.

3. Conclusions

We can therefore easily deduce that Flamininus, a Roman politician, had been able to establish some personal bonds and at the same time, acting as a Roman commander, had been able to create significant trust in Rome in many Greek communities; he later used this to prevent further rebellions in many states, thus doing the Roman interest without violence. This invites, in my view, two natural conclusions: first, in a manner similar to Nye's treatment of the relationship between foreign policy decisions and soft power, Rome could attract polities because of the trustworthiness and moral authority it

[22] Plutarch, *Life of Flamininus*, pp. 4–5.

[23] Plutarch, *Life of Flamininus*, p. 15.

projected thanks to its foreign policy, in this case through Flamininus; Cicero's strategy of *vis benevolentiae* was evidently working well. Secondly, Flamininus was a single individual: originally sent as a state actor, he was able to turn the personal trust many had in him into trust in promoting the Roman interest, keeping many Greek polities in alliance with Rome. In this way he worked in a similar way to Vuving's NGOs, which create benignity towards their country and enhance its scope for soft power projection.

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