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Cognitive warfare, propaganda and nudging with the use of soft power techniques: a challenge for Western democracies

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1. Introduction

“What worries me is that the tabloid press was involved in the making of World War I, and that radio and newsreels contributed to the making of World War II. Let us hope that it will not take a political catastrophe of this magnitude to teach the world to cope with the ubiquity of propaganda” (Cull, 2019).

Since the war in Ukraine began in 2022 (or in 2014), it is not only on the battlefield that a fierce struggle is taking place. The war for the minds and hearts of all nations involved in the war is also being bitterly fought. “This is a propaganda war”, affirmed American journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner John Pilger (SCMP, 2022). However, in other areas of society, people's thoughts and feelings are also the aimed at by targeted psychological influence. One example is the 400 “nudge units” spread around the world. These are teams of specialists in behavioral economics (Fusaro & Sperling-Magro, 2021) from the private sector as well as the political sector, who strive to promote the “right” decisions on the part of the population through unconscious control techniques in areas such as waste separation, climate protection, health or old age care.

All of this raises questions about the extent to which such control techniques can be reconciled with the demands of a democratic society from the perspective of democratic theory and society as a whole. What is meant by “behavioral economics” anyway, how do the psychological mechanisms of steering work, how have they developed, and where do we stand today? These questions are explored in this article. First, the concepts of soft power, propaganda and nudging will be discussed. Then the basic features of the concept of democracy are explained, before the origins of modern propaganda in Western democracies are traced in the next step. This is followed by a look at the current situation of the practice of the targeted use of soft power techniques in Western democracies, which has already been addressed. Finally, this will be critically examined on the basis of the characteristics of democracy explained in the article, and the challenges (and dangers) posed to Western democracies by the use of modern propaganda and other psychological influence techniques will be elaborated.

2. The concepts of soft power, propaganda and nudging

Before the use of soft power techniques can be discussed as a challenge for Western democracies, the concept of soft power itself should be explained. This is not easy from a psychological perspective, because although the concept and the techniques associated with it are well known, the term is rarely used in psychology. An example of this is the very comprehensive “Lexicon of Psychology” (Wirtz 2000), in which many thousands of psychological terms are explained on more than 2000 pages, but in which soft power is not mentioned.

The situation is different if we look at political science. There the term soft power is discussed in distinction to hard power. Hard power is the exercise of tangible coercion or force. This coercion is not very desirable from a psychological point of view, because although military force is also used today, it does provoke resistance. The reason for this resistance is based on the desire of every human being for self-determination, which is a well-documented, deeply grounded psychological need (Deci & Ryan 1985, p. 5ff). In this context, Noam Chomsky also speaks of an innate “instinct for freedom” (Young 1992), which every human being possesses. Analogous to Chomsky, Erich Fromm observed a recognizable “[struggle] of man for his freedom” in the course of history (Fromm 1982, p. 27).

The concept of hard power can be distinguished from that of soft power. Soft power stands as an umbrella term for all those psychological techniques that make it possible to influence people's psychological states without using force or coercion and that therefore usually proceed imperceptibly and unconsciously because they pass below the threshold of perception or consciousness of the human psyche (cf. Tögel 2021, p. 25; Cialdini and Wengenroth 2004). This is possible because in psychological research today it is considered undisputed “that by far the largest part of human information processing runs factually below the threshold of consciousness and cannot be brought into consciousness even with the greatest willful effort” (Asendorpf 2005, p. 24). The targeted use of soft power techniques takes advantage of this fact. But what exactly is soft power?

The concept is defined in political science as “the ability to persuade others to do what you want without using force or coercion” (Nye 2004, p. 11). One of the rare definitions of soft power in a psychological context formulates a similar definition for soft violence: “These are influence strategies that are usually considered offensive and are forms of manipulation. Such influence techniques can be particularly effective because the imperceptible control of behavior does not generate reactance” (Fischer & Wiswede 2009, p. 615).

Consequently, in contrast to hard power, resistance or reactance in people is much lower when soft power is exercised. This fundamental distinction between hard and soft power goes back a long way, and Immanuel Kant already distinguished between deception and coercion (Kant 1791/1870, p. 45; White, 2013, p. 92).

Soft power techniques – also referred to as “weapons of influence” (Cialdini, 2021, p. 19) – are similarly applied in fields that have a variety of different names, but all share a conceptual proximity to the definition and mode of action of soft power. These include, for example: Public Relations, Advertising, Political Communication, Propaganda (Ellul, 1965), Cognitive Warfare (Tögel, 2023), Nudging, Psychological Warfare (Ewen, 1996; Simpson, 1994), etc.

If we compare the definition of these application areas, the similarities to soft power

become clear. For example, the term ‘public relations’ describes techniques to “deliberately persuade a group of people to adopt a particular point of view”, as Grunig and Hunt write. One of the characteristics of nudging is that the “people affected [...] are unaware of the influence [...]” (Thaler & Sunstein 2019, p. 105). Propaganda is defined as “the attempt to deliberately influence people's thoughts, actions, and feelings” (bdp).

The different fields of application themselves are not always easy to distinguish. For example, there are researchers for whom ‘public relations’ are forms of well-established propaganda techniques, although the authors admit that the public relations industry is naturally “nervous” when the accusation is made that its techniques are in some way propaganda (Grunig & Hunt 1984, p. 21).

What is certain, however, is that soft power is used in the areas listed above. In order to discuss the extent to which this use poses a challenge to Western democracies, it is necessary to take a closer look at the essential characteristics of a democracy.

3. Important characteristics of a democracy

This chapter will define what is meant by the term democracy before using this definition to explain individual aspects that make the targeted use of soft power techniques appear problematic.

A first approach to a definition of the term democracy can be made through etymology: The word itself comes from the Greek *dēmokratía* (ancient Greek: *δημοκρατία*) and means rule of the people (Duden 2006, p. 213). It is composed of *dēmos* (the people) and *krátos* (force or power) (ibid. p. 213). This idea of popular rule has had a variety of manifestations throughout history, two of the best known being the democracy of ancient Greece and that at the time of the Enlightenment (Mausfeld, 2018). It is therefore worthwhile to first look at the historical origins of democracy in order to shed more light on the concept.

A first form of democracy can be found in ancient Greece in Athens, the so-called Attic democracy in the 5th century BC. Even if it is discussed in research to what extent the ideal of true popular sovereignty was already realized at that time (cf. e.g. Schulz and Walter 2022, p. 48f.), Athenian democracy is also considered a “radical” democracy” (ibid. p. 123), in which an attempt was made to institutionally guarantee popular sovereignty, at least of parts of the population, via a plenary assembly and via other democratic institutions such as a people's court (cf. Bleicken 1994).

This idea of popular sovereignty was taken up again in the 18th century at the time of the Enlightenment. Here, democracy was primarily justified by natural law and universal humanism, which assumes that all people are equal in principle (cf. Israel, 2013, p. 831f.). “All men are free by nature” affirmed Louis de Jaucourt (1755, p. 415f.). The Enlightenment definition of democracy was based on these principles. It was intended to create a form of government that made it possible for people to live together in dignity, with inalienable, universal human rights at its core.

The problem of the use of soft power techniques is based on this understanding of democracy. In the following chapter, the justifications and argumentation patterns for their use will be presented from a historical perspective and how their use is legitimized today. Subsequently, with reference to the understanding of democracy outlined above, four aspects

of targeted, psychological control within a democratic society that are particularly in need of discussion will be highlighted, namely: the question of power, the question of the weak points of decision-makers, the question of participation in public discourse, and the possibility of misuse as war propaganda.

4. Psychological control then and now

A look back to the beginnings of modern propaganda at the advent of the 20th century can help to work out the type of argumentation of the then still young “propaganda” science. This will be exemplified by one of the founding fathers of modern propaganda or public relations, Edward Bernays.

Edward Bernays was a nephew of the well-known psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. He was intensively engaged in the possibilities of directing people with the help of propaganda. Initially, Bernays was involved in the Creel Commission, which tried to convince Americans to enter World War I by using soft power (Demm, 2021; Zinn 1980, p. 355ff). Bernays acted in a very planned manner in this regard and was well aware of the influence of his work on people's psyche, even welcoming it: “Public relations involves what I call the building of consensus, which is based on Thomas Jefferson's principle that in a democratic society everything depends on the consent of the people” (cited in: Leipold, 2017), he explained.

Bernays furthermore believed that directing people's thoughts and feelings through soft power is an essential component in a democratic society. One of his most famous quotes is: “The conscious and purposeful manipulation of the behaviors and attitudes of the masses is an essential ingredient of democratic societies” (Bernays, 1928/2916 p. 19). This fundamental idea permeated Bernays' work (Leipold, 2017) and it was echoed by other influential intellectuals of the time, such as Walter Lippmann and Harold Lasswell (Cull, Culbert & Welch, 2003). Bernays himself was recognized for his life's work and named one of the 100 most influential people of the 20th century by Life magazine (see MacDonald, 2012).

The idea that the broad mass of people do not always act rationally and that they should therefore be “nudged” in the right direction for their own good has a long tradition. It began before Bernays, and it continues to this day. A historical example of distrust of the populace is the Greek historian Thucydides. He wrote: “The masses are unsteady and fickle in their opinions; for their failures they blame others” (Leppin 1999, p. 124f). While this does not call for the use of soft power techniques, it does provide evidence for the view that people act irrationally. This view is still used today as a justification for the use of soft power: people must be made to make “smart decisions” (Thaler & Sunstein 2019, front page) without it being noticed, so the argument goes.

From this, it is clear that there is still a great deal of effort being undertaken on putting soft power techniques to use today. Two particularly well-known proponents of their targeted use are American researchers Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, who have dedicated a book of their own to the idea of psychological “nudging”. It is called “Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness” (ibid.). Just like Thucydides and Bernays, they believe that people can make “stupid mistakes” (ibid. p. 106). They therefore promote a “liberal paternalism” (ibid. p. 106) and argue that since it is impossible for decision-makers not to influence people (just as the architect of a house always influences to some extent the

behavior of the people who later live and work in the building through his or her building plan), one should, as a wise “decision architect” (ibid. p. 107) accept this responsibility, and with psychological pushes, so-called nudges, help people to find their way unconsciously (just as one puts up signs in a complicatedly built house “so that people can find their way” (ibid. p. 239)).

Such decision architectures could be built in the most diverse areas of a society: “old-age provision, social security, credit markets, environmental policy, health care and marriage” (ibid. p. 331) are cited as possible areas of application for nudges, but “the range of possible applications goes far beyond that” (ibid. p. 331). However, soft power must remain soft. One should leave the decision “up to people and [at the same time] make it as easy as possible for them to choose their own path” (ibid. p. 309).

A look at recent work by researchers shows the diverse areas in which the use of soft power is discussed. Cass R. Sunstein, for example, together with other researchers, devoted attention to ways to combat “fake news” (Lazer et al. 2018, p. 1094) or climate change (Sunstein, 2021). They are exploring how to curb “fake and true news”, which are a “challenge” for many countries, through a “robust news-ecosystem” (ibid. p. 1096). In addition, he recently collaborated with German scholar Cornelia Betsch and others to publish an article on how best to teach the public that lockdowns in the wake of Covid- measures are useful and good (see Habersaat et al. 2020). “Public behavior and following national and subnational response strategies [...] will continue to be the most important measures to contain the virus” (ibid. p. 677), the authors are certain. They thus welcome the use of soft power techniques to protect people and encourage compliance with “effective” measures through psychological nudges and incentives. Richard H. Thaler also stayed true to the theme of soft power. In 2021, for example, he and other researchers addressed the question of whether a lottery could be used to motivate adults to get the Covid-19 vaccine (see Milkman et al. 2021).

The book ‘Nudge’ was reprinted in 2021 (“the definitive edition”) and addresses, among other things, the psychological tools with respect to climate change, which according to the two authors must be countered by using the insights of psychology and behavioral economics (Thaler & Sunstein 2021, p. 286). The authors see one possibility here in the behaviorist technique of punishments for misbehavior: Countries could form “climate clubs” and collectively agree to abide by certain rules. If individual countries from the club do not comply, they are punished for it, “perhaps by means of some kind of fee” (ibid, p. 292). On the other hand, people could be economically rewarded for energy-efficient behavior and, in addition to soft nudges, hard coercion could be used, for example through strict laws (ibid, p. 292).

In addition to these civilian uses of soft power, there is also the military domain. While war propaganda and psychological warfare have been part of warfare for more than 100 years (Simpson, 1994), cutting-edge manipulation techniques have been increasingly advanced since 2020 in so-called “cognitive warfare”, an official NATO program (Claverie et al., 2021). The military alliance's efforts go so far as to define humans themselves as the official theater of war, placing their thoughts and feelings at the center of this novel form of warfare. This extreme form of soft power, which in part touches the realm of hard power, requires special attention, particularly also from the realm of science, as well as a thorough reflection on the challenges it poses.

5. Challenges for Western Democracies through the Use of Soft Power Techniques

The matter-of-fact manner with which the basic idea of Bernays and other intellectuals of his time persists to this day is surprising, because the targeted control of public opinion can certainly be criticized from the perspective of democratic theory. Four particularly salient points of criticism will be explained in this chapter: the question of power, the question of the vulnerabilities of decision-makers, the question of public debate space, and the danger posed by the misuse of soft power techniques as war propaganda, addressed at the outset by Nicolas Cull.

The question of power

When one considers the term soft power in its literal sense, one encounters the English word power and thus the question of who exercises that power and what legitimizes it. Indeed, the legitimacy of power is a feature of democracy. “All citizens thus have a right to comprehensive democratic participation in all relevant aspects of society. [...] All power structures have to prove their right to exist and justify themselves to the public, otherwise they are illegitimate and therefore to be eliminated”, explains one of the critics of propaganda, Rainer Mausfeld (2018, p. 105). Mausfeld also associates democracy with the demand that “every citizen should have a fair share in all decisions [...] that affect his or her own social life” (ibid. p. 209). It is obvious that not every citizen had the opportunity to spend 150 million euros on advertising in 2020, as the federal government did (cf. Parts 2020, n.d.). Very high advertising expenditures can also be found in the military or economic sectors. For example, the most expensive advertisement in the world, a 30-second commercial during the American Super Bowl finals, cost 5.6 million U.S. dollars (cf. Malone 2021, n.d.). NATO's civilian budget, which is, in part, also used for PR, is set at \$289.1 million for 2022 (cf. NATO 2022). Consequently, the opportunities to exercise soft power are not equal for everyone. This, however, leads to an imbalance of power and these power structures, although very effective, are not democratically legitimized, according to critics.

The question of the decision-makers' vulnerabilities

The second point refers to the fact that one reason why soft power can work as an imperceptible manipulation at all (cf. Thaler & Sunstein 2019, p. 12ff) is the presence of human ‘vulnerabilities’. This leads to the question of how rationally those people who use soft power act. It is striking that this question is little discussed by those who see soft power as an achievement. Thaler and Sunstein do defend their call for nudges:

“In other words, we argue for self-conscious efforts by private and public institutions to steer people's choices in directions that increase their well-being” (cf. Sunstein & Thaler 2003, p. 1162, author's transl.).

They do, however, not explain how decision-makers within private or public institutions are themselves exempt from what constitutes a “flawed but genuine” (Thaler & Sunstein 2019, p. 167) human being. Noted democratic theorist Sheldon Wolin recognized this point, pointing out the need to discuss why “elites ... should claim for themselves a special system of

rationality [and] ... possess the substantively superior form of judgment” (Wolin 2022, p. 382).

The question of the public space for debate

Another criticism of the use of soft power also derives from the understanding of democracy explained above. Democracy also includes the ability to discuss factual issues controversially (Crouch 2020, p. 9), openly, honestly and on an equal basis with one another (cf. e.g. Ruß-Mohl 2020, p. 8ff). The Federal Agency for Civic Education in Germany states on this point:

“The functioning of a democracy, in which all state power emanates from the people (Article 20 (2) of the Basic Law/Grundgesetz), presupposes that its members have the information they need to form their own opinions on all political issues in a rational manner” (bdp).

For Rainer Mausfeld, the public debate space is therefore “the heart of democracy” (Mausfeld 2020, n.d.). As early as 1956, the American sociologist Charles W. Mills lamented in his work “The Power Elite” that the “respect for public debate [...] so important to a democratic society [has been] replaced by unscrupulous psychological warfare” (Mills 1956/1962, p. 251). Consequently, critics like Mills see in the use of soft power techniques the danger of no longer debating using rational arguments, but rather using psychological techniques to “manipulate the crowd” (ibid. p. 216).

The possible misuse as war propaganda

The final point of criticism relates to the historically demonstrable link between hard and soft power. Again and again, critics of propaganda such as Nicolas Cull warn of the danger of escalation of wars, which are further fueled by the skillful use of soft power or propaganda. A historical example of this is the aforementioned Creel Commission, founded in 1917 (cf. Zinn 1980, p. 355ff), which prepared the U.S. entry into the war propagandistically. In modern times, evidence of the involvement of PR agencies in wars can also be found. One example is the war in Yugoslavia. The American advertising agency Ruder Finn, for example, was active here from 1991 onward and openly admitted this (cf. Sremac 1999). Currently, NATO's so-called “cognitive warfare” (Tögel, 2023) provides a particular focus, which is considered the most advanced manipulation program ever, further escalating the war for minds and hearts with the help of state-of-the-art soft power techniques.

6. Conclusion

Targeted use of soft power techniques takes place with surprising naturalness and ubiquity (Cull, 2019) in Western democracies today. The well-endowed budgets for advertising, political or strategic communications of corporations, governments, or militaries illustrate the great importance attached to soft power in Western democracies. Its daily use in the most diverse areas of our society cannot be denied, which makes it all the more important to have an in-depth, scientific debate on the question of its legitimacy. Above all, however, the compatibility of propaganda and nudging using the help of soft power techniques with fundamental democratic principles requires closer scientific examination.

Particularly noteworthy in this context is the danger posed by war propaganda and cognitive warfare: history shows that propaganda has repeatedly made it possible to unleash the worst of wars and endless suffering (Blum, 2014; Wolin, 2022, p. 378ff). This makes public discussion and broad education about the destructive potential inherent in weapons of manipulation all the more urgent.

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