

INFLUENCE AND COUNTER-INFLUENCE IN 2023

Forms, Actors, Excesses and Strategies

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SKEMA Publika is an independent international think tank aiming to anticipate tomorrow's societal and geopolitical transformations. It fuels public debate and issues recommendations for national and international policymakers.

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"I believe that influence is the tip of the diamond of economic intelligence, its most complex form. I found it difficult to have this accepted when, between 2000 and 2005, the cornerstones of economic intelligence were only monitoring and security. At the time, I was told that influence really meant public relations or communication. It has become an absolute must today. And perhaps at times excessive. That said, I do remain convinced that monitoring/anticipation is the ultimate of battles, both for influence and for security, and that these three cornerstones are very closely connected. I am also convinced that any successful action requires first and foremost a strategy that is based on will. "

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1. WHY TALK ABOUT INFLUENCE IN 2023?

The globalisation of the 1980s and 1990s exacerbated competition. Much is decided through information and, more particularly, through influence, which is one of its variations. Influence is key in every kind of competition, whether economic, political or scientific, and particularly so in intangible fields, such as image, of course, but also rules and standards, systems of law and of teaching, broader cultures, including business, and values.

Influence involves processing information. Information is a raw material, in the same way as gas or oil is; the difference is that we cannot see it. Information in its raw form may be of varying degrees of quality. It may, or may not, be refined, adulterated, sold, or stolen. The companies that exploit information are becoming powerful and sought after as oil producers, and will soon become even more so. Both public and private stakeholders use it. In 2023, it is a key element of international relations and competition, even if it is, of course, not the only one and if the power relationships may follow very different paths.

It has significantly broadened its scope via the Internet, all kinds of websites, and social media. Algorithms themselves are subject to influences and artificial intelligence will continue to open up new fields.

In France, the importance of influence(s) has struggled to break through but now appears to have officially done so, as evidenced by the *Influence Roadmap* created by the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs in December 2021 as well as by the *National Strategic Review* in 2022, with its phrase “*Influence is strategically built*”.

2. WHY USE INFLUENCE?

Influence is a weapon, a weapon that does not kill, a weapon for taking power over the mind of another person or other people. As Éric Delbecq, “*Influence is a clean weapon*”¹. In summary, influence is an eminently complicated relationship that will have an effect on reason, conscience, affectivity, beliefs and emotions, changing them without the subject feeling any obligation or being paid. This strange faculty that can make others think and act as per one’s wishes, without using any open constraint or money, really can lead to taking possession of someone’s conscience. As the greatly missed François-Bernard Huyghe wrote, influence is an “*approach that aims to change the way in which others perceive reality*.” It is consequently a means of action over the decisions of others.

Influence is a weapon for taking political power. The information that the United States (US) spent decades disseminating across the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) via clandestine radio stations and equally secret books attempted to permeate consciences in order to “turn” them in the American direction. Namely, it sought to undermine Soviet power from the inside. The Russians (since this nationality dominated the USSR) were not to be outdone and secretly financed supposedly pacifist movements. At the same time, the two powers engaged in open propaganda, which was based on image (film, sporting events, space exploration, etc.). In any case, the aim was to influence opinions. I will not elaborate on the very current propaganda battles, where specific analysis is required in order to avoid simplification.

It is also an instrument for taking economic power, particularly via action on standards, regulations, contracts, that we often call lobbying, which is one of the forms of influence. More surreptitiously, it will have an effect on the business environment, law, governance, a certain notion of ethics, etc. to gradually format a framework and a doxa. A well-known example is the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS), which come from a private body, the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB), based in London. These standards have ultimately become the European Union’s accounting and financial system, with technical consequences (and

¹ É. Delbecq, *L’influence ou les guerres secrètes. De la propagande à la manipulation (Influence or secret wars. From propaganda to manipulation)*, Vuibert, 2011.

lucrative markets) as well as implications in terms of economic and political vision. The dark side of influence will have an effect on reputation, whether for a company or for a State.

It is a social weapon, via diverse and varied propaganda, and obviously magnified by social media and the Internet. And more subtly via the algorithms that preside over our fates, whether this is Parcoursup², the articles finding you on your Twitter feed or the attitudes forged by TikTok and others. There is also social engineering³, which aims to gradually format opinions via diverse actions, particularly among the elite.

The digitisation and the technification of all processes in everyday life and in the economy have opened up 'unhoped' for fields to influence, with the capacity to act at the very root of information. Because those that make the algorithms also have their vision of things and they impart this; moreover, they often do so unconsciously. Machine learning and the self-learning of adaptive algorithms will happen within this predefined framework and will develop it.

Since the dawn of time, influence has been considered as a weapon, a weapon that was paradoxically designed to avoid war – real, physical, bloody war. The great Sun Tzu, Chinese general and author of *The Art of War* in the 6th century BC, told us that, by exercising a demoralising influence on our adversary, we make them give in more quickly and easily than by attempting to decimate them. “*All warfare is based on deception.*” Machiavelli comes to mind, with: “*The art of politics is to make people believe.*” As does Lenin, with his: “*Tell them what they want to hear.*”

This weapon can now count on – and this is only the beginning – technical input from cognitive sciences, neuroscience, nanotechnology, biotechnology, chemistry, etc. Experiments are apparently already underway, in secret laboratories⁴.

Influence is one of the most cross-functional and multiform concepts and practices in existence. **It is a form of operational thinking that leads to action.** The scope of influence is without limit, particularly technical and ethical ones. And yet, it remains an object and an instrument, its practice is an art derived from regulations and experience, intended to serve specific strategies. Finally, it cannot and must not address all the issues of competition alone.

3. HOW IS INFLUENCE EXERCISED?

SEDUCTION AND ARGUMENTATION

The relationship of influence acts by seeking buy-in through two great methods: seduction and argumentation. In principle, seduction aims for the affective, for emotion, whereas argumentation talks to reason. Seduction acts in a less conscious, more implicit and more tacit register than argumentation. The latter is traditionally better considered than the former.

However, we should not excessively differentiate nor hierarchise these two approaches to influence, by branding argumentation as noble and seduction as perhaps a little crude: we may indeed seduce with a nice smile, a nice face or more generally by highlighting beauty; however, we can also do so with fine reasoning (the aesthetics of mathematical reasoning has its supporters) or even with a work of art, which may, alone, replace an entire argumentation. For example, Picasso's painting “*Guernica*” does a much better job convincing us of the horrors of war than a speech and has exercised a significant pacifist and anti-Franco influence. The emotional effect is

² Web portal which manages candidates applying to French higher education institutions and undergraduate places available.

³ Extensively described, for example, by Eric Denécé in his various writings, including *L'autre guerre des Etats-Unis (America's other war)*, with Claude Revel, in 2005.

⁴ Rick Weiss, Washington Post, 2007, referring to the experiments of the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).

well known as a tool to influence opinions and has been widely used for a long time, particularly with a commercial aim, by advertising and marketing. Today, it has been greatly magnified by the vast resonance of social media.

Conversely, argumentation may be based on false or fallacious figures, or on real figures that have been compiled in a certain way for the occasion. Figures and, generally speaking, quantitative evidence should be treated with as much caution as attempts at seduction. When I hear politicians and many others saying “*Numbers don’t lie*”, then I tend to disagree. Argumentation may use facts and figures that are distorted, incomplete, misunderstood or misinterpreted, and which end up being disconnected from reality.

Among other things, these include the much talked about cognitive biases; moreover, these are sometimes practised by people of good faith, or through ignorance. The reasoning will seem “flawless”. There are many cognitive biases and the use of figures will be even more credible as these will strengthen an existing bias or a key idea that is already well established. There was a recent example on 30 January, with a tweet by the director of a recognised think tank, reposting from a website: out of €1,000, “*The State spends 3 times more on pensions than on national education, 7.5 times more than on national defence, 7.5 times more than on the environment/energy, 7 times more than on the family...*”⁵, etc. Except that this amount spent on pensions includes the amounts paid out by private funds. In fact, the European classification deems any compulsory deduction as public, including those of the private funds, even if, in reality, it is not the State itself that is paying them. While the confusion between “public” and “State” is probably unintentional here, the consequence is that these figures struck an audience that is already very well aware of public spending and the cost of retirement.

The intentionally or unintentionally inaccurate use of figures can establish entire reasonings, which are extremely appealing as they are very structured while appearing logical and credible “because the numbers don’t lie”.

THE BASIC RULE: NEITHER CONTRACT NOR CONSTRAINT⁶

Influence is a conscious or an unconscious relationship that can make others act or think according to the wishes of the influencer. It is usual to add: “without exercising force or payment”. What is payment? The notion of payment may be more complex than monetary exchange: for example, payment may consist of psychological gratification (feeling like the favourite, feeling like the norm), this is the basis of the ‘nudge’ (an incitation, an encouragement providing a kind of reward, we are not far from the notion of payment in return). A more mundane example: we will be more easily influenced by the thinking of the mayoral candidate who promises us accommodation!

As for force, well, the word ‘convince’ comes from the Latin *convincere*, which means to overcome. And in ‘soft power’, before anything else, there is ‘power’.

The 20th century would develop these notions while also theorising collective influence. With Freud⁷, Gustave Le Bon⁸ and, of course, Edward Bernays⁹, Freud’s double nephew. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud looks for individual reasons for these surprising crowd reactions; these can be summarised and simplified as the resurgence of buried love for the “other group”, a return to the primal horde, and identification with the leader.

Le Bon predicted the strengths of collective influences and he attempted to find their roots. In 1923, he wrote: “*all men can be more or less influenced through suggestion but, above all, with regard to subjects that they do not know. The credulity of many scholars can be explained in this way. [...] Advertising in newspapers represents*

⁵ The tweet can be found here: <https://twitter.com/DominiqueReynie/status/1619961707039985665>

⁶ Expression created by François-Bernard Huyghe, who examined all aspects of influence, starting with his *La Soft Idéologie*, in 1987 then, among other works, *Maîtres du faire croire. De la propagande à l’influence (Masters of make-believe. From propaganda to influence)*, in 2008.

⁷ *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 1920.

⁸ *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, 1895.

⁹ *Propaganda*, 1928.

a very efficient means of persuasion, precisely because very few minds are strong enough to resist the power of repetition. For the majority of men, it soon creates certainty.” Finally, there is Bernays, whose book *Propaganda* lays the groundwork of mass institutional and commercial influence, and even what we would today call the manipulation of opinion.

In France, in the 1970s, Serge Moscovici¹⁰ focused on the means of group influence and established a theory of minority influence in 1976. He drew attention to the importance of unanimity within the group that wishes to exert influence, even without a numerical majority. He highlighted the difference between coercive power and normative power, that of influence, but which itself needs to rely on shared values. He also drew attention to the role of behaviour (that we can replace with “the example”) in terms of exerting influence. At another level, we cannot help thinking about Trotskyist entryism whereby a minority, or even an individual, “turns” a community. These analyses of minority influence prove useful today to understand and manage traditional networks, but also social networks, in which a group of individuals can take power “just like in real life”.

Nevertheless, when compared with these social psychology theories from the 1970s, it appears to us that the wave of multiform information is changing the paradigm, insofar as the mastery of virtual access is becoming a key element of influence today.

More recently, the American Robert B. Cialdini developed his theory regarding the six weapons of influence in a bestseller¹¹: these are reciprocity, commitment and consistency, consensus or social proof, liking, authority, and scarcity. Like their predecessors, these theories have been widely used in sales and negotiations, and also to develop leadership and charisma.

Unlike the Americans, the French have a rather negative innate approach to influence, which they tend to consider generally like manipulation or influence peddling. This explains why the multidisciplinary approach to influence via economic intelligence created in France at the beginning of the 2000s struggled to establish itself and is only finally being recognised because of the pressure of the reality of the external world.

4. SOURCES OF INFLUENCE

Previous “globalisations” were ultimately dominated by States. Today, large companies, banks, funds, professional organisations, NGOs, forums and think tanks have become high-profile global players and the privileged partners of States; they have also, and above all, become international regulatory organisations, some through their financial influence and others through their “moral” or “expert” influence. These private players are the source of regulations, law, practices, thanks to the influence and lobbying that they exert on public authorities, both national and international, and in particular in Brussels. The term ‘soft law’ has become accepted for designating this kind of regulation, and soft law often becomes positive law when it is gradually taken up by public authorities.

Private groups possess all the technical information resources they need to disseminate messages, if they do not directly own shares in information tools (like billionaires in the press or in world-class news agencies). Information providers can often be found among them, such as Apple, Google and others, which have become major global players, and which broaden their influence by establishing partnerships with news networks, thus combining the container with the content. In this information sector, we are finding – and this will be more and more the case – the same ruthless struggles as there are for gas and oil, the same fluctuation between public and private interests, and the same mixture of styles between business and politics.

The implementation of an artificial intelligence process is becoming an open field in this competition, which while obviously commercial is also so much more. There is much talk, and rightly so, about protecting individuals and

¹⁰ *Perspectives on Minority Influence*, 1976.

¹¹ *The Psychology of Persuasion*, translated into French as *Influence et manipulation* in 2004.

their data. However, we should also be concerned about the actual use of this data. In addition to the huge commercial godsend represented by data (incidentally, this makes France a prime target, since it possesses much of it, and of excellent quality – for example, in the health sector), the implementation of these systems gives free rein to all visions.

When it comes to digital influence, it is impossible not to mention that of social media, both because of the content they carry and the practices and approaches they promote, particularly among young people, even adolescents, for example Tik Tok, which is severely controlled in China and much less so around the world, where crowds of teenagers attempt to conform to different kinds of influencer profiles.

As for NGOs, their power was consecrated by the events in Seattle, in November-December 1999, during the opening of the World Trade Organization round. These events were a first example of influence on a planetary scale thanks to information technologies. At the time, NGOs, so well known these days, were still considered as associations devoted to humanitarian aid and to development. By opposing the opening of the negotiations, they prevented all the States in the world, as well as the largest international institutions, from negotiating and holding the conference. They did this quite simply because these States had not taken their demands into account. Seattle saw NGOs acquire a “legitimacy” of representation as a “democratic” counter-power to the multilateral and national powers. This “legitimacy” was based on the power of media influence.

In any case, those three days in Seattle¹² marked the birth of global public opinion, which is today a fully fledged player in global events, being much sought after, and subject to all influences, if not more. The question is whether or not, by dint of being subject to online pressure, it is in the process of developing a spontaneous expertise in analysis and information sorting.

Today, this public opinion reads and hears the same news at the same time, gets fascinated by, or indeed rallies around, the same subjects, without showing priorities except circumstantial ones, as one announcement constantly follows another.

Other players have had a remarkable career in the influence market: here, we are referring to the “expert organisations” or places bringing together expertise, such as the relatively specialised institutes (for example, the previously mentioned IASB, based in London, in the field of accounting and financial standards, and all the CSR institutes), think tanks, forums (for example, the Global Competitiveness Forum or the World Economic Forum in Davos). Without forgetting the international consultancy firms which have managed to give themselves the aura of American management, which itself has earned its credibility through the reputation of the universities in that country.

Former legitimacies have been surpassed in this proliferation of players and influences, and they have not been replaced. Instead, the former public legitimacies are competing with the “private legitimacies” coming in from the markets. Today, any player with a good media understanding can have a chance to exist, to launch “content”, i.e. to exert influence. This includes mafia and criminal players (who are sometimes the same, hiding behind respectable façades).

None of this has gone unnoticed by certain countries, which have started engaging in public diplomacy. In this case, the word ‘public’ does not mean public, but rather intended for publics, unlike traditional diplomacy which is exercised between peers. It has been much theorised in the United Kingdom¹³, which has mastered this practice and accordingly makes use of all kinds of sectors, for example, sport.

¹² The film *Battle in Seattle* by Stuart Townsend, produced in 2008, brilliantly tells the story.

¹³ Ali Fisher, *Options for Influence: Global Campaigns of Persuasion in the New Worlds of Public Diplomacy*, 2008.

5. FORMS OF INTERVENTION

SOFT POWER, SMART POWER

It has never really been possible to translate the term 'soft power' into French or, more precisely, its translations (*pouvoir doux* or *mou*) have never been convincing. So it is always used in its original form in French. While this well-packaged 'Anglo-Saxon-style' concept was launched by an American, it was already being applied by the United States long before this. The author is Joseph Nye¹⁴, a Harvard professor, who served as Under Secretary of State in the Carter administration and as Assistant Secretary of Defense during the Clinton presidency. Among other roles, Joseph Nye has also been Chairman of the North American Trilateral Commission, a group of international leaders from the three industrialised continents created in 1973 and to which important hidden influence has been – and is once again being – attributed. He explained that soft power is a country's capacity to achieve its objectives through the attraction that it exercises on other countries instead of by force.

In 2009, he redefined soft power and explained 'smart power', a concept he had been using since 1990, he says, and which involves combining hard and soft power depending on needs, determined by an understanding of the context. However, the term 'smart power' is instead associated with Suzanne Nossel, a diplomat with a similar background to Joseph Nye and, in practice, with Hillary Clinton, who implemented it as an approach in 2009 in her capacity as the Secretary of the State Department. For Clinton, this meant refraining from nothing, continuing to use soft power yet not hesitating to resort to hard power, and using each of them in a 'smart' way, in the interest of the United States. We reserve the choice of weapon; this is the power of intelligence, which consists of using the right tools at the right time.

In the 1990s, Joseph Nye explained that military power could not win everything, and that the United States had won the Cold War with a 'smart' combination of hard and coercive power and soft and attractive power. The loss of confidence in Communism eventually led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. This loss of confidence was carefully encouraged by so-called soft actions disseminating written, radio and other messages from the United States. We could also point out that, in reality, these actions of disseminating books were not always as soft as Nye says, since they were prohibited and therefore completely clandestine: these publications were called *samizdat* in Russian and when their senders were arrested by the KGB, they were rarely treated very 'softly'. For China, Joseph Nye inspired the US government to take a dual approach, simultaneously consisting of a partnership with Japan to contain it and an integration into the global community. This was already smart power, a combination of hard and soft. It was also supposed to have inspired the British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who also talked of a combination of hard and soft power, as well as, better still, Chinese leaders.

Joseph Nye, a Democrat, spoke out against the impoverishment of American thinking during the Bush years, considering notably that, at this time, the US administration created more jihadists than it killed¹⁵. By way of illustration, Joseph Nye gave another example: it is difficult to catch a terrorist (he used the example of bin Laden) and what is required is hard power, weapons, a lot of work. It is much more cost-effective to ensure that terrorists can no longer be trained, by convincing the people concerned that moderate Islam is preferable to extremism.

Cultural activities are soft power when they help achieve the aims of public diplomacy. Finally, according to Joseph Nye, the main elements of a country's soft power are its culture (when it is attractive to others), its values (when these are attractive and consistent) and its policies (when they are legitimate). He added that soft power is not the solution to all problems of power: *"the Korean dictator Kim Jong Il may well watch Hollywood films, but this won't prevent him from building a nuclear bomb"*.

In truth, while it is less unpleasant to be dominated by soft power than by hard power, the manipulation of brains exerted by soft power still remains a form of lack of respect towards others. At times, the boundary between soft power and cynical manipulation is tenuous. It hinges on the ethics of its architects and their transparency. For example, in one of the favourite tools of soft power – attracting foreign elites, a high-level practice for the

¹⁴ *The Paradox of American Power* in 2002, followed by various other publications until 2021.

¹⁵ *Our Impoverished Discourse*, 1st November 2006: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/our-impoverished-discourse_b_33069

United States – it is ethical to announce one's intention, like in the International Visitors Leadership Program, which states clearly on its website that it aims to select the leaders of the future in foreign countries to show them the best of the United States. This is clearly an operation of influence, but there is nothing to criticise about it, in our view; it is transparent and those who become involved with it do so with full knowledge of the facts. It does not use any coercive or exaggeratedly seductive methods either.

This is also the case for those participating in the American Young Leaders Program and also in similar programmes in China and other countries these days. This influence is crucial when the people trained, even formatted in this way, obtain positions of power; they have been chosen for this and they can, in turn, influence decisions in the direction and as per the ideology they were taught.

STORYTELLING

Nye added an extremely true phrase which has very freely inspired all political advisors: *"In the information age, success is not merely the result of whose army wins, but also whose story wins."* We win because we convince and we seduce with a great story. Telling a story is a cornerstone of soft power: the American way of life, the conquest of the West, or even Hollywood (a great ally and one that was, moreover, specifically put to use by the Marshall Plan) itself becomes a story to tell.

Incidentally, storytelling has been very successful among many politicians, who have seized upon this promotional technique, which consists of telling the public various stories, updated stories, even ones involving intrigue, about the person being promoted. We do not talk about ideas or programmes or strategies; we talk about the person, about part of their childhood, their family, their talents, etc., and incidentally touching upon (or not) the ideas that they champion.

Tony Blair was a talented pioneer in the use of these methods, just like, in a very different register, Steve Jobs. He turned Apple into a story, his own story, one that everyone believes they – more or less consciously – relive by using its products. However, spin doctors, particularly those of Tony Blair (Alastair Campbell) and George Bush Jr (Karl Rove), who only wanted to play on this argument and who lost all sight of reality, were doomed to failure. In particular, it was the second Iraq war, skilfully staged and recounted by the latter in the United States and Europe, which led to an outcry once it turned out that this background was fake and that, ultimately, public opinion had been exploited by a very well-constructed procedure, but one without foundation.

There is only a short step from this story to what we now call fake news, these traditional practices spreading false information to discredit the adversary, and specifically from within. A step, nevertheless, that it is important not to take without reliable indicators or by ideology. Private players, who are sometimes professional, and public players engage in this and they accuse each other of engaging in it. The question of their regulation by the State arises regularly. Except that these States are driven, and this is normal, by a vision and by choices and are not always innocent. Let us remember that the USSR had an official newspaper called *Pravda*, which means 'truth'. Regulating information to assert or impose "the" truth is a dangerous game. In democracy, it is the role of intermediary bodies and, in particular, the press to provide duly verified information and counter-information. Each citizen should have access to the basic intellectual tools to receive information.

Once again, we suggest that information analysis should be learned at school, through systematic questioning: who, what, why and when? This may seem simplistic, but such reflexes would avoid many of the beliefs caused by the appeal of certain rhetoric.

LOBBYING

As everyone knows, this much used term comes from the word lobby. In the 19th century, it was used to describe the corridors of the House of Commons in England and especially the lobby of the Willard Hotel, next to the White House, where General Grant, who became President after the American Civil War, came to relax and have a drink, attracting everyone who wanted to move forward on an issue.

Lobbying means defending interests, and as long as the interests in question are publicly announced and the relationship calls neither on money nor on threats, then there is nothing objectionable about it. On the contrary,

these interests can enhance the information provided to public decision makers. Well-constructed lobbying requires much work, and must provide documented information and arguments. It must also, in principle, always show how the proposals made can contribute to the general interest or at least not hinder it. In addition, to be effective, it must convey clear and well-packaged messages, by using key words and strong images (this takes us back to the seduction/conviction duo).

It becomes suspicious, even illegal, when it is accompanied by bonuses, or corruption of any kind and not just monetary.

ENTRYISM

This involves having people in institutions or bodies that make the rules, standards, strategic decisions. It is quite an art, which requires advance preparation, to be there when positions become available (in the key international bodies, in standardisation bodies, etc., wherever collective decisions are prepared), or for foreign governments to format current and future decision makers to an ideology that can have an impact on future decisions. It requires professional engineering, of the budget, for example, in embassies so as to not “skimp” on the posting of an expert or the duplication over a few months of a new arrival with their predecessor, so as to correctly recover the existing networks. Again, there is nothing illegal about open entryism. It becomes non-ethical, even illegal, when the person is acting in the shadows for goals that are not connected, or even run contrary, to the interests of the role they hold.

THE PROFESSIONAL USE OF RANKINGS

Rankings and ratings are irrefutable instruments of influence, especially when they are produced by credible organisations, such as Shanghai Jiao Tong University or the World Bank. Everyone will obviously want a good rating or ranking and will ensure that they adopt the criteria that will lead to this.

In principle, influence through rankings works very simply. It is based on two psychological mechanisms: the first works positively, and involves wanting to be like something or someone well regarded by the community. The second is guilt-inducing: it is based on the shame felt in front of peers, it comes from the same roots as ‘naming and shaming’.

Having always been used by the masters, the ranking methodology implicitly indicates how to move up, how to be “better regarded”; to do so, you just need to look at the list of the ranked and the criteria. These are disguised standards. On a global scale, these rankings are veritable instructions for acting, but by another name. They are a refined tool for influence and are sometimes borderline unethical when they do not clearly and obviously provide the basis for their selection criteria.

The process is particularly well suited to strategic fields with few international regulations, like the business environment, and it is even more credible for it to come from an authorised source. Rankings can certainly appear as simplistic but this is because they actually are simple, as well as being easy to use and therefore impactful. Packaging, a marketing technique that is well known for tangible objects and widely used by suppliers and advertising, is also valid for the intangible, stories, rankings. We could define it as formatting for an attractive appearance.

The World Bank’s *Doing Business* ranking has been a model of the genre, it met all the criteria for credibility since the Bank is an intergovernmental organisation whose aim is to finance development in poor countries. In terms of analysing influence, the World Bank’s credibility is thus used to convey an ideological view without informing its readers of this. By examining the criteria of this ranking, the first ones in any case, it appeared that a State’s main quality is to have the lightest possible legislation and that only the conditions of time and costs of installation are examined (so, the shortest credit, the fastest building permit, business creation within the fewest possible days, etc.). Even if, gradually, other criteria have been added, the underlying philosophy is that the best risk can be found where there are the fewest regulations, particularly social ones.

The 2004 edition contained a passage that has since been deleted as it was too harsh and poorly received although it was, at least, honest. It outlined a perfect syllogism: French civil law goes hand in hand with cumbersome state structures, cumbersome state structures foster corruption; therefore this law fosters corruption.

The European and French authorities have shown, and continue to show, little interest in the subject, even though, like the World Bank, the European Investment Bank could also have created a ranking. At least, that was the negative response given to the *Conseillers du Commerce extérieur de la France* (CCE – French Foreign Trade Advisors) which, along with other experts, produced a report in July 2010¹⁶, proposing new criteria likely to improve upon the existing ones and provide a more complete vision of the countries. The CCE also took these proposals to other French authorities, without success, as none of them felt concerned by this subject, which remains strategic.

The *Doing Business* ranking was discontinued following a scandal linked to the pressure exerted on its authors. The World Bank has been working on a new ranking, the *Business Enabling Environment*, since the end of 2022. *It is up to the French authorities and experts concerned to take part and/or work towards the representation of various approaches.*

Many other rankings exist, in all sectors. The development of the digital sector, particularly artificial intelligence, has become one of their subjects with, for example, the already existing *Tortoise Global AI Index 2021*¹⁷, which evaluates nations based on their levels of investment, innovation and implementation of artificial intelligence. It is vital to identify in advance the gestation of these projects (monitoring, monitoring, monitoring) and to get organised so as to both participate and contribute our messages in them.

Ideally, for strategic subjects like those mentioned above, or for others like the quality of higher education (still dominated today by the Shanghai ranking), initiatives would be taken at a European level using a specific approach, which would innovate in the assessment methods.

PARTNERSHIP, NETWORKS, CO-OPETITION

Finally, we can't exert influence alone. We need carefully maintained partners and networks of alliances; and France has so many of these abroad (local elected representatives of the French abroad, who are often long-term residents in the countries and very well-informed, foreign alumni of universities and prestigious schools [*grandes écoles*], scientists trained in France, emblematic artists, French-speaking and Francophile networks, etc.). We also need to be able to work together with the different players (in Brussels, the State with private partners like professional organisations or trade unions, States allied with other States, companies in discussions with expert groups even NGOs, etc.).

Depending on the timing, these partners may also be competitors. We have to know how to simultaneously fight competition and co-operate on major issues. This is called co-opetition, the capacity to form an alliance with competitors when necessary for a shared objective.

Influence is ultimately a component of negotiation, and vice versa.

¹⁶ *Évaluer la qualité des climats des affaires (Assessing the quality of business environments)*, a CNCCEF report edited by Patrick Patelin and Claude Revel.

¹⁷ This index examines six factors: talent, infrastructure and operating environment (implementation), research and development (innovation), and government strategy and commercial (investment).

6. ETHICS AND THE EXCESSES OF INFLUENCE

Generally speaking, the effect of the action of influence is to make others think and act as we wish them to. This, however, can be more or less visible depending on its target. There are two distinct cases: either the person subject to the influence is informed of the aim of the “influencer”, as in professional lobbying, a visible and supervised technique; or they are neither informed nor conscious and not able to recognise the action they are subject to. Here, then, the influence is being exerted without their knowledge. In this case, in principle, this is manipulation, even if, unfortunately, this practice seems to have become common. We can also make the person believe in an aim that differs from the real one. This then is instrumentalization.

We cannot propose these techniques as a code of conduct. Nonetheless, it is important to be able to recognise them and protect oneself against them as much in advance as possible when one is their target, as they exist on a large scale.

So-called special services use a collection of techniques, all based on a sound knowledge of the human personality and which exploit the psychological characteristics of the individual, carefully studied in advance. This is no longer influence, it is manipulation. But it is their job, and perfectly legal when it is a matter of State policy and is undertaken as per the instructions and regulations set in place by the latter. The acronym MICE summarises the means available, except physical violence, to make someone do something: Money, Ideology, Compromise and Ego. However, it should be noted that compromise, which in fact means blackmail via the threat of revealing compromising facts, is a form of psychological violence. In any case, we are quite clearly no longer talking about traditional influence.

There is also disinformation, which means the use of information that is intentionally false (generally only partially, so as to be more credible) or removed from its decisive elements, or combined with other information with which it is not really connected. There could also be intentionally distorted arguments, to succeed in the manipulation or instrumentalization, or even destabilisation, of the subject or the company. This disinformation may, of course, take a visual and/or auditive form.

These informational attacks precede and often accompany destabilisation attempts whether these are on States (like France in Africa) or companies. There are too many examples to mention, but many famous operations on companies were preceded by stories about their corruption, bad practices and other things, real or supposed; the same applies before the discussion of big international agreements.

A vital point is that these attacks always use an element of truth. A basic rule for successful destabilisation is to not totally convey false information. Otherwise, they would not be credible. Particular attention has to be paid to information based on outrageous reasoning structured around correlated or combined facts and figures to establish the reasoning. Generally, though, the mix of true and false is what will have an impact on the opinion. Hence the interest of not leaving yourself open to “inappropriate” attitudes that will obviously reinforce the element of the attack that is actually true. Exemplarity is always the best protection.

Hence, once again, the major value of active and anticipatory monitoring of these informational risks.

There is also much talk of interference, which consists of getting involved in and playing a role in others’ affairs. Obviously, interference wants to influence. Here again, the doxa fluctuates: it is considered good when it is a matter of humanitarian aid, even above countries’ sovereignty, and bad when it is a matter of interference in international powers and bodies, and still not all at the same level. There is also digital interference, which is an aspect of political interference and is connected to a specific treatment linked to cybersecurity. Note: this is slippery ground, as sometimes, to be secure, we need to attack and, in doing so, we go much further than traditional influence, we’re entering the field of services, or even war.

There are many excesses in influence, but their classification still depends on the state of a society at a given moment. The legal boundaries are developing at the same time as the techniques of influence, always following them. They concern influence peddling, corruption, manipulation of prices in financial matters, defamation or denigration, all acts punishable by law.

7. COUNTER-INFLUENCE AND ANTICIPATION

This is a difficult subject, since it presumes that the influence has already been recognised. So, there are two scenarios: counter-influence can be a reaction, as you did not recognise the influence soon enough; or it can be anticipation, in advance, when you have engaged in intelligent monitoring and anticipation.

In the first scenario, there are several theories and, in fact, everything depends on the case in point. It is sometimes recommended to not “leave traces in the snow”, especially when it comes to reputational attacks that are sometimes best ignored. If we react, we need to do so subtly, not so much by defending ourselves, but by attacking the attacker or their friends, here again doing so with subtlety and via various channels.

The best obviously is to be able to anticipate influence and to undermine it well in advance. When it is a matter of propaganda against a country by another country, it is very late when the results are already in place (the Russian example in certain African countries). Hence the extreme importance of economic intelligence, including for diplomats, the detection of false signals, the launch of counter-stories long before minds are reached. Afterwards, it is possible, but so much harder.

ANTICIPATING

Anticipating is not just planning, it is acting in advance. There is a strong connection between anticipation, influence and action. When we anticipate, we first presume one or several futures that may exist, with varying probabilities depending on the case, but which, by definition, are not yet formed. We then look for the means to adapt to each of them. Unless it is more worthwhile to try to adapt this future to us (!), and thus start thinking in terms of influence. The future is formed from current (and old) forces which are exerted and which, when combined, will result in a reality. So, these forces need to be estimated and, depending on the case, why not be one of them? Or join with one of them? *“We do not ask foresight bodies to be psychics, or indeed visionaries, but rather to contribute to domesticating the dynamics that are constructing the future”*, Christian Lechervy quite rightly wrote¹⁸.

“If we are to influence its order in the future, we have to better understand the world today”, he continued.

However, just like influence, anticipating is a technique. It is neither planning nor extrapolating. It is not about pursuing current trends, even embellished by new variables. Anticipation can only be correctly undertaken when based on the detailed assessment of the players, their interests and strategies, all kinds of ongoing collective phenomena, past experiments, the strength of the available network, potential alliances, and so on.

It requires real multi-disciplinarity, as well as great intellectual honesty and perfect ethics, all of which are difficult qualities to combine. This explains the difficulty of anticipation much more than imperfections in software or scenarios. To anticipate, we have to move away from the usual frame of mind, imagine disruptions or “abnormal” events, or, to the contrary, demonstrate down-to-earth common sense that has perhaps been lost by excessively abstract or quantified strategies. And we must do all of this with no holds barred. Calling on artists, screenwriters and writers is increasingly popular among professionals and including in the Army, as evidenced by the book *Ces guerres qui nous attendent (The wars that lie ahead)* in 2022. We cannot overstate the famous premonitions such as those of George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Ray Bradbury and many others. We can also mention the more recent trilogy by Antoine Bello, published between 2007 and 2015, *The Falsifiers*, *The Pathfinders*, and *The Producers*, staging the Consortium for the Falsification of Reality, of which we see examples in real life with professional disinformation companies that occasionally come to light.

The main obstacles to anticipation can be found in psychological inflexibilities or cognitive biases: prejudices, the fear of embodying bad news (the “scapegoat” phenomenon, still called “kill the messenger”), the willingness to please the leader by telling them what they want to hear, the lack of courage in front of the group, a weakened

¹⁸ Deputy Director of Foresight, French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, in “La prospective, une procédure cognitive et d’action” (“Foresight, a cognitive and action-based procedure”), *Revue Mondes*, n° 4, summer 2010.

will facing a charismatic or dictatorial leader, etc. Hence the value of independent and honest external advisors. In particular, we should not merely be satisfied with grids, templates or other standardised matrices.

At a time, the revelation of not always pleasant truths to the leader was embodied by the “court jesters” or “fools”, who played an ultimately essential role which no longer exists, and who alone had the right to say disagreeable things to the monarch, going unpunished since they “were fools”. The presence of a good advisor (or consultant) reveals a good leader. They must be open and, above all, brave, as it is so much more reassuring to think like everyone, in any case like the strongest, and above all so dangerous in certain cases to think differently. In the end, the ethics, openness and bravery shown by the most senior person are what will or will not enable an organisation to anticipate and therefore influence correctly.

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

There is another known connection between anticipation and influence, the self-fulfilling prophecy. By making forecasts public, we make them achievable and we shape the future. There is obviously a great temptation to launch forecasts or scenarios that are perfectly documented, whether or not with a sound basis, but that appear credible due to the author, the sources mentioned, the partnerships, etc., into ruling circles, in the press, on the Internet, and on the networks. By dint of hearing them, opinion ends up integrating them as true and as real, and then acts accordingly.

The phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy has been studied, among other authors, by the late Robert King Merton, professor of sociology at Columbia University. For him, the self-fulfilling prophecy was, initially, a false definition of the situation resulting in a behaviour that ensures that the originally false conception will become true. And as soon as signs seem to prove that the prophecy was true, they will be highlighted to validate the original hypothesis and thus prove that it was correct. So, if we take it further, we can successfully bring to life what was false, or at least unproven, at some point, and make it true. This is only valid for human phenomena, because, in hard science, there comes a day when the false can no longer be held up as the truth. This was the case with Lyssenko’s notorious agronomic theories in the Soviet Union, which led to famine.

These self-fulfilling prophecies are not all deliberate, but they are often ideal vehicles for influence strategies. Particularly on financial markets. The “warnings” from rating agencies or international financial bodies about the situation of countries or companies appear to be entering this category, as are declarations by official figures.

8.A FEW EXAMPLES

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: A CONCEPT SERVING THE LIBERAL ORDER

This is an example of a concept that has flourished. The concept of sustainable development is quite clearly liberal in origin, and not at all “leftist”, along with its avatar for companies, corporate social responsibility (CSR). Created in the 1970s in American think tanks, specifically the Rockefeller Institute of Government, it was then pushed through United Nations circles to become the foundation of the Brundtland Report (*Our Common Future*) in 1987 and the basis of the Earth Summit (UNCED) held in Rio in 1992. It was then expanded to companies at the World Summit held in Johannesburg in 2002, notably with the creation of the Global Compact. In the minds of its proponents, it had several interests. A large new globalisation was predicted and, so as not to hinder this, and in simple terms, the assumption was that the international market should be able to self-regulate outside the excessively narrow State regulations, if the stakeholders themselves applied some behavioural rules and basic ethics, to avoid the law of the jungle¹⁹. Private players therefore become legitimate by binding themselves to commitments proposed by public organisations or ones that have been self-drafted, for example, among many others, the *Equator Principles* for banks or the *Forest Stewardship Council* standards, etc.

¹⁹ See details in *La gouvernance mondiale a commencé (Global governance has begun)*, Claude Revel, 2006.

These commitments were not supposed to be purely “cosmetic” and another category of players would see their role powerfully boosted to watch over it all: non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which would assume, notably, the function of “helping” companies to act “well”, through partnerships, by providing them with ideas and methods, through best practice guidelines and codes and, finally, by assessing and judging them. This is the field of non-financial ratings, certifications and labels; then, if it goes badly, it becomes naming and shaming, i.e. denunciation in the media. NGOs became the privileged partners of international organisations whose actions they “legitimised” in turn through a kind of global representativeness.

The sustainable development concept has had the influence we know, because it is sufficiently supple to adapt to all, or almost all, and is fundamentally unifying. It links several subjects that were previously approached differently and shows that the qualities of life, the economy and the environment were inextricably linked and interconnected; it prompts the search for shared indicators, measuring instruments for exchange. It applies to all economic players, both private and public. Over the years, it has encompassed increasingly wide fields; we could compare it to a magnet, which attracts many fields as soon they have a little exposure to it. It brings together thought and action, simultaneously being a finality, a conceptual framework and a process offered to all the players concerned. Finally, sustainable development is more multicultural than it appears to be. As François Jullien, philosopher and Sinologist, says, “*Unlike Greek thinking, which repeatedly encountered the question of measure, the very foundation of the Greek tragedy, Chinese thinking has never been obsessed by the idea of limits* ²⁰”. He saw proximity between the notion of sustainable development and Chinese thinking: “*... the coincidence that you highlighted between the notion of process and that of sustainable development is not really one. In fact, the very idea of development assumes that we are going beyond the European frame of mind defined by the notions of being and finality. Thinking about development means thinking about resources, and not the aim, which corresponds perfectly to Chinese thinking.*”

Today, the concepts of sustainable development, social responsibility and governance are integrated into all the work of international organisations and States. They are the foundation of all private standards and self-regulations and the increasingly refined criteria of all company and country ratings. The most technical requirements, such as those for calls for tender, the allocation of credit exports or public funding, must take them into account. They co-exist well with financial capitalism and are now even claimed by the newly promoted values of Islamic finance.

However, in these troubled and fragmented times, perhaps the moment has come, and in order to be part of the changing world order, to reconsider one or several of the concepts of the same kind, with the same strength of influence, since the variations of sustainable development have today probably been painted in very, very Western colours. This would be a fine challenge for Europe and/or France.

LEGAL SYSTEMS, VEHICLES AND PRIVILEGED OBJECTS OF INFLUENCE

In economic terms, the law is a vehicle for a kind of business climate, working relationships, magistrates and courts; it allocates a role of varying importance to the judge, provides for different procedures, and also results in different costs. The law is inseparable from an economic-political culture. Civil law (or Roman law) conveys a vision of the general interest that comes from Rousseau, a world governed by principles, a strong State, the French-style republican idea. These elements are interactive, the predominance of such law promotes such culture, the related training, a type of institution, and vice versa. These elements are strongly linked to long-term global influence; they are one of its most effective vehicles. It is therefore very interesting to influence the law itself.

In practice, while Roman law is used in 60% of the world’s countries²¹, US law has become the norm in business. This domination of business by US and British law is no coincidence.

²⁰ Cercle Médicis, 15 June 2004.

²¹ See the research by the Civil Law Initiative (Fondation pour le droit continental).

Gaining a foothold on a breeding ground of US soft power disseminated since the last war, so-called US economic law was skilfully promoted in the 1980s, accelerating following the fall of the Berlin Wall, then boosted for a second time with the first Clinton administration (1993). Law firms followed the movement, by restructuring. In particular, Eastern Europe benefitted from programmes to reconstruct rights, the most famous being the Central and East European Law Initiative (CEELI), supported by the American State and implemented by lawyers from this country. At the same time, there were also training actions led by private foundations, including those of the famous George Soros, the Open Society Foundation and the Open Society Institute, in particular.

All these influences on law go hand in hand with the training of the foreign elite, policies of attraction, the reputation of the universities, which will or will not attract foreign young brains, with the general capacity for seduction of a thought system and, of course, in the American case, with the English-speaking law firms' desire for international expansion.

Today, the Anglo-Saxons have been emulated, particularly by the Chinese, who aim to establish their own standards, firstly technical ones, like for telephones; it has to be said, though, that they are counting on the size of their market to impose these standards on everyone. Tomorrow, they will propose more political approaches, which will be supported by the allies that they are patiently creating. In this way, they have already had emerging Asian countries adopt the agreement known as the Beijing Consensus, in 2004, which since 2022 is taking on a new dimension, and which is "unravelling" the Washington Consensus, the corpus of economic values for development drawn up by the Americans in the 1990s. The Chinese are expected to propose more and more economic values and methods, even rankings, made in China.

Islamic law should not be forgotten, with the actions of influence of rich Islamic countries, Qatar and Saudi Arabia in particular. Law is not the means there, but the object, and it is sought out through finance, or forms of soft power such as sport (and in sport too there are standards).

We cannot finish this chapter without talking about the influence of the legal competition tools allowed by certain legal systems. This is obviously the case with the extraterritorial sanctions the United States practices on the behaviour of foreign companies and in foreign countries, a very widely addressed subject that is not only still current but in addition has given other countries ideas. The European Union is starting to take this subject into account and has, in particular, recently renovated its so-called 'blocking' regulation (Commission Implementing Regulation (UE) 2018/1101), with France already having had such a law since 1968, reinforced several times, like other European countries. But their implementation remains weak, subject to strong diplomatic stakes.

ABOUT CHINA AND STANDARDS

For some years now, the Chinese have been patiently "doing their shopping", sending experts to different countries to draw inspiration from the best examples. They have understood that the global market will ultimately be a standardised market, and they have begun to roll out their own standards in various consumer products, such as telephones, with the assurance that their size will at some point enable them to make these the global standards.

Nowadays, China is going further and will soon also influence standards of governance. It has embedded itself into multilateral and standardisation bodies, where it monopolises the presidencies of committees, and even if it is accused of not following the rules, it has become a de facto member of the global community. This means that it is subject to legal attacks within, but also that it is capable of promoting its own points of view therewith. We believe that we have so far seen only a very small percentage of the broader standardising influence that China will wish to have on a not-so-distant day: in industry, in terms of environmental, ethical, social standards, in conjunction with a fast-developing cultural influence (with its intense current creation in the arts and fashion).

Today, the digital field, and specifically artificial intelligence, are becoming hotspots of standardising influence, conveying not only technical specifications that are favourable to some, but also ways of thinking, approaches, values.

CONCLUSION

INFLUENCE IS A TECHNIQUE AND HAS TO BE WORKED ON

It is urgent for us, the French and Europeans, to have a greater presence in this field. Careful though, it is not enough to be present, we have to deliver messages, carefully developed in advance and in an organised fashion. For the French State, it is good practice to prepare shared positions, which will then supply the embassies and the various networks at our disposal abroad (economic players, elected representatives of the French abroad, French-speaking networks, etc.); these will each be able to support positions in their own spheres. This must all be supported by a perfect knowledge of the field and the key players in contention. Influence is real work that cannot be improvised. To be effective, we have to rely on economic and strategic intelligence, as the watchword in influence is 'in advance', to identify the beginnings and weak signals of an action, a project, legislation ... (symposiums, academic articles, reports by think tanks or NGOs), or even better, generate projects ourselves; and never alone, whether we are being defensive or offensive, we need partners, allies, who, moreover, in the future, could also be competitors and adversaries in other fields, as per the second key principle of co-opetition.

THE MAIN INSTRUMENTS TO RECOGNISE

- Formatting public opinion.
- Getting into the minds of decision makers.
- Emphasis on standards, particularly the implementation of governance rules, the supreme form of influence, since we are defining the model itself.
- The attractiveness of the model, of culture or the brand: soft power.
- Reputation: naming & shaming.
- Indirect regulations: rankings, ratings, best practices...

TOOLS

- Seduction and argumentation.
- For States, development aid (tangible and intangible reconstruction) and technical co-operation.
- The action of permanent conviction: public diplomacy.
- Image: branding and rebranding (for States).
- Action on foreign elites.
- Managing networks abroad.
- Managing alliances on the principle of co-opetition.
- Action in public-private partnerships and with allies that are different from oneself.
- A professional engineering of influence connected to economic intelligence.

IDEAS OF ACTIONS TO BE DEVELOPED

Against disinformation: learning information analysis at school, through systematic questioning: who, what, why and when? This may seem simplistic, but such reflexes would avoid many of the beliefs caused by the sole appeal of certain rhetoric.

International rankings of States, standardising actions: it is up to the French authorities and experts concerned to take part fully in this, or indeed to create them. One of many examples: there is still time to do this for the successor to the World Bank's *Doing Business* ranking, the *Business Enabling Environment*, under development.

An international unifying concept: just like what sustainable development has been and the influence that it still exerts, in these troubled and fragmented times, perhaps the moment has come to reconsider one or several of the concepts of the same kind, since its variations have today probably been painted in very, very Western colours. This would be a fine challenge for Europe and/or France.

FINALLY, WHY SHOULD WE WANT TO BE INFLUENTIAL?

- To maintain our standard of living and choose our future. Behind the rules and standards, the decisions, there are the markets and, even more, ways of life.
- To be part of the changing world order: behind law and economics, there is the international competition of political, ethical and religious values.
- To keep our status (France and Europe) and have our say.
- Ultimately, to act rather than endure: influence is a POLITICAL issue.

Would we prefer to be influenced or to influence?

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