Figures of Order
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Soft Power

Transitory Thinking

Systems . Signs . Disruptions

Edited by Hans Holl and Jürgen Miller

FIGURES OF ORDER

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Soft power

Transitory thinking: Systems.Signs.Disturbances

CONTENTS

1. Soft Power – A Concept in Decline

The authors would like to thank Dirk Baecker for an important remark that helped clarify the argumentative line developed here.

Introduction

The discourse of soft power has deeply shaped Western reflections on global power. Yet the seemingly reassuring idea that political effectiveness can be exercised through cultural attractiveness, values, or symbolic presence has lost much of its explanatory force in the twenty-first century. Between the United States and China, a competition is unfolding that is defined less by images, narratives, or self-representations than by the shaping of the conditions under which access to the world becomes possible at all. Against this background, soft power no longer appears as a gentle alternative to military hard power, but as a semantic residue of a past epistemo-geopolitical order.

For decades, the United States generated a form of global contemporaneity whose media, cultural, and epistemic infrastructures were sustained by Hollywood, Silicon Valley, news agencies, and universities. Out of this constellation emerged a concept intended to capture the operation of cultural paradigms: soft power became the expression of an American modernity that seemed to radiate outward from itself.

With China, a new actor has emerged that not only questions American dominance but challenges it structurally. China pursues a fundamentally different approach: less visible, less narrative-driven, and consistently oriented toward administrative design.

The central question of power today is therefore no longer primarily which socio-political model appears more attractive, but which model defines the conditions under which connectivity, visibility, mobility, and cooperation become operationally possible.

1. Who Tells the World? Toward a Geopolitical Theory of Culture

Frédéric Martel has shown that American soft power does not consist in the exportability of a particular cultural form, but in the capacity to produce global contemporaneity. Film industries, media conglomerates, streaming platforms, digital operating systems, and universities form an ensemble that operates less through state planning than through structural omnipresence. This presence generates a specific mode of access to the world: those who inform themselves, listen to music, or participate in the cultural rituals of modernity move—often unconsciously—within infrastructures shaped by the United States. Soft power was the aesthetic surface of this deeper structural nexus.

It would, however, be reductive to claim that soft power as a cultural practice has disappeared. American films, television formats, streaming platforms, pop music, and digital popular culture continue to shape global imaginaries. The ability of the United States to render the present narratable has not vanished. Yet cultural omnipresence no longer guarantees structural steering capacity. Attractiveness generates attention, but it does not replace control over standards, infrastructures, and operative conditions.

The thesis advanced here is therefore the following: soft power persists, but it no longer operates as an ordering principle of world politics.

A perspective that recognized this shift early on can be found in the work of Vishakha Desai. She emphasizes that cultural attraction has never been a one-way flow, but has always involved mutual influence. From this angle, soft power appears not as the export of national identity, but as a circulatory process of cultural reception and adaptation. For precisely this reason, the concept loses analytical sharpness once the global order is no longer structured by clear centers and peripheries. The world in which soft power

functioned possessed a distinct epistemic and aesthetic center; the present, by contrast, is shaped by relational, situational, and frequently administratively mediated forms of power. Since China has been a decisive driver of this shift, attention must turn to a different mode of exercising power.

2. China and the Power of Conditions – From Cultural Offer to Operative World Architecture

Through the expansion of administrative regulatory systems, China pursues a logic that is only marginally mediated by culture. Over the past two decades, a system has emerged that exercises power not through attraction but through the design of environmental conditions. Science policy, technological standard-setting, urban governance technologies, digital payment systems, logistical architectures, and international cooperation protocols form an administrative world model that convinces less than it binds. It produces not images but specifications; not cultural horizons but operative conditions.

That China simultaneously stages its historical depth, invokes the continuity of its civilizational past, and mobilizes philosophical traditions—from Laozi and Mengzi to Confucius and Zhuangzi—as well as aesthetic forms such as calligraphy, painting, and poetry, does not contradict this diagnosis. These symbolic references do not constitute the primary mode of global influence. Rather, they function as cultural framing for a power model whose effectiveness lies in shaping standards, protocols, and infrastructural conditions of connectivity.

It is precisely here that the concept of soft power begins to erode. Cultural identification can no longer serve as the central resource of international politics. The present is structured less by narratives than by standards and procedures. Those who define standards shape communication; those who control supply chains shape economic relations; those who expand urban sensor systems shape

forms of social coexistence. Soft power attempts to describe this reality in terms of proximity and attractiveness—yet fades in the face of a world structured by technical architecture.

The internal tensions of American soft power become visible as its underlying conditions fracture. Three factors sustained this model for decades: the dominance of American media and information infrastructures, cultural innovative capacity, and the epistemic status of American universities as seemingly natural centers of knowledge production. These fields are fragmenting. Digital infrastructures are no longer unequivocally U.S.-centered; cultural production processes are globally distributed and hybrid; the scientific system is pluralizing and destabilizing established hierarchies. What once appeared as self-evident attractiveness must now be defended through administrative instruments—export controls, visa restrictions, sanction regimes. A paradox emerges: soft power becomes overlaid by harder measures precisely when its cultural persuasiveness declines.

3. China's Alternative Modernity – Structural Integration Rather than Representation

China does not seek to expand its power through increasing cultural attractiveness. Global recognition is replaced by global binding force. Scientific, technological, and administrative strategies converge into a comprehensive apparatus designed to shape world conditions. The Chinese model aims at structural influence: the design of epistemic spaces, the control of future technologies, the expansion of logistical architectures, and the stabilization of cooperation regimes grounded not in values but in standards. It operates beyond the dichotomy of hard and soft power—and in doing so, deprives the older vocabulary of its foundation.

Western debates reveal their blind spots when China continues to be interpreted through the categories of 1990s soft power discourse. Terms such as attractiveness, trust, or image fail to

capture layers of power that define conditions of connectivity rather than seek consent. The question of contemporary centers of power can only be addressed if framed not in terms of cultural identities, but in terms of technological and administrative ordering forms.

4. The Epistemic Shift – From Symbolic Worldviews to Technical Parameters

Operative infrastructures structure the world. Cultural representation loses its ordering function or is displaced into secondary domains. Standards, protocols, algorithms, and networks assume roles once attributed to narratives and political programs. Soft power was the cultural expression of an order grounded in the persuasive force of symbolic forms. The present, by contrast, relies on functional structuring.

Since the end of the Cold War, it appeared self-evident in the West that scientific rationality, technological innovation, and liberal institutions were not only dominant but normatively decisive. Soft power was the semantic culmination of this self-understanding. The emergence of a second epistemic center—a Chinese model structured administratively—has unsettled this order. China projects not worldviews but parameters. Decisions about the future are made less within the register of political representation than within that of technical operationality.

The return of history thus manifests not as an ideological struggle, but as a competition between different designs of reality. What matters is no longer who represents the world, but who stabilizes the horizons within which reality becomes experienceable. The future is shaped by those who define standards, control data spaces, and design procedures.

Soft power remains confined to the surface. It describes attractiveness, but fails to grasp the operative depth at which preconditions are organized. Contemporary power rests less on

consent than on the organization of conditions. It emerges through access possibilities, through infrastructures that define pathways of action.

The distinction between hard and soft power becomes unstable. The United States resorts to regulatory instruments to stabilize cultural dominance. China exercises a form of hard power that appears soft because it operates not militarily but through standardization. The geopolitical landscape is increasingly shaped by structural power—technical, impersonal, comprehensive.

5. The Epistemic Shift – From Symbolic Worldviews to Technical Parameters

This shift points to a deeper epistemic dynamic: the world is no longer structured by symbolic representations but by operative infrastructures. Standards, protocols, algorithms, and networks assume ordering functions that were once attributed to narratives, values, or political programs. Soft power was the cultural expression of an epistemic order grounded in the persuasive force of symbolic forms. The present, by contrast, relies on the effectiveness of functional structures.

This transformation is particularly visible in the epistemological field long shaped in the West by the illusion of a universal modernity. Since the end of the Cold War, it appeared self-evident that scientific rationality, technological innovation, liberal institutions, and global communication systems were not only Western-dominated but structurally derived from the Western model. Soft power was the semantic crown of this self-understanding. The emergence of a second epistemic center—a Chinese model structured administratively and organized technologically—has profoundly unsettled this order. China does not project worldviews but world parameters. It does not offer an alternative to liberal democracy; it constructs an environment in

which decisions about the future are made less in the register of political representation than in that of technical operationality.

The return of history therefore does not manifest itself as a clash of ideologies, but as a competition between different designs of reality. What matters is no longer the capacity to represent the world aesthetically, but the capacity to consolidate the technical and administrative horizons within which reality becomes experienceable. The question of who shapes the future is identical with the question of who defines standards, trains algorithms, controls data spaces, and designs procedures that structure knowledge.

Soft power cannot capture this shift because its conceptual framework remains at the level of surface phenomena. It describes political power as attractiveness, yet fails to grasp the operative depth in which the structural conditions of attractiveness are already produced. Contemporary power relies not on consent but on the creation of preconditions. It emerges through access possibilities, infrastructures that define pathways of action, and administrative apparatuses that determine how knowledge, communication, and mobility become possible.

The old distinction between hard and soft power thus becomes questionable. The United States resorts to administrative and regulatory measures—traditionally associated with hard power—to stabilize its waning cultural dominance. China, conversely, exercises a form of hard power that appears soft because it does not manifest in military intervention but in the enforcement of standards, procedures, and infrastructures. The geopolitical landscape is shaped by a structural power operating beyond the old dichotomy. This structural power is invisible, impersonal, technical —and precisely for that reason, comprehensive in its effects.

6. A Theory of Power in the Age of Infrastructure – Foucault, Arendt, Luhmann, Benjamin

Having outlined the geopolitical, infrastructural, and temporal transformations of the present, we can now turn to the theoretical question of how power itself has changed. Twentieth-century political theory was shaped by concepts oriented toward subjects, discourses, and collective capacities for action. The present shifts these axes. Four conceptual figures—Foucault, Arendt, Luhmann, and Benjamin—allow us to see that soft power was not merely a political term tied to persuasion and culture, but a historical stage of power that is now dissolving.

The theoretical depth of this transformation becomes visible in classical lines of political and social analysis. Foucault's understanding of power as dispositif—as an arrangement of possibilities, probabilities, and fields of conduct—suggests that power rarely operates as overt domination, but rather as the structuring of conditions of action. Soft power was an expression of such a dispositive form: it functioned through cultural proximity, attraction, and implicit recognition. The present, however, is marked by a form of power that no longer primarily addresses subjects, but the pathways available to them. The dispositif shifts from the discursive to the infrastructural level.

Hannah Arendt's distinction between power and domination marks a similar transition. For Arendt, power arises from collective action —the capacity of a group to shape a shared world. Domination, by contrast, belongs to the logic of apparatuses, bureaucracies, and administrative enforcement. Soft power, theoretically speaking, was a concept of power in Arendt's sense: it rested on shared worldviews and common cultural horizons. Today's geopolitical order, however, increasingly takes the form of domination—not necessarily in the sense of repression, but in the sense of procedural governance. China embodies this model in a particularly visible way: it does not offer a narrative, but a procedure. The United States, long sustained by a power-based self-understanding

rooted in cultural appeal, now responds to the erosion of that appeal through administrative measures.

Luhmann's theory of functional differentiation provides yet another analytical lens through which the erosion of soft power becomes intelligible. Soft power could only function in a world in which culture, politics, science, media, and economy operated as relatively distinct systems. Contemporary configurations of power blur these distinctions. China has developed a model that integrates science, technology, state, and industry into a highly coordinated complex. The United States, albeit less deliberately, moves in a similar direction when it restricts scientific cooperation, controls technological exports, or politicizes university partnerships. In a post-differentiated order of this kind, soft power—understood as influence through cultural attractiveness—loses its structural foundation.

Walter Benjamin's concept of the aestheticization of politics reveals the historical core of the soft power model. The United States mastered the art of presenting political power as cultural surface: as pop culture, modernity, narrative, spectacle. This aestheticization was central to the legitimization of American world order. China, by contrast, does not primarily aestheticize; it technicizes. The legitimacy of the Chinese model rests less on myth, imagery, or symbolism than on reliability, calculability, and long-term planning. Where domination becomes aesthetic, soft power emerges; where domination becomes technical, soft power recedes. In this sense, the rise of China marks not only a political but also an aesthetic rupture: soft power loses its stage.

Taken together, these four perspectives suggest that what we are witnessing is not merely the decline of soft power, but the transition to a new formation of power—one that no longer legitimizes itself through attractiveness, but through the shaping of possibilities themselves. The future of geopolitical order will not be decided by competing ideologies, but by the structures that determine who can reach whom, who can address, integrate, or

exclude whom. Soft power was the stage. Infrastructures are the new light.

7. Platform Empire vs. Administrative State – Infrastructures as Geopolitical Actors

Against this background, it becomes intelligible why contemporary geopolitics is defined less by competing political programs than by competing infrastructures. The decisive differences no longer run simply between liberal and authoritarian state forms, but between distinct modes of organizing the world. The United States operates as a platform empire whose power unfolds through visibility, communication, and the mediated self-description of the world. China is evolving into an administrative state that defines operative structures through standards, protocols, and technological prescriptions. Soft power—a concept born in an era when history was imagined as globally narratable—can no longer capture this constellation.

In such a configuration, it becomes clear that forms of power are always tied to semantic horizons that render them plausible. Soft power functioned as long as the world was conceived in terms of cultural attractiveness. Once political effectiveness is mediated through technical and administrative parameters, however, the semantics of "soft" power lose their grounding. Concepts do not disappear when they are refuted; they disappear when the world they described disappears. They persist as rhetorical afterimages—offering orientation while obscuring emerging forms of order. Soft power is such a concept: a theoretical device that has outlived its epoch and thereby risks misleading analysis.

The shift from cultural attractiveness to administratively managed conditions of access becomes particularly evident in the structure of network society itself. In a world in which social, economic, and epistemic processes are mediated through digital platforms, power migrates to the level of inclusion logics. What matters is no longer

the capacity to generate consent, but the capacity to define connectivity. Access becomes the central resource of the present—and thus the central form of political power.

The logic of administrated inclusion now shapes the structure of contemporary politics. Access no longer arises in the medium of cultural proximity, but in the medium of technical compatibility. Participation in global exchange does not require conviction; it requires compliance with operative conditions. In this respect, platform empires and administrative states resemble one another despite their institutional and ideological differences. Both produce reality through procedures—through algorithms, standards, registration systems, and connection protocols that determine who becomes visible, mobile, actionable, or epistemically effective.

Within this configuration, soft power survives only as a semantic remainder. It describes narratives of attraction, while operative reality is structured by architectures of access. These architectures form an inconspicuous yet pervasive framework that defines the scope of action available to global actors. Attractiveness becomes a rhetorical surface that conceals the fact that contemporary power lies in the organization of conditions, not in the production of desire.

Against this backdrop, soft power appears as a concept that has outlived its epoch. It remains attached to a world held together by the dominance of American cultural industries, by the relative coherence of global media spaces, and by the epistemic hegemony of Western knowledge systems. The present, by contrast, is characterized by a multipolar, technically fragmented, and administratively integrated order in which power is articulated less through narratives than through the control of functional conditions. The world is no longer seduced; it is integrated.

FREDERIC MARTEL

Soft Power Under Stress

(Interview for Figuren der Ordnung III)

Warum Martel?

Frédéric Martel gehört zu den wenigen Autoren, die den Begriff „Soft Power“ nicht nur theoretisch reflektiert, sondern empirisch vermessen haben. In Mainstream und späteren Arbeiten beschreibt er die USA nicht als Machtzentrum im klassischen geopolitischen Sinn, sondern als kulturelles Produktionsregime: Hollywood, Musikindustrie, Plattformen, Universitäten – ein Ensemble, das globale Normalität erzeugt.

Dieses Heft geht von der Annahme aus, dass sich die Bedingungen globaler Macht verschoben haben: von Attraktivität zu Infrastruktur, von Narrativ zu Standard, von Sichtbarkeit zu Zugriff. Martel widerspricht dieser Diagnose nicht frontal – aber er hält daran fest, dass kulturelle Dominanz fortbesteht.

Das folgende Gespräch markiert daher keinen Abschluss, sondern eine Parallelthese.

(Das Interview wurde in Englischer Sprache geführt)

The concept of soft power today

**Is "soft power" an outdated concept in the 21st century?
Or, to put it another way: does it still describe the current power structure of the US – or does it obscure it?**

How can one speak of soft power in a world dominated by hard power, that is, by power relations? That is precisely the question. With Xi Jinping, Putin, Hamas, and – alas – Donald Trump, the issue clearly deserves serious attention. Soft power refers to influence through seduction rather than coercion: media, culture, digital technologies, values, and so on. These are precisely the domains Donald Trump cares little about, since he believes only in power relations, lies, and violence. That said, Trump is undoubtedly a man with fascist behavior – I use the term deliberately – but the United States remains a democracy with a liberal constitution. Hollywood, Broadway, and the music and publishing industries have been affected by Trumpism (self-censorship, reorganization of media groups, etc.), yet these sectors remain relatively autonomous. Therefore, soft power still retains its full importance. The real question is: for which values? And to disseminate what?

**If soft power once meant "American attractiveness":
is attractiveness still politically relevant in a world of administrative and technological standards?**

That is exactly the question.

Would you say that the US today is trying to defend soft power rather than produce it?

It continues to produce it. One is struck by the fact that films remain overwhelmingly American worldwide, particularly in Europe. The same applies to music. For the time being, the United States remains the country that produces soft power. However, influence must be measured over time. The real question is whether, in two, three, or five years, the Trump years will translate into a decline of American soft power. This is a plausible

hypothesis. At this stage, I am not certain about the long-term cultural effects of Trumpism. But I may be mistaken.

Platform Empires

You have repeatedly described how American cultural industries created global normality. Are Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and the major platforms still in a position to define global access today?

I would not say "global normality"; I would rather say mainstream. That is the term I would use. The question one must always ask concerns cultural industries themselves: are they mainstream because they are Americanized, or are they Americanized because Americans have succeeded in producing the most powerful and effective mainstream, which other countries then consume? In other words, mainstream culture exists in India with Bollywood, in Korea with K-Pop, in Japan with anime, in Arab countries with Ramadan television series, and in Latin America with telenovelas. None of this is inherently American, even if the techniques of mainstream production are sometimes similar.

TikTok has disrupted US platform dominance for the first time. Are we witnessing the birth of a "non-Western platform empire" – or the end of the US model?

As you have seen, TikTok is now American in the United States, which means that it has effectively become part of the American model. Moreover, I believe it is crucial to distinguish between platforms and their features (algorithms, etc.) on the one hand, and content on the other. One may be on Instagram, Facebook, X, or TikTok, yet consume content that is less global than local. Borders still exist on the Internet: language, the territory in which one lives, the cultural spheres in which one evolves, and so forth. The world is not flat. But perhaps things are beginning to change?

If platforms are the new culture machines, is American soft power today more algorithmic power than cultural power?

Both.

I believe that the great strength of the United States lies in its dual domination of both the pipelines and the content. China may control the pipelines (TikTok), but it has failed – for now – to export its content. There are no Chinese global blockbusters, no globally dominant music, and very few internationally influential writers. I believe that the failure of Chinese soft power is clear at this stage. But history is not yet written.

China and the loss of American infrastructure sovereignty

The US is losing control of the infrastructure on which its soft power was based. How deep does this loss go? Is it just technology – or also symbolism, a sense of the times, a vision of the future?

At this stage, Hollywood, Broadway, and the music and publishing industries remain dominated by the United States. This does not mean that national cultures do not exist – on the contrary, they are very strong everywhere: Brazilian music in Brazil, French literature in France, German theater in Germany, Italian soft power in Italy, and so on. The problem is that when non-national culture is consumed, it is often American. Talk to ten young Europeans: they will all be able to name national artists, but when they speak to one another, they will talk only about Anglo-Saxon music, Hollywood cinema, or American or Japanese video games. That is Europe's problem: twenty-seven cultures and very little shared culture.

Do you believe that China wants to counter the US in cultural production – or is China operating according to a completely different logic of power?

This was the Chinese project that I described in detail in my book Mainstream. But fifteen years later, China has failed. It does not operate according to a different logic of power, because China is no longer communist or socialist in any meaningful sense. It is an ultra-liberal economy combined with ultra-nationalism. And this approach has failed.

There is a strong reaction to Chinese tech infrastructure in the US (CHIPS Act, export controls).Is this the moment when soft power turns into hard power?

Yes, if we are speaking of infrastructure, telecommunications, and platforms. No, if we continue to focus on creative content.

Epistemic power and science power

What does it mean for the US that China is establishing its own science and publication regimes that are no longer dependent on the West? Is an "epistemic bipolarity" emerging here?

Let us rather say that China seeks to define its publications and its science « with Chinese characteristics ». We saw what this meant during Covid. I believe that China remains infinitely more dangerous to us than the United States. Because after Trump, the US will be different; after Xi, China will be the same.

The US is increasingly relying on visa controls, technology bans, and scientific isolation. Is this still soft power – or already a kind of administrative defense mode?

It is the opposite of soft power, and it represents a loss of attractiveness. At the same time, the mere fact that there are 53.2 million immigrants in the United States (the total number of foreign-born persons residing on U.S. territory in 2023) shows that its capacity for attraction remains strong. Visas are denied, yet migrants still want to go there: very few migrants want to go to China, Cuba, or Venezuela. They still overwhelmingly want to go to the United States or to Europe, with Germany (18.2 million migrants), the United Kingdom (9.9), Spain (9.5), France (9.3), the United Arab Emirates (8.7), Canada (8.4), and Australia (8.2) ranking in that order. There are specific migration patterns concerning Saudi Arabia (13.5 million, mainly from Arab countries) and Russia (12.9 million, largely regional migration from CIS countries, that is, the former USSR). But otherwise, the majority of migrants move from the « Global South » toward the « West ». But perhaps this will change with Trump (IOM data, 2023).

The concept in transition

If you compare the present with the 1990s: Which dimension of American soft power has been irretrievably lost?

More than its ability to attract migrants or its cultural influence, I believe that the greatest loss concerns values. American values and the American Way of Life inspired admiration worldwide after 1945. Today, no one admires the United States for its values. I believe this will return, since we should not forget that Obama and Biden were elected not long ago. The Trump chapter will be closed more quickly than one might think. But the disillusionment of 2025 will undoubtedly remain.

And conversely: Which elements could the US redefine in order to remain relevant in the coming world order – beyond the nostalgic concept of soft power?

Change president!

Finally: Do we need a new term to describe the power of the US today?

A crash test.

Frédéric Martel
Journalist, author, professor at ZHdK

Interjection: How Concepts Die

Concepts are instruments of orientation. They arise because the world is too complex to be grasped without abstraction. They facilitate thought by stripping away contingency and leaving behind an operative essence. Schopenhauer once compared concepts to logarithms—condensations that reduce intellectual labor. In this efficiency lies their fragility. Concepts age. They lose their object-reality. And they die—often imperceptibly, while still in use.

The concept of soft power belongs to those semantic forms tied to the conditions of their own emergence. It originated in an epoch in which the United States was not only culturally dominant, but functioned as a seemingly natural epistemic and political center of the world. Soft power was the aesthetic narration of that dominance: the world follows not because it must, but because it wishes to. Yet this narrative now encounters a world that no longer conforms to its premises. The concept persists, while the configuration it described has fundamentally shifted. In that gap, confusion emerges: soft power appears to name what now operates differently.

Concepts rarely vanish abruptly. They fade as the world they once ordered transforms. They survive as residues of earlier thinking, continuing to circulate even as their structural conditions erode. Soft power remains attached to a model in which attractiveness functions as geopolitical capital and visibility as leverage. The present, however, is shaped by a different form of invisibility: structural power, standard-setting, administrative integration. Terms such as structural power, infrastructural power, or epistemic authority are less elegant, less rhetorically appealing—but they address the core of contemporary political reality more directly.

When obsolete concepts continue to circulate, political risks arise. Soft power sustains a sense of Western agency that is no longer

matched by operative capacity. It permits attachment to moral self-images while the effective organization of the world increasingly unfolds through technological apparatuses, administrative procedures, and global chains of functionality. The United States continues to invoke the term because it preserves the aesthetic residue of cultural universality. Europe holds on to it because abandoning it would require acknowledging structural marginalization. China rarely uses the concept—and this abstention may constitute a strategic advantage. It operates within the emerging configuration, while the West continues to speak the language of the previous one—though still not without success, as films, orchestras, theater and opera houses, television formats, and cultural institutions continue to circulate globally.

Dead concepts do not disappear. They drift through the present as shadow figures. They reassure because they suggest a world in which political power operates through persuasion. Yet contemporary reality is no longer negotiated aesthetically; it is produced administratively, technologically, infrastructurally. Soft power is the aftersound of an order that has receded—an echo that continues to exert political effects.

2. Platform Empires (USA) vs. Administrative States (China)

Elena Voss

Elena Voss is an independent analyst of technology policy and global administrative structures. Her research operates at the intersection of media infrastructures, digital governance, and geopolitical transformation processes. She studied political theory and sociology in Paris and Hong Kong and has spent several years examining the divergent functional logics of American platform economies and Chinese administrative regimes. For Figures of Order, she develops analytical miniatures that trace the points at which technological, administrative, and geopolitical power converge.

What we are witnessing are two fundamentally different modes of governance in the present — and two incompatible world models.

1. Platform Empires — The Power of User Interfaces

The United States is no longer merely a state in the classical sense. It functions as a platform complex composed of:

social media networks - Meta, TikTok USA, X

search engines - Google

operating systems - Apple, Android

digital infrastructures - AWS, Microsoft Azure

communication standards - ICANN, IETF

media conglomerates - Disney, Paramount, Netflix

global universities operating as knowledge platforms

American soft power emerged from the integration of these platforms into everyday life across the globe.

Platforms generate:

visibility

desirability

opportunities for self-staging

narrative spaces

cultural presence

A platform empire does not require territorial control; it requires users.

Its political instruments are:

content moderation

algorithmic visibility

control over information flows

management of attention

standardization of communication formats

Its territory is not geographic, but symbolic and interface-based.

2. Administrative States — The Power of Protocols

China, by contrast, is constructing a global power architecture grounded not in user interfaces, but in administrative processes:

5G/6G technical standards

logistical chains and infrastructural nodes (ports, customs regimes)

digital payment systems (Alipay, WeChat Pay — expanding globally)

technical norm-setting bodies (TC260, international ISO cooperation)

science policy and global talent recruitment

state-supported industrial consortia

AI governance standards

urban administrative technologies

The administrative state does not operate through images, but through protocols. Not through narratives, but through regulatory schemes. Not through users, but through regimes.

Its political logic can be summarized as follows:

If you trade with us, you operate within our standards.
If you operate within our standards, you operate within our future.

The administrative state expands not culturally, but administratively.

3. The Non-Translatability of the Two Models

The decisive point is this: platform empires and administrative states are structurally incompatible.

- The platform empire operates through visibility; the administrative state through functionality.
- The platform empire depends on user attachment; the administrative state on protocol compliance.
- The platform empire produces cultures; the administrative state produces deadlines, norms, and procedures.
- The platform empire is chaotic and pluralistic; the administrative state is coherent and hierarchical.
- The platform empire seeks to render the world imageable; the administrative state seeks to render it calculable.

Soft power was a concept derived from the platform model. Yet the emerging world order is increasingly shaped by administrative logics. The world is no longer a stage (platform), but a system of conduits, standards, and procedures (administration).

4. Conclusion: The Collapse of the Soft Power Concept

Within the logic of platform empires, soft power is overdetermined — reduced to pure visibility.
Within the logic of administrative states, it is underdetermined — replaced by functional power rather than cultural influence.

Between platform empire and administrative state, there is no longer analytical space for soft power. What remains are:

infrastructure policy

standard-setting

knowledge production

regime formation

data power

system cooperation

The world is no longer seduced. It is integrated. This marks the end of soft power.

Alexandra Christou, *Ohne Titel, o.J.*

Case Studies

Platform Empires vs. Administrative States — Concrete Configurations

Each case study functions as a window into a larger power model.

Case Study 1: TikTok — The Platform as Geopolitical Zone

TikTok is not an export of Chinese culture. It is an export of Chinese functional logic into the core of the American platform empire.

It is not an "Asian YouTube," but the first global space in which a non-American system of algorithmic visibility disrupts Western cultural grammar.

The critical issue is not video content, but the architecture of attention. The central resource of American power — control over global platforms — is perforated. Not through ideology, but through interface design.

The American response is telling: visa restrictions, forced divestments, security legislation — the instruments of the administrative state deployed by a platform empire under threat.

TikTok demonstrates that platform power is not soft power. It is geopolitical infrastructure.

It is the first arena in which platform empire and administrative state mirror and confront one another — not with tanks, but with protocols, data flows, and ownership structures.

Plattformimperium (USA)	Verwaltungsstaat (China)
kontrolliert Aufmerksamkeitsräume	kontrolliert Funktionsräume
algorithmische Sichtbarkeit als Macht	algorithmische Steuerung als Governance
Angst vor Kontrollverlust	strategische Geduld
reagiert mit Regulierungen	agiert über Infrastrukturdurchsetzung
TikTok = Fremdkörper	TikTok = Testlabor globaler Anschlussfähigkeit

Case Study 2: Belt and Road — The World as Administrative Act

Belt and Road is not what it was often assumed to be in Western discourse: not a symbolic geopolitical mega-project, not a colonial repetition in Asian form.

It is something structurally more contemporary: a logistical rewriting of the world, an administrative reconfiguration of global connectivity.

Every agreement, every port, every railway line is less a construction project than a procedural integration.
To dock at a Belt and Road node is to dock into a Chinese temporal regime, a customs regime, a standards regime.

Power manifests not in concrete, but in forms and procedures.

Belt and Road is the first political-administrative world machine:
not an empire of images, but an empire of operations.

Infrastruktur als Erzählung (USA/Westen)	Infrastruktur als Verfahren (China)
Hafen = Symbol	Hafen = Protokoll
Vertrag = Diplomatie	Vertrag = Integration in Verwaltungslogik
Infrastruktur = Image	Infrastruktur = Machtarchitektur
lineare Großprojekte	modulare Anschlussräume
Softpower-Signale	Anschlusszwang durch Standards

Case Study 3: Visa Regimes — Power as Mobility Governance

The visa is one of the most underestimated geopolitical instruments of our time.

It regulates not only who may travel where, but who gains access to which future.

The United States has transformed the visa into a security instrument — a filter for talent, data, and technological transfer.
China deploys visas as instruments of invitation: gateways to scientific cooperation, tools of talent accumulation, components of long-term integration strategies.

Both models reveal the same insight: mobility is the new frontier.

US-Logik (restriktiv)	China-Logik (integrativ)
Visum = Sicherheitsbarriere	Visum = Bindungseinladung
Ausschluss	Rekrutierung
talent drain verhindern	talent gravity erzeugen
Technologie schützen	Technologie anziehen
Softpower-Abschottung	Long-term-Integration

Visas are not administrative side notes. They are political interfaces through which epistemic and technological order is structured.

Case Study 4: Science Power — Who Produces the Future?

The decisive geopolitical question today is not who controls borders, but who controls the epistemic production centers of the world.

China is building parallel scientific systems: its own journals, rankings, citation economies.
The United States responds with decoupling, export controls, and risk bureaucracies.

Where culture once functioned as the primary site of power, laboratories, data centers, and standardization authorities now occupy that position.

Science power constitutes the new battlefield — largely invisible, yet structurally comprehensive.

It is here that the technological thinkability and social realizability of the future are determined.

US-Science-Power (reaktiv)	China-Science-Power (expansiv)
Abschottung	Akkumulation
Exportkontrolle	Inhouse-Standardisierung
Visa-Restriktion	Talent-Ökonomie
Schutz der Führungsrolle	Aufbau eines parallelen Epistemes
Angst vor Kontrollverlust	Investition in epistemische Souveränität

Case Study 5: The CHIPS Act — When the Platform Empire Learns Bureaucracy

The CHIPS Act may be one of the most revealing documents of the present.

For the first time, the American platform empire adopts the instruments of its counterpart: subsidies, supply-chain management, export restrictions.

This is not soft power. It is the vocabulary of the administrative state.

Through administrative measures, the United States attempts to preserve technological leadership whose former basis — monopoly over the future — has eroded.

The CHIPS Act is not a liberation strategy. It is a moment of self-statization.
It demonstrates how unstable platform power becomes once it is no longer sustained by unchallenged global market dominance.

Plattformimperium (alt)	Plattformimperium (neu)
freie Märkte	geschützte Märkte
Innovation	Regulierung
Softpower-Sicherheit	Verwaltungszwang
globale Durchlässigkeit	nationale Abschottung
Vertrauen in Silicon Valley	Misstrauen + Staatsintervention

From Infrastructures to Material Structure

The preceding analyses have described power in terms of platforms, standards, and administrative regimes. They examined how contemporary order is shaped through infrastructures and protocols rather than narratives.

Yet these structures do not remain abstract. They sediment in bodies, materials, and spatial relations. Power does not only organize systems; it also organizes perception, resistance, and form.

The following artistic position does not illustrate these structures. It translates them into material intensity. Zhou Jian's work operates where infrastructure becomes pressure, where protocol becomes incision, where order condenses into matter.

Zhou Jian, *Reflection 04, woodcut, chinese ink, oil, 2014*

Zhou Jian

Zhou Jian is neither a transcultural intermediary nor a position suspended between aesthetic traditions. His practice is a procedure of condensation. Trained at the China Academy of Art and the Royal College of Art in London, he combines printmaking precision with spatial intervention. What matters, however, is not the biographical dual trajectory, but the operative structure of his work: improvisation, rationalization, renewed destabilization.

Affect does not appear here as expression, but as material. It is released, restrained, structured—and then returned to instability. The work emerges from a field of tension between gesture and control.

Zhou Jian operates at the intersection of drawing, woodcut, and space. The pictorial surface stores the act of its own production. Line is not a contouring device, but an energetic instrument. It cuts, incises, presses itself across the surface, condenses into black knots

Zhou Jian, *Walk into the Rain, 133x72cm, woodcut pencil, 2014*

or dissolves into aqueous transitions. In the woodcut, the resistance of the material becomes visible: the incision is not illustration, but event. Printing becomes a physical assertion. The surface bears traces of force.

Color does not function decoratively, but eruptively. Deep blacks, earthy browns, fractured layers of red or blue stand against raw, untreated zones. Pigment absorbs light; it does not radiate. It marks intensity, not illusion. Color organizes tension, not spatial depth.

The figure—when it appears—is not a stable body but the result of condensation. Anatomical indications dissolve into overlaps, smears, incision lines. The body emerges from energy rather than contour. Volume is suggested and simultaneously undermined. Boundaries remain porous.

Characteristic is the centered composition. Energy gathers in a core zone, while the periphery remains open or fragmentary. The image organizes itself from within. The center is not a symbol, but a pressure point.

Materiality is constitutive. Wood, charcoal, water, wall—they interact directly. Moisture causes pigment to bleed; cuts fracture the surface; layering generates resistance. The work is not representation but physical process. It does not depict structure—it performs it.

In installation-based works, this principle extends into space. The wall does not function as a neutral support, but as a resonant body. Axes of line, zones of condensation, and voids structure the movement of the viewer. Space is not staged, but activated. The work is not a closed object, but a field of forces.

Zhou Jian transforms expressive means into a procedure of self-organization. Gesture remains visible, yet regulated. Improvisation is analyzed. Affect is not exhibited, but transferred into structure.

Order does not arise through external framing, but through the regulation of energy within the material itself.

In this sense, Zhou Jian is not a representative of an expressive tradition, but an artist of structural intensity. His works investigate how form emerges from resistance—and how the body becomes legible as a zone of material condensation.

Zhou Jian, *Reflection, 39x39cm, woodcut chinese ink, 2014*

Clarification: Time, Effectiveness, and the Limits of Soft Power

Issue III of Figures of Order takes the concept of soft power as a starting point for reflecting on forms of political effectiveness that operate without coercion, violence, or direct intervention. Soft power designates modes of influence that do not rely on enforcement, but on attractiveness, cultural evidence, and narrative attachment. For a long time, it functioned as a corrective to hard—often military—power: a subtler, less destructive alternative to interventionist politics.

In the present political constellation, however, a structural limit of soft power becomes visible. As a form of power that operates through attention and visibility, it unfolds its effectiveness primarily where political processes are event-driven, accelerated, and symbolically mediated. Where duration, infrastructures, and long-term dependencies become decisive, soft power loses its supporting medium. Attractiveness fades when endurance becomes the determining factor.

This observation does not imply that only hard power can now claim relevance. Rather, it demands a shift in perspective: away from the question of how influence is exercised, toward the question within which temporal regime political effectiveness emerges. The decisive issue is no longer the instrument, but the order of time in which instruments gain or lose their force.

The following essay begins precisely at this point. It does not seek to contribute directly to the soft power debate in a narrow sense. Instead, it offers a theoretical deepening of the problem that becomes visible in the increasing inadequacy of the concept. Its point of departure is the observation that since modernity, political theory has largely tied effectiveness to action, decision, and intervention. Responsibility appears as readiness to intervene; non-

action as deficiency. In the present, this logic has condensed into a powerful imperative of intervention.

Against this background, the essay sketches a different political rationality: a theory of waiting—of suspension. Why a theory? Because we assume that this terrain remains underdeveloped. Waiting has often been described empirically or phenomenologically, but rarely conceptualized as an autonomous political rationality. We do not understand waiting as passivity or delay, but as a distinct form of political practice. Non-action is conceived as a demanding competence—one that does not operate at the level of the event, but at the level of the conditions of the event: duration and threshold, expectation and reversibility. Effectiveness, as a temporally conditioned phenomenon, belongs to process rather than to action, to framing rather than to decision.

Within this perspective, the role of political apparatuses must also be reconsidered. Administration, procedures, and institutions appear not as the opposite of politics, but as its precondition. By assuming the management of the present, they create the temporal distance necessary to prevent the future from being foreclosed by premature action. Non-action thus becomes a sovereign second-order practice—not the refusal of responsibility, but its temporal condensation.

The essay forms part of a larger theoretical project (Elements of a Theory of Waiting), whose elaboration begins here. Within Figures of Order, intermediate stages of this line of thought appear as essays and reflections—less as answers than as displacements. They extend the question of soft power beyond itself, toward a more fundamental inquiry into time, effectiveness, and political responsibility.

4. Elements of a Theory of Waiting

Non-Action as Political Competence

Jürgen Miller

I. Soft Power and the Exhaustion of the Intervention Paradigm

The debate on soft power has revealed a blind spot in political theory. It attempted to explain effectiveness beyond coercion and violence—through attractiveness, cultural evidence, narrative attachment. Yet the more closely this form of political influence is examined, the clearer its temporal limitation becomes. Soft power operates in the medium of attention, visibility, and event. It presupposes presence, repetition, resonance. Where duration, path dependency, and irreversibility become decisive political variables, it loses its sustaining layer.

This insight initially leads to comparative explanations: to the assumption that other political orders operate according to different temporal logics, that they cultivate forms of effectiveness not grounded in intervention. Such comparisons are heuristically productive, yet limited. They describe differences in practice, not the temporal order from which those differences emerge.

The present essay therefore begins elsewhere. It does not take the soft power debate as the starting point for an alternative strategy, but as a symptom of a deeper problem: the modern imperative of action itself. The question is not who acts differently, but under what conditions action appears necessary at all—and when non-action becomes the decisive form of political effectiveness.

II. The Intervention Imperative of Political Modernity

Political modernity has systematically bound effectiveness to intervention. Responsibility appears as readiness to intervene;

politics as reaction to events; time as a scarce resource that must be translated into decisions. Not to act generates justificatory pressure; waiting appears morally suspect. In the present, this logic has condensed into an almost total intervention imperative in which political, humanitarian, and economic reasoning converge.

Within this paradigm, politics is primarily understood as the management of the given. Problems appear as deviations requiring measures; time as something to be used; the future as an extension of the present. Intervention produces clarity—but at the price of closing possibilities before they become legible.

A theory of waiting begins here without formulating a counter-morality. It does not propose an ethics of passivity, but a different temporal order of political rationality. Waiting appears not as delay, but as an autonomous mode of effectiveness. To wait means to keep situations open rather than closing them; to endure indeterminacy rather than prematurely fixing it; to suspend decision as long as its necessity is not structurally given.

Effectiveness thus shifts from act to trajectory, from event to duration, from decision to framework.

III. Non-Action as an Epistemic Practice

This shift concerns not only political action, but political knowledge. The ubiquitous imperative to act narrows perceptual capacity. Where politics is permanently oriented toward intervention, decision, and reaction, the political is processed—but no longer perceived. Action produces effects, while simultaneously blocking certain forms of seeing.

Non-action—understood as deliberate waiting, suspension, and keeping open—is therefore not merely an alternative strategy, but an epistemic condition of political knowledge. Those who act in order to solve see problems; those who wait in order to understand see constellations. Non-action shifts the focus from What should

be done? to What is occurring?—and further to What becomes possible if we do not intervene immediately?

At this point, Simone Weil's thought becomes central. When she describes waiting as method—as the lucid apprehension of irresolvability, as sustained attention without hope for immediate solution—she articulates an epistemic posture decisive for political theory. Attention, in her sense, is not contemplation but epistemic restraint: the refusal to translate the real prematurely into options for action.

This posture is not moralistic, but structurally demanding. It requires enduring uncertainty, refraining from immediately converting responsibility into activity, and temporally delimiting effectiveness. Precisely therein lies its political productivity.

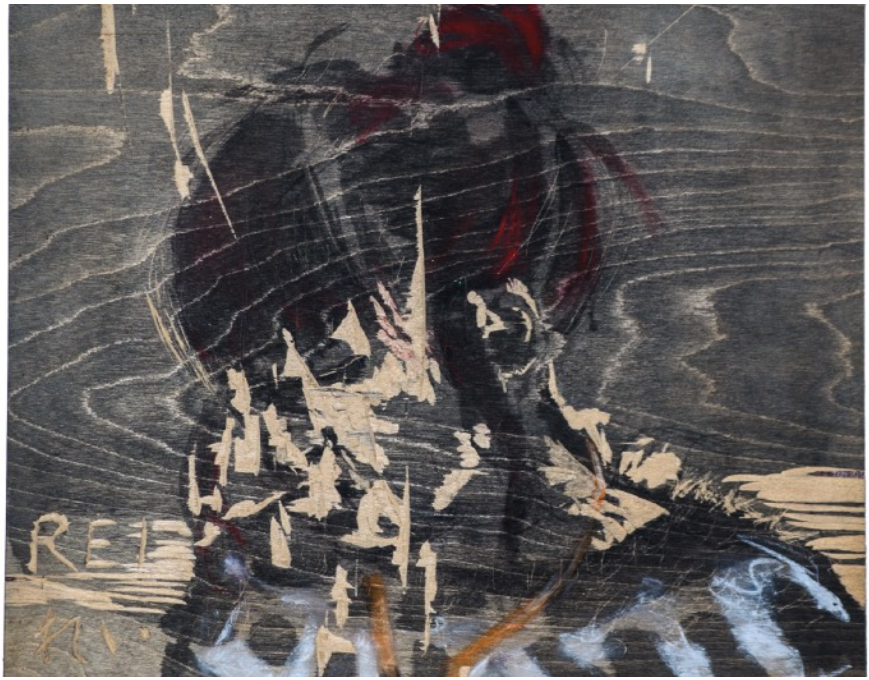
IV. Management and Future: The Guiding Paradox of Politics

Politics operates under a structural double bind. On the one hand, it is management: the administration of the social, legal, and institutional real. This dimension is unavoidable. Without it, order disintegrates. On the other hand, politics is always also the shaping of the future—the future that will arrive as present. Interventions stabilize the now, but simultaneously fix futures irreversibly.

The paradox lies in the fact that the very actions that secure order may destroy possibility. Modern political rationality tends to resolve this paradox one-sidedly—in favor of management. The future then appears as the implicit prolongation of the present.

A theory of waiting renders this paradox visible and operable. Non-action is not an alternative to management, but its complement on a higher level of order. Apparatuses assume continuous action; they absorb urgency and stabilize procedures. Only this relief enables another political practice: the capacity not to intervene, even when intervention would be possible.

Non-action thus becomes a form of sovereignty—not as decisionist power, but as temporal competence. Sovereign is not the one who decides at any moment, but the one who can decide without having to.



Zhou Jian, *Reflection 03*, *40x36cm, woodcut chinese ink pastell, 2014*

V. Effectiveness Without Appropriation

Daoist thought offers here not an alternative politics, but a processual ontology of effectiveness. Effectiveness does not necessarily arise from intervention, but from attunement to

trajectories; order not from imposition, but from alignment with tendencies. What matters is not the decision itself, but the moment at which decision becomes unavoidable.

From this perspective, non-action appears not as absence, but as a highly demanding practice: a work on tempo, threshold, reversibility, and attribution. Politics does not act upon the event, but upon the conditions of the event.

VI. Outlook

This essay presents itself as a theoretical condensation of a broader project. It does not develop a complete system, but marks a path of thought: away from the primacy of intervention toward a political theory of time. Within this framework, non-action appears not as deficiency, but as a condition of responsibility. Politics demonstrates its highest competence not in appropriation, but in renunciation—where such renunciation is possible.

It is not waiting that requires justification, but intervention.
It is not delay that demands explanation, but the compulsion to decide.

Zhou Jian Born in Hesitating (Merrygoround) Size165cmx120cm woodcut
Chinese ink 2012-2014

Two Modes of Cultural Efficacy

Figures of Waiting — Artistic Positions in Figures of Order III
Hans Holl

If soft power begins to lose its explanatory force, the question of cultural efficacy shifts accordingly. The artistic positions assembled here do not comment on geopolitical conditions. They investigate the temporal form in which power is experienced today: suspension, postponement, condensation.

Between platform empire and administrative state, no space of persuasion emerges—only a space of duration. Within this space, waiting becomes the central figure.

Zhou Jian works through internal condensation.
Christou stages social standstill.

Both mark a zone in which efficacy no longer lies in the event, but in persistence.

The works presented here are not illustrations of political or theoretical arguments. They operate as autonomous figurations of time—visual investigations of waiting in different modes.

A. Christou

The series of street scenes by A. Christou, presented here for the first time, unfolds within a tension between expressive figuration and social typology. Saturated color, emphatically drawn contours, and compressed bodily volumes suggest an affinity with early twentieth-century positions. Formally, her work resonates with traditions of Expressionism—yet without adopting its subjective pathos—and it brushes against the sobriety of interwar New Objectivity without embracing its detached austerity.

Alexandra Christou, untitled, o.J.

What emerges instead is a hybrid visual language that deploys expressive means in order to analyze social order.

The fractured naturalism of the figures recalls Edvard Munch, particularly in the use of deformation as a mode of intensification. Yet where Munch dramatizes interiority, Christou remains controlled. Distortion does not serve existential escalation but structural legibility. Shoulders, hands, hips are exaggerated; volume is condensed. The body carries social weight, not metaphysical anxiety.

Unlike historical Expressionism, Christou's painting does not aim at subjective ecstasy, urban nervousness, or existential extremity. Her figures do not scream; they do not erupt. Deformation functions not as psychological amplification but as structural exposure. Bodies are compacted, shoulders broadened, hands enlarged—without interior drama being staged.

A comparison with Max Beckmann further clarifies this distinction. Beckmann's figures are embedded in symbolically charged spatial structures; the space itself is metaphorically overdetermined. Christou, by contrast, radically reduces the

background. Perspective is minimized, architecture withdrawn, depth illusion flattened. Space does not function as allegory but as neutralized stage. Place becomes condition.

Stylistically, Street Life operates through an intensely fractured naturalism. Anatomies remain recognizable, yet they are displaced, compressed, heavy. This proximity to expressive figuration recalls the material corporeality of Chaim Soutine more than expressionist pathos painting. Yet Christou avoids painterly dissolution. Contours remain firm, composition controlled, color fields clearly articulated.

The individual is reduced to a kind of role. Her figures appear less as portraits than as recurring constellations of urban life.

Formally decisive is the treatment of space. Perspective depth is minimized; backgrounds appear as color fields or divided zones. This reduction produces placelessness: the street is not presented as concrete topography but as structural condition. There is no nocturnal milieu, no dramatic lighting. Illumination remains even, undramatized, almost indifferent. As a result, focus shifts entirely to posture, gaze, and positioning.

Color oscillates between intensity and artificiality. Saturated yellows, reds, and blues coexist with chalky, lightened skin tones. Shadows do not model illusionistically but mark volume summarily. Contours remain visible, at times accentuated. The figure asserts itself against space not through integration but through separation. Surface replaces atmosphere.

From this combination emerges a visual language that cannot be clearly assigned either to Expressionism or to Social Realism. Rather, Christou employs expressive means to examine social micro-orders. Cars, telephones, seating arrangements function as signs of discreet power relations. There are no dramatic conflicts, only routinized arrangements.

Here the theoretical horizon of soft power becomes relevant. Power appears not as repressive event but as habit. It operates through regimes of visibility, through bodily discipline, through

spatial placement. Who sits, who stands, who observes, who is exposed—these seemingly minor distinctions stabilize hierarchies. The figures in this series do not act; they are positioned.

Christou's painting thus presents public space as quietly regulated terrain. No overt violence, no explicit accusation. Instead, an order that sediments through repetition. The formal rigor—flattened background, pronounced contour, fractured anatomy—functions as visual analogue of this structure: stable, persistent, scarcely spectacular. It is precisely in this unspectacular quality that its political dimension unfolds.

5. Shakespeare, Theatre, and the Time of Power

Andrea Gaston

Posterity has turned Shakespeare into a classic. His plays are regarded as modern myths; *Hamlet* has become a cipher: for procrastination, for the tension between the compulsion to act and reflection, for psychological and familial conflict. Yet these readings reveal more about later needs of reception than about the historical function of Shakespeare's theatre.

For his contemporaries, Shakespeare was not a timeless author but a dramatist and theatre practitioner intensely oriented toward the present. His plays were not read (like the "closed plays" circulating at the time) but seen. The separation between text and performance familiar to the modern concept of literature did not exist. The theatre was a site of presence, a public space in which political, social, and dynastic conflicts were not merely represented but brought into appearance. The plays were alive — and they were conscious of their own vitality, of their intervention in and entanglement with political reality.

Shakespeare's theatre was thus not a place of distance from reality but of its condensation. The dramatic texts that have come down to us are not allegories but open textual bodies into which historical reality has entered and may continue to enter.

In referring to this, we inevitably recall Carl Schmitt and his essay *Hamlet or Hecuba*, in which he formulated this observation with precision. In *Hamlet*, the mythic material underlying the plot is decisively and repeatedly fractured. The action stalls; the moment of decision is deferred — not because the hero hesitates, but because the political order capable of sustaining a sovereign decision has already been damaged.

Hamlet is not an indecisive figure by virtue of his character. He is a figure situated within a condition in which decision has lost its self-evidence and, owing to political circumstances, can no longer simply be executed. The famous — and all too often psychologically interpreted — delay is a structural experience of political time. Time is out of joint — and the theatre becomes the place where this desynchronization becomes visible.

Yet the political significance of Shakespeare's stage does not end with this diagnosis. What is decisive is how theatre brings this reality into appearance: the stage is not a space of intervention but of suspension. Action is displayed and exposed. Decisions are not taken, because on stage they cannot be taken — or because the external danger would be too great if they were. Action is prepared, postponed, or experienced as impossible. The audience is placed in a posture of attentiveness, of political self-assurance. This is far removed from instruction or exhortation of any kind. Theatre cannot produce solutions — it produces time.

At this point a connection to modern aesthetic theory becomes visible, particularly to Friedrich Schiller. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller describes play as a state of disinterestedness in which compulsion and utility are suspended. Play signifies freedom from immediate purposiveness. Precisely therein lies its political relevance: in play, interests become visible without being enforceable, because we operate on the level of free play.

A glance toward Walter Benjamin shifts this perspective once more. In his analysis of the Baroque tragic drama, history appears as a condition rather than an open field of action and decision. Power manifests as a system of signs, as ceremonial form, as pathos — and simultaneously as a phenomenon of decay. The political emerges as allegory. Rule becomes visible insofar as it solidifies in symbols, rituals, and repetitions — and thereby reveals its fragility.

From this vantage point, theatrical suspension is both a space of freedom (Schiller) and a historical form of time: a public pause in which political order becomes legible because it binds itself in signs.

In this sense, Shakespeare's stage may be read as a space of such play of interests. Power, violence, guilt, and sovereignty appear without being immediately executed. Theatre transforms political conflicts into a form in which they become observable, experienceable, and negotiable — suspended, as it were, from the compulsion to act. It is a public space in which politics appears without its executive command.

This function of theatre predates modernity. Ancient drama was not an entertainment medium but part of the political public sphere. Tragedies negotiated guilt, law, and violence not outside the polis but within it — before the eyes of its citizens. There too, theatre was less a site of solutions than one of exposition. Reality was transferred into a form in which it could be collectively perceived, initiating a process of shaping and affecting the spectators' reality (catharsis).

Shakespeare stands within this lineage. His plays intervene without seeking to influence political decisions; they intervene by suspending the compulsion to decide. They create a space in which power becomes visible, shows itself. Theatre operates here through presence, representation, reflection; it closes nothing, acting instead through repetition and through its very unfinishability.

In this sense, Shakespeare may be read as a producer of an early form of soft power — though one not based on attractiveness or identification. His efficacy arises from duration, from the sustained return of the same conflicts in ever-varied forms. The stage binds attention but does not prescribe direction. It organizes time by marking action as an option rather than a necessity.

This function of the stage as a public temporal space can be traced into the present. An exemplary case is Heiner Müller's rewriting and staging of *Hamlet* in 1989/90: begun before the fall of the Berlin Wall, premiered in reunified Germany. In this process, history entered theatrical work both as material and, more strikingly and unexpectedly, as rupture of time. The actors left the stage, appeared on Alexanderplatz, spoke to those whose protests accelerated the political process — theatre here did not become intervention but public presence at a moment of open futurity.

From the perspective of *Figures of Order III*, Shakespeare thus appears as an early figure of a form of power grounded not in decision but in duration. His stage organizes time rather than compelling action. The irruption of reality shatters myth — yet it opens a new space of political efficacy: beyond intervention, in the mode of play, presence, and waiting as a productive form of action.

The aesthetic suspension made possible by theatre finds its political counterpart in diplomacy: it too is a practice of postponement, translation, and temporal mediation. What occurs when this form of time is no longer politically available is explored in the following essay.

6. The End of Diplomacy

Miriam Klose

The War in Ukraine as a Rupture in a Conversation-Based World Order

What has been unfolding since 2022 is more than a war in Europe. It marks a rupture in the semantic and operational foundations of twentieth-century international politics. The war in Ukraine represents a turning point at which diplomacy does not simply fail, but fails by being actively suspended — morally delegitimized, strategically narrowed, communicatively replaced by sanctions, weapons deliveries, and continuous media address.

Historically, diplomacy — from Metternich to Helsinki — understood itself as a technique for managing conflict between adversaries, not as an instrument among moral equals. Precisely the burden of speaking with the actor identified as responsible formed its core. That burden has disappeared. The structural impossibility of speaking with the actor marked as responsible, or of seriously engaging with his thinking, marks a geopolitical rupture of considerable magnitude. With Vladimir Putin, negotiation no longer takes place; signals are sent. Speech is replaced by address; instead of the arduous attempt to understand the other, there is classification.

This signals a shift in political paradigm: diplomacy is replaced by morality, understanding by a perpetuated attribution, strategy counts less than posture. The classical assumption that stability emerges from calculable antagonism is abandoned in favor of a politics of unconditionality. Those who do not speak still communicate — but only through transmissions: weapons packages, red lines, media narratives, symbolic summits without a counterpart.

It is here that the concept of soft power touches its paradoxical core. Soft power once meant the capacity to exert influence

through attractiveness, translation, and institutional inclusion. In the present configuration, it becomes a normative power without a dialogical dimension: values instead of negotiation, publicity instead of diplomacy, moral clarity instead of strategic ambiguity. The result is not a depoliticization of conflict but its sacralization.

For Figures of Order, this raises a central question: What becomes of world politics when diplomacy is no longer understood as the practice of enduring alterity, but as an impermissible relativization of one's own position? From this perspective, the war in Ukraine appears as an epistemic rupture of geopolitical significance — as the end of a world in which speaking with the enemy was considered a precondition of politics rather than its betrayal.

The reflections gathered in this volume approach this rupture not normatively but analytically: as a shift from politics to morality, from diplomacy to sign warfare, from understanding to performance. The intention here is not to relativize — but to understand what is at stake when conversation itself becomes taboo.

Moral Non-Negotiability and the Loss of Political Time

Diplomacy presupposes a fundamental condition: the recognition of the counterpart as a negotiable actor. This recognition is a functional assumption. It does not imply agreement or legitimation, but it assumes that conflicts are, in principle, translatable into a temporal form of mediation. Where this assumption disappears, diplomacy ends — factually and structurally.

The current disappearance of diplomatic options is therefore not primarily a consequence of escalating conflict; it expresses a deeper transformation: the erosion of the temporal form in which politics could be conceived as negotiation. Diplomacy has always been a practice of waiting — of postponement, delay, controlled indeterminacy. It relied on the idea that time transforms conflicts, clarifies interests, cools escalation. That temporal form has eroded.

The relationship between Russia and Ukraine offers a paradigmatic example. Long before the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Western discourse had shifted from an interest-based to a normative framing. Questions of security policy — such as the gradual integration of Eastern European states into Western institutions — were increasingly coded morally. Divergent interests were no longer treated as negotiable; they were deemed illegitimate.

With the Crimea crisis, a semantic threshold was crossed. Russia became a rule-breaker; it lost the status of a problematic political actor. Political language shifted accordingly: it was no longer about interests, but about guilt. The Minsk agreements of 2014/15 represent a transitional state in this regard: formally diplomatic, factually already hollowed out. They were less the expression of a shared will to mediate than an attempt to gain time — yet few still believed in time's transformative power.

This development cannot be reduced to individual decisions or actors. It is a structural transformation. The West increasingly understands itself as the (last) bearer of universal values — democracy, freedom, human rights — and thus as a morally privileged order. From this self-description follows an implicit claim to exclusive validity. Those who believe they speak for humanity cannot wait. Diplomacy appears not as a political virtue, but as a dangerous delay.

Under such conditions, negotiability itself becomes delegitimized. One does not negotiate with actors marked as criminal, illegitimate, or morally unaccountable. This logic does not apply only to Russia. It was also evident in the European and transatlantic experience of Donald Trump's presidency.

The diplomatic contortions of European states in dealing with a U.S. president perceived as unpredictable, norm-breaking, and institutionally destructive made visible how deeply diplomacy had already been hollowed out from within. Conversations no longer served mediation, but damage control. Trust was replaced by

improvisation; reliability by permanent alertness. Here too, no one waited — they reacted.

This experience is crucial because it shows that the end of diplomacy is not an East–West problem, nor a special case of authoritarian systems. It is a symptom of Western power relations themselves. Where politics understands itself as morally without alternative, it loses its capacity for temporal self-limitation. Non-action appears as failure; waiting as capitulation.

This transformation also deprives soft power of its foundations. Persuasion through the quality of offer — through attractiveness, institutional openness, the promise of better orders — requires time. It presupposes that others can choose, approach gradually, hesitate. Where moral evidence replaces offering, there is nothing left to persuade. There remains only assent or rejection.

Diplomacy was the political practice of this open time. It allowed differences to endure without immediately deciding them. It operated in the mode of the not-yet. Its end therefore marks not merely the loss of an instrument, but the loss of a temporal competence. Under these conditions, politics knows only intervention or administration, escalation or stagnation.

In the context of Figures of Order III, the end of diplomacy thus appears as the loss of a crucial intermediate space. The capacity to wait — not out of weakness, but out of judgment — is discredited. In its place emerges a politics of permanent present, in which every delay counts as moral failure.

Perhaps the deeper crisis of the present lies not in insufficient negotiation, but in the refusal to accept time itself as a political medium. Where politics can no longer wait, it loses the capacity for mediation. Diplomacy does not end because conflicts are insoluble. Diplomacy ends where the ability to endure time as a political medium disappears.

Diplomacy and Intervention: Two Political Time Regimes

Diplomacy and intervention differ not primarily in their instruments, but in their relation to time. Diplomacy is a political practice of extended time. It assumes that conflicts need not be decided immediately, but can be transferred into processes of delay, repetition, and revision. Its effectiveness rests on the assumption that time itself is politically productive: that interests clarify, costs become visible, positions shift. Diplomacy operates in the mode of the not-yet. It accepts uncertainty, ambiguity, and provisional solutions. Precisely therein lies its rationality. It renounces moral certainty in favor of stability over time.

Intervention, by contrast, is bound to the compulsion of the present. It operates under the premise that time is scarce, dangerous, or morally unavailable. Action appears not as one option among others, but as obligation. Every delay counts as complicity; every hesitation as weakness. Intervention replaces the openness of diplomatic time with the urgency of the now. It closes processes rather than keeping them open and produces irreversible commitments where diplomacy relies on reversibility. In this sense, the transition from diplomacy to intervention marks not merely a strategic shift, but a transformation of temporal regime: from politics as negotiation over duration to politics as morally charged reaction in the moment.

Notes / Historical Reference Points

(for footnotes or marginalia)

Crimea 2014: shift from interest-based to guilt-based semantics; beginning of systematic delegitimization of Russian negotiation positions.

Minsk Agreements I & II (2014/15): formal diplomacy amid eroding belief in the transformative power of time.

NATO rhetoric since the 2000s: moralization of security discourse ("open door," community of values).

EU–USA 2017–2021: diplomacy reduced to crisis management vis-à-vis a normatively unpredictable partner; loss of strategic patience.

After Distinction

The final contributions of this issue deliberately resist clear classification. They no longer stand unequivocally under a rubric, but mark a threshold. What is negotiated here is not another field of political efficacy, but the erosion of those distinctions on which political orientation long depended.

If soft power fades as a concept, this is less because it is replaced by other forms of power than because the semantic, diplomatic, and symbolic procedures through which political situations became legible have themselves eroded. Diplomacy does not end abruptly; it becomes indistinguishable. Influence does not disappear; it disperses. Power does not become invisible—it becomes difficult to assign.

The texts in this closing zone do not describe a new condition, but a condition without transition. They show how political order no longer presents itself as a clear alternative between war and peace, intervention and restraint, decision and waiting. Instead, a zone of permanent ambiguity emerges in which action is no longer clearly recognizable as action, and non-action no longer clearly recognizable as renunciation.

In doing so, these contributions touch a point at which the order of this issue itself becomes fragile. The categories that previously offered orientation lose their separating force. World-signs shift into system positions; system positions appear as interstitial spaces. What remains is not a new order, but the experience that political legibility itself has become a scarce resource.

Figures of Order III therefore does not end with a conclusion, but with a demand: the demand to think political efficacy without stable concepts, without secure classifications, without final diagnosis. Not as deficiency, but as the condition of a present in which order can no longer be established—only temporarily held, in awareness of its provisionality.

7. Indistinguishability and the Crisis of Social Legibility

The present social condition is marked by a peculiar tension: on the one hand, social reality is described more densely, framed with greater moral sensitivity, and illuminated more thoroughly in discourse than in earlier epochs. On the other hand, it appears increasingly difficult to read. Categories that once provided orientation are now considered problematic; distinctions that were analytically functional are placed under general suspicion. In their place emerges a mode of permanent sensitization, in which every attribution appears potentially injurious and every typification as structural violence.

The crisis of the present is therefore less a crisis of truth than a crisis of readability.

What is often subsumed under the label of "woke" thinking may, in this context, be understood less as a political ideology than as the epistemic endpoint of a postmodern development. Postmodern critique of grand narratives, universal truth claims, and stable identity categories originally aimed at liberating difference. In its continuation, however, this critique has produced a condition in which difference is no longer structured but potentially multiplied without limit. Sensitivity replaces the capacity for judgment, decisions are replaced by contextualization, and a pervasive moral anxiety blurs conceptual sharpness.

Indistinguishability is not experienced as a deficit. It becomes a form of ethical achievement. The refusal to make clear attributions is regarded as a sign of heightened reflexivity. Social reality no longer appears as a field of distinguishable positions; it has become a highly complex web of singular experiences that resists generalizing description. The result is a form of discourse that is normatively charged yet analytically difficult to connect to.

Orientation arises from posture, while categories — and the act of categorizing — are depowered.

Parallel to this development, a counter-movement can be observed: the return of what might be called the great simplifiers. These figures do not primarily position themselves as opponents of sensitization; rather, they offer an alternative access to social reality. Their central promise is the restoration of readability. Where discourse is perceived as unintelligible, contradictory, or overcomplex, they offer reduction; where ambiguity prevails, they provide clarity; where ambivalence dominates, they draw sharp boundaries.

This simplification operates strategically. It reduces social complexity to a limited set of recognizable roles, narratives, and lines of conflict. Society is presented as a manageable ensemble of morally unambiguous actors. This does not necessarily assert truth, but it produces comprehensibility. The political attractiveness of such positions derives less from their correspondence to reality than from their capacity to transform diffuse social experiences into a readable order.

Crucially, these two movements — postmodern sensitization and populist simplification — cannot be understood as opposites. They respond to the same structural experience: the loss of a shared social readability. Where distinctions are discredited, an orientation deficit emerges. Where this deficit persists, the willingness to accept simplification as relief increases. One movement produces the problem; the other occupies it politically.

In this sense, the return of the simplifiers is both reaction and symptom. It responds to a highly modern, discursively generated opacity. Both sides operate with moral claims: one through maximal sensitivity, the other through maximal clarity. Yet both refrain from a reflected theory of simplification itself.

At this point, I would like to open a space for an entirely different approach to "great simplification": literature as seismograph.

Literature may serve as an archive of past crises of readability. In literary texts, situations become visible in which order grows fragile and simplification becomes seductive — where difference tips into paralysis. Literature stores patterns of experience. It makes perceptible how societies cope with opacity long before such experiences are politically systematized.

The recourse to literary constellations thus allows the present situation to be located genealogically rather than judged normatively. It shifts analysis away from questions of guilt and responsibility toward the cultural forms through which readability is produced, lost, and violently restored. In this sense, literature marks the transition from diagnosis to analysis — not as commentary, but as the epistemic memory of social order.

I. Readability

Readability as Social Framing

Readability does not mean "understandability" in a trivial sense, but the possibility of translating social reality into distinguishable relations. A society is readable when actions, positions, conflicts, and expectations are structured in ways that render them interpretable, comparable, and at least provisionally classifiable. Readability is therefore not a property of the world itself, but the result of cultural, linguistic, and institutional ordering operations.

Historically, readability emerges through categories, types, roles, narratives, and concepts. These produce reductions — which is not identical with falsification. Readability is always selective: it makes visible by rendering something else invisible. Precisely therein lies its productivity. Without this selective ordering, social reality does not remain open; it becomes diffuse.

In the postmodern constellation, readability comes under general suspicion. Categories are treated as coercion, types as violence, generalizations as exclusion. In their place stands an ideal of maximal contextualization. What is lost is not information, but orientation. Readability is replaced by moral sensitivity — with the paradoxical effect that social processes are described more intensively yet become harder to understand.

Readability is therefore not naive simplification; it is an epistemic precondition of social communication. Where it collapses, uncertainty, affect, and the desire for compensatory order arise.

II. Violence

Violence as Epistemic Operation

Violence is understood here not primarily as physical or repressive, but epistemic. Violence does not begin only where coercion or exclusion occurs; it is already present where readability is enforced or unreadability produced. Every order that renders social reality interpretable intervenes in it. It sets boundaries, defines relevance, fixes meaning.

Violence in this sense is not necessarily illegitimate. It is unavoidable. Every category, concept, and typification exercises a form of violence because it closes what is open and stabilizes what is ambiguous. The decisive question is therefore not whether violence can be avoided, but how it is exercised and whether it remains reflexively controlled.

Contemporary discourse tends to code violence exclusively in moral terms. Simplification is regarded as inherently violent; difference as innocent. Yet this moral asymmetry obscures the fact that indistinguishability also exerts violence — by withdrawing orientation. A world that resists structuring compels individuals into permanent self-interpretation and self-responsibility. This, too, is a form of coercion.

The violence of readability thus lies both in the imposition of clear order and in its refusal. Both modes are powerful; both shape social reality.

III. Simplification

Simplification as Technique — Not Ideology

Within this framework, simplification is neither intellectual weakness nor inherently political strategy. It is a technical operation that reduces complexity in order to render relations visible. In science, law, administration, and art, simplification is a basic condition of cognition.

Modern sociology has always employed simplification consciously: ideal types, models, and categories are explicitly marked as reductions. Their legitimacy lies not in completeness but in transparency and revisability. Simplification is epistemically accountable.

It becomes problematic where it is naturalized — when reductions no longer appear as tools but as reality itself. Populist simplification operates in precisely this mode: it presents its readings not as models but as truth. Difference is not abstracted, but eliminated.

Conversely, the blanket delegitimization of simplification produces a paradoxical situation: where every reduction is condemned as violence, the power of simplification is ceded to those willing to deploy it ruthlessly. The refusal of reflected simplification creates the space for its brutal return.

IV. Interplay of the Concepts

The Violence of Readability

The violence of readability thus designates the field of tension within which social order emerges:

* Readability is necessary, yet always entails deliberate intervention.

* Violence is unavoidable, yet not identical with oppression.

* Simplification is epistemically productive; it becomes politically dangerous when absolutized.

The central conflict of the present does not lie between order and freedom, but between reflexive and unreflexive readability. Literature — the guiding assumption of this essay — functions as an archive of experience of these conflicts. It shows what happens when readability is personalized, refused, exaggerated, or exhausted.

The deeper crisis of the present may not consist in excessive simplification or insufficient differentiation, but in the absence of responsibility for the forms of readability that make social reality shareable in the first place.

Alexandra Christou, Untitled

9. On Dying

Simone Weil and the Withdrawal of Exception

Much has been written about the death of Simone Weil—usually too much, and rarely with precision. Interpretations oscillate between pathologization and sanctification, between suspicion of suicide and veneration of martyrdom. Both readings miss the point. They translate an existential stance too quickly into categories of intention, decision, or morality. Yet it is precisely these categories that fail here.

Simone Weil died in 1943 in Ashford, England, weakened by tuberculosis, malnutrition, and physical exhaustion. She consumed less food than medically recommended and refused special treatment. These facts are known. Their meaning remains unclear. Was it a decision? A sacrifice? A political act? Or a silent withdrawal?

The question "Why did Simone Weil stop eating?" misleads. It presupposes motive where there is stance. In Weil's writings, there is no will to die, no desire for dissolution. What appears instead is radical consistency: the withdrawal of every exception. Not only in thought, but in life—and ultimately in dying.

Weil conceived human existence rigorously from the standpoint of limitation. Time, for her, is not a resource but a condition. The human being does not stand above it, but is subject to it. "To obey time" is not metaphor but demand. Whoever waits experiences time not as emptiness, but as presence. This attitude of attention—attention in her precise sense—is the highest form of intellectual activity. It consists in forcing nothing, anticipating nothing, occupying nothing.

From this perspective, eating is not a private act. It belongs to the order of the world. In L'Enracinement, Weil describes nourishment not merely as biological necessity, but as social and moral fact. To eat is to participate. To take more than others is to set oneself

apart. To protect oneself while others are deprived is to claim an exception.

In exile, in wartime, confronted with suffering in Europe, Simone Weil refused to claim that exception. Not out of asceticism, not out of self-punishment, not out of a longing for death. Rather out of a radical refusal to exempt her own body from the order of the world. Her conduct was not gesture, not symbol, not appeal. It was consequence.

That consequence is difficult to endure because it offers no support. It is not heroic. It is not exemplary. It cannot be generalized. For that very reason, it is not suitable for imitation. Simone Weil herself would have rejected any form of replication. Her path is not a model, but a limit.

Her dying was not an act of sovereignty. It was not a decision in the strong sense. Nor was it protest. It was the continuation of a stance that refused intervention—even intervention in her own life. Where others intervene, correct, mitigate, she endured. Not out of hardness, but out of attention.

In this respect, Simone Weil marks a point at which political and existential theory diverge. The theory of waiting, of non-action, of withdrawal finds here its most extreme intensification—and at the same time its boundary. What can be conceived as political practice becomes existential imposition. The body becomes the final site of consequence.

For that very reason, Simone Weil must not be made witness to a theory. Her dying establishes nothing. It legitimizes nothing. It answers no question. It poses one. What does it mean not even to intervene in one's own dying? What remains of political responsibility when the withdrawal from exception is carried through to the end?

Perhaps the significance of this death lies precisely in its resistance to significance. It is not example. Not argument. Not conclusion. It is interruption. A blank in thought that must not be filled.

Simone Weil did not die because she wished to die. She died because she refused, in life as in death, to claim exception. Her death is not an act. It is the consequence of a stance that knew no retreat. For theory, this is unbearable. For thinking, perhaps necessary.

Closing:

The concept of soft power emerged within a historical constellation in which political effectiveness appeared plausible through cultural attractiveness. This constellation depended on functional differentiation, relative stability of global publics, and an event regime structured by accelerated visibility.

These conditions are undergoing transformation.

Political strategy once revolved around the production of consent. Increasingly, attention shifts toward the organization of conditions of access. Power now operates through configuration of standards, protocols, and infrastructural frameworks that shape what can connect, circulate, or become operative. The transformation concerns form as well as temporality.

Platform logics intensify acceleration and continuous updating.
Administrative regimes stabilize through extended institutional cycles.
Diplomatic procedures rely on synchronizable expectations.
Moral positions tend toward temporal compression and immediate judgment.

Divergence among these temporal regimes has become a defining feature of contemporary power constellations.

Where operative times intersect without alignment, frictions and asymmetries emerge. Conflicts unfold as problems of synchronization. The central issue concerns coordination of temporal rhythms rather than adjudication of correctness.

Soft power, viewed from this angle, signals a historical condition whose temporal presuppositions no longer hold. Its declining efficacy indicates reconfiguration in structures of coupling. It presumes shared temporality; such presupposition can no longer be assumed.

The guiding question therefore shifts. Instead of asking what time is, inquiry turns toward relations among temporal regimes within present systems.

One might formulate it more concretely:
What time is it—and according to which operative clock?

Further analysis moves toward entanglement: constellations in which regimes of visibility, duration, decision, and suspension intersect and condition one another. Focus rests on patterns of coupling rather than identities of actors.