

What is soft power if anything but Hollywood, MTV, and Mcdonalds?

Descrizione

Pro•mo•tion

1. The act of promoting or the fact of being promoted; advancement.
2. Advertising; publicity.
3. Encouragement of the progress, growth, or acceptance of something; furtherance.

It's curious to look at the etymology of the word promotion to be struck by words such as "encourage," "advancement," "growth" and "furtherance". They all have a positive connotation that seems to bring the word promotion outside of its most common business and marketing terminology. Promotion is also defined as an act of "acceptance of something," ultimately, not a coercive act. The encounter with the "Other" does not imply an obliteration of cultural differences or a threat of hybridization. On the contrary, it is a source of enrichment for the culture and societies of both parties. Promotion is synonymous with "persuasion" (*peitho* in greek) "achieved by holding out the prospect of building or strengthening friendship, common identities and mutually valued norms and practices." It has a positive value since it is based on engaging qualities and joint understandings. (Ned Lebow Richard, 130: 2007).

Thus, boosting the attractiveness while adjusting it to other cultures is crucial to the wellbeing of international relations of a nation. As Jessica C.E Gienow- Hecht cites, Maki Aoki-Okabe, Tochi Makita, and Yoko Kawamura divide cultural diplomacy into two types: one is the promotion of national culture and the second is the promotion of "interactive international cultural exchange"(Hecht, Donfried, 10: 2010).

For this reason, attention should be addressed to "think of culture as providing the operating context for politics"(Bound, Briggs, Holden and Jones, 20:2007); an essential investment in the domestic and foreign prosperity of a country. In relation to the

promotion of culture or the ability of a country to attract the others, the use of the so-called “soft power”(Joseph Nye: 1990) in international politics has become increasingly strategic and important. It can be considered “a tangible tool that can be amassed and deployed” (Mattern 2007:101) especially when confronting the great impact that culture has in an international and hyper connected world, such as the one we are living in. Consequently, the European Union is the best example of an international environment in which competition and collaboration coexist in an uncertain balance.

Specifically when speaking of the European Union we refer to an environment in which different national identities try to accommodate and adjust to one another while striving to dominate. Accordingly, Anthony Haigh affirms in his book, “Cultural Diplomacy in European Union”(1974), that cultural diplomacy has developed from cultural propaganda to “the more recent developments in the collective cultural co-operation”(30:1974). This happened at the end of the Cold War and marked the end of bipolar and the beginning of a multipolar world where the cultural factor, also known as “soft power”, plays a much more important role in the definition of a national identity and the way in which it is perceived and interpreted from other nations with which, political, commercial and, ultimately, cultural exchange takes place.

In following Joseph Nye’s theory, “the use of ‘soft power’” is to spread social knowledge about one’s values. When speaking of one’s values we refer to the cultural narratives of one country as: the set of stories told by and about one nation to others. One can deduce that, soft power, so the use of culture, “seems rooted in communication” (Mattern 101:2007). Therefore, communication is the key, and in today’s world communication able to shape the global public audience are anything, but the Internet and its online social spaces, namely social networks.

However, when speaking about culture as the political and economic leverage of a nation, it is easy to think of the Government, or high governmental institutions operating nationally and internationally, as the only entities determining its use or not. Wherefore, the politician and writer Shashi Tharoor proposes an interesting insight that can further develop the topic discussed thus far. In a fascinating Ted Talk entitled: *Why nations should pursue soft power* Tharoor states,

“We know the Alliance Française is all about French soft power. The Beijing Olympics were an exercise in Chinese soft power. Americans have the Voice of America and the Fulbright scholarship. But the fact is, in fact, that probably Hollywood and the MTV and MacDonlads have done more for American soft power around the world than any specifically government activity. So, soft power is something that really emerges partly because of governments, but partly despite governments.”

On the same line he continues by saying,

“And in the information era we all live today, I’d say that countries are increasingly being judged by global public that’s been fed on an incessant diet of Internet news, of televised images, of cell phone videos, of email gossip. In other words, all sorts of communication devices are telling us the stories of countries, wheatear or not the countries concerned want people to hear those stories (...) In order to have soft power, you have to be connected” (2009 November, Ted.com).

From Shashi’s contribution one can understand that “soft power” has a broader scope than what it is generally assumed at first glance. One can even argue that “soft power” is also, and quite possibly, mostly, “Hollywood, MTV and Mcdonalds,” using Shashi’s words. More than any government or specific cultural policy, they can greatly impact the attractiveness or non-attractiveness of a country, ultimately contributing not only to the nation’s internal prosperity but also to the external positive relations. The global reach and the influence on the global imaginary that they have, in respect to what Shashi calls the “global audience,” seriously affects the level of “soft power” from which a nation can benefit.

Finally, reflections upon the global audience perception of the Italian country are inevitable when looking at the relevance of “soft power” and its broad connotations. The question that arises is: are we really seriously taking into account the great impact that a strategic use of “soft power” can represent, not only in terms of international prestige and wellbeing of international relations, but also in terms of what the notorious economist John Myerscough called the economic impact of culture? If yes, what is the international image and imaginary of the Italian culture that is exported abroad? Is it benefiting or damaging the level of soft power that we could

potentially use?

While pondering on those reflections I leave you to the inspiring talk of Shashi Tharoor, http://www.ted.com/talks/shashi_tharoor.html.

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