

## 1.7 Looking beyond nation branding: the prism of hegemony and Orientalism.

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“History is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and rewritten, so that ‘our’ east, ‘our’ orient becomes ‘ours’ to possess and direct.”

— Edward Said 1

“Democracy is the best school to learn soft power.”

— Joseph Nye

“Perception, unfortunately, always trumps reality”

— Simon Aholt

### *Introduction*

Across the world, norms are both the same and different. If we take into account the overlap between hegemony and Orientalism, it further allows us to build a more robust understanding of nation branding and soft power. Norms are customs of conduct dependent on one’s identification in a certain social context in which actors adhere to a “logic of appropriateness”.<sup>2</sup> International hegemony is rather a mobilisation of leadership by

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\* Views and research expressed here are the author’s own and do not represent the views of the UK Government and are not statements of UK Government Policy.

a predominant power to order relations among actors.<sup>3</sup> Historical contexts matter with nation branding, as history is a cornerstone of how countries market themselves. Hegemonic influences are as powerful today as ever before. One undeveloped feature of soft power is the processes by which one person is drawn to behave in line with the desires of another actor.<sup>4</sup>

Soft power differs from hard power in that no brute coercion is used to persuade the adversary to follow one's own desires. Soft power is used by countries to show and encourage their interests, such as freedom and equality. They influence other countries to share their interests as a result.<sup>5</sup> This may include the results of significant world issues such as trade negotiations, the fight against terrorism, disease transmission, and climate change. The inducements a country uses to exert influence under hard power as "carrots" and the threats as "sticks"<sup>6</sup> where one must coerce or influence the other based on material objects.<sup>7</sup>

Power is described as a country's ability to exert influence over other countries and political groups in order to regulate their actions. The scale, wealth, and capacities of a nation decide its fiscal, military, and political strength. Nations may use their influence to persuade other nations to join them in pursuing their goals. Most global frameworks for studying hegemony centre on relations among states and other political communities. The construction of difference is established across socio-cultural things within society, from novels and paintings to even political/governmental reports.<sup>8</sup> The notion of Orientalism equipped Europeans with the skills and ideology to engage with the 'Orient' on a number of levels.<sup>9</sup>

Since the 19th century, the term hegemony has been generally interpreted to symbolise the political supremacy of one state over another.<sup>10</sup> This essay will look at how, through the prisms of hegemony and Orientalism, we can better understand nation branding and the establishment of social norms.

The implications and impact of promoted images of countries are substantial as they can affect the audience through the creation of expectations, and the desire for image verification.<sup>11</sup>

Nation branding as a term refers to a country's whole image on the international stage, covering political, economic, and cultural dimensions<sup>12</sup> Nation branding is a metaphor for how effectively countries compete with each other for favourable perception,<sup>13</sup> often through intangible links like tourism, culture or heritage. National branding goes beyond the narrower purpose of country-of-origin or place brands to promote specific economic interests.<sup>14</sup>

### *The case of hegemony and Orientalism*

The impact of hegemony  
Many scholars view the field of international relations marked by the rise and decline of dominant powers. In this way, some focus on the processes of economic transformation, some political dynamics, and sometimes both of these things. A hegemon has been defined as something (such as a political state) having dominant influence or authority over others.<sup>15</sup> Within this, hegemonic ordering takes place within existing international structures, which creates opportunities and constraints. Hegemons may find themselves constrained by elements of an international order that they helped produce.<sup>16</sup> Yet, hegemons rarely enjoy sufficient power to completely overhaul order entirely. Such was the case with the US, where the terrorist attacks and Washington's responses adversely affected the vital 'soft' foundations of its power, including the appeal of American values and culture, perception of US hegemony and the apparent legitimacy of the exercise of American power.<sup>17</sup> In turn, this constrained US hegemonic power by limiting the effectiveness of foreign and security policies.<sup>18</sup>

The relationship between the concept of hegemony and empire has always been fraught. Hegemons putatively control the foreign relations of other polities, while empires impinge on their domestic politics.<sup>19</sup> Hegemonic ideologies can be generated by philosophers, policymakers, and scholars who study certain parts of society and then advocate a certain perspective.<sup>20</sup> Hegemonic relations describe patterns of leadership and control among nominally autonomous polities. On the one hand, some conclude that “hegemony” is just a substitute for “empire”. On the other hand, some suggest a variety of procedures for detecting when a hegemonic relationship is really one of informal empires. Empires arise when constituent units no longer enjoy such nominal autonomy.<sup>21</sup> Yet we see a problem when we begin to try to distinguish hegemony and informal empire, as both bleed into one another.

For Antonio Gramsci, cultural hegemony is ultimately the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class, which manipulates the culture of that society.<sup>22</sup> This can range from belief systems, perceptions, and values, in a way that a ‘ruling-class’ worldview becomes the accepted cultural ‘norm’. Yet, cultural hegemony can only be realised as a concept if it is taken within a variety of contexts. For Jackson Lears, relying on one single definition is misleading.<sup>23</sup> Cultural symbols can have an integrative significance within particular communities.<sup>24</sup> Yet, often such symbols may not be realised within wider socio-economic or even political structures. In turn, it allows for inequalities of power to be subsumed by an implicitly functionalist “cultural system”.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, cultural hegemony was aided by “intellectual historians trying to understand how ideas reinforce or undermine existing social structures and social historians seeking to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the power wielded by dominant groups and the relative cultural autonomy of subordinate groups whom they victimise”.<sup>26</sup>

### The impact of Orientalism

Orientalism as a concept has gained its strength directly from cultural hegemony. Some, like Edward Said, believed that central narratives of Western scholars governed the East.<sup>27</sup> In this way, the 'East' was the geographical territory spanning Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East whilst the 'West' was seen as the European Great Powers.<sup>28</sup> Said argued that the perception of the Orient, or the 'East' in the 'West', was one that was primitive and exoticised, which directly fuelled the assumption of Western superiority.<sup>29</sup> The paradigm itself depicts Eastern cultures as static and irrational, compared to Western society, which are understood to be both modern and civilised. The process of Orientalism, or indeed the otherisation of representation, by directly comparing hegemonic powers and everything else, allows scholars to examine how international orders themselves shape hegemony and bids for hegemony.<sup>30</sup> In this case, Orientalism was a hegemonic discourse, where essentialist assumptions served the ruling world powers.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, this was manifested throughout all forms of discourse including literature, research and conversation both due to, and in order to, perpetuate the power of these dominant groups.<sup>32</sup>

At its core, Orientalism is the sheer exploration of how the colonial gaze framed (and still frames) the Orient as a visionary opposite to the Occident to be governed. Said's critique of Orientalism has been seen as highly valuable for demystifying the Western narrative of 'world history' as an accepted universal reference point.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, his highlight of how such a binary representation of Europe in the context of the wider colonised world remains relevant today. Nevertheless, his work is not without challenge or criticism. For some, the Said's re-articulation of a complete binary between the East and the West<sup>34</sup> was problematic as power relations were fixed and one-way (West to East).<sup>35</sup> In this way, Orientalism, as a concept, represented the sheer dominance of the West (the Occident) over the East (the Orient)<sup>36</sup> from the beginnings of capitalism and imperialism to the

present. For some, Said didn't cover the true representation of what the concept of Orientalism means. Bernard Lewis argued that Said's account of Orientalism was a reduced representation of the West presented through an ideologically loaded narrative and imperceptive of its own assumptions<sup>37</sup>, whilst Western scholars were depicted as evil.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, before the peak of 19<sup>th</sup> century European colonialism, scholars who focused on the orient mostly studied Islam alongside other non-western civilisations out of intellectual curiosity.<sup>39</sup> Some Orientalist scholars were opposed to European imperialism. Ian Burma (2008) argues that some Orientalist scholars held the 'othered' perspective of the Orient, to directly contract and oppose colonialism. Such is the case of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), a German Romantic philosopher, who advocated the exotic "otherness" against the rationalist opinions of imperialist powers.<sup>40</sup>

Orientalism as a lens of study has been understood to be a pretext for oppression and imperialism. It is a political doctrine and nobody can write, think, or act on the orient without being influenced by Orientalism.<sup>41</sup> It was also able to reinforce colonial stereotypes about the east.<sup>42</sup> Orientalism was popular because it was able to explain a complex and diverse culture in a simplistic way. Where it argued that uneven power relations between two unbalanced halves distort knowledge<sup>43</sup>, where non-European cultures for the most part became objects of discussion, rather than equal participants within the dialogue. In turn, such a perspective has portrayed Eastern cultures as inherently subservient to Europeans. Though geographies of power and inequality have shifted dramatically in the last two centuries, the concept of Orientalism still has relevance due to new discussions of belonging, race, and difference. Any of Orientalism's binary oppositions do not go far enough to explain an ever more globalised world. The argument of such a binary does not account for the fact that the flow of information between countries is greater with global interconnectedness than ever before.

The legacy of Orientalism is an interesting one. Drawing on the role of hegemony, the presence and construction of “*certain cultural forms which dominate over others*”, Said sought to prove how Orientalism was being internalised by Western and Eastern cultures alike.<sup>44</sup> Yet, he did not explore the concept fully, failing to offer the necessary depth in Gramsci’s concept of hegemony.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, one of the biggest legacies of Orientalism is the elevated awareness and reflections amongst scholars of the positions from which they write. For some, having such a level of self-consciousness can quickly dissolve into identity politics or even support the view that only one group of people can write about themselves.<sup>46</sup> This viewpoint highlights the often-contradictory links formed by the postcolonial realm. Indeed, scholars have expanded Orientalism’s resolutely binary opposition between West and East into the richer concept of cross-cultural hybridity.<sup>47</sup> For some, this hybridity is a situation of democratic strain and resistance against imperialism; others instead have criticised it as a neo-colonial dialogue closely aligned with transnational capitalism.<sup>48</sup> Cross-cultural hybridity is then where something no longer allows itself to be realised within the binary meaning and instead upends it by occupying, resisting, and disorganising the space around it.<sup>49</sup>

For several decades, accusations of Orientalism have mainly been directed against those on the political right. Some argue that in the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration was influenced by Orientalist influence where the stance of “good West versus bad Islamic world” became dominant.<sup>50</sup> The effect that US foreign policy had post-9/11 can still be felt today: they then constructed an Orientalist paradigm through which most US actors still view the Middle East today. available to rising states as they seek to challenge the existing order. To be drawn to US society, public policies, or political values, one nation must be prosperous or benefit others in other countries<sup>51</sup>, or even share common values. For Daniel W. Drezner, the logic of resistance and revisionism for a number of nation-states has

been directly in response to the American hegemonic organisation of the world economy.<sup>52</sup> Drawing on Susan Strange's notion of "structural power"<sup>53</sup>, Drezner examines the strategies available to rising states as they seek to challenge the existing order where rational revisionist nation-states would attack the "ideational" dimensions of the existing hegemonic order.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, F. Gregory Gause III points to the importance of variation in the "international institutional context" for British and American dominance in the Middle East in shaping the effectiveness of their power-political efforts.<sup>55</sup> Such insights forward the notion that hegemonic polities are both order makers and order takers.<sup>56</sup>

### *Impacts on norms, soft power, and nation branding*

The influence of both hegemony and the gaze of Orientalism on norms, soft power, and nation branding cannot be overstated. Norms are a rule or standard that govern conduct within society, serve as a guide or control, or even regulate behaviour. For some, it is a societal expectation, where it has become a standard to which we are expected to conform whether people choose to or not.<sup>57</sup> The concept of a norm remains complicated at best, as scholars have interpreted it in a variety of ways.<sup>58</sup> All societies have rules or norms specifying appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and these are based on cultural values, which are justified by moral standards, reasoning, or even aesthetic judgment.<sup>59</sup> Norms are not necessarily things that are deemed 'good' nowadays. However, within the sense of a given norm, actors who partake in that norm assume that their acts are natural.<sup>60</sup> Norms can be identified as efficient or inefficient only if we know the ends they are to serve.

Norms are effective in the sense that they direct behaviour<sup>61</sup> by creating a sense of obligation amongst groups.<sup>62</sup> Understanding this sense of obligation is critically important to understanding norms<sup>63</sup> and how



they in turn operate. Norms become obligatory as they are internalised<sup>64</sup> and it is this system of internalisation that provides their peculiar force. The norms are blueprints for behaviour, as they set the limits in what people may seek alternate ways to achieve their goals.<sup>65</sup> The assumption of self-interested behaviour underlying the norms necessarily leads to an evaluation of performance that is based upon whether such goals of actors are fulfilled.<sup>66</sup> Such standards of behaviour may appear at several levels, including for example at a local level, state level, or at an international level where a community of individuals or actors share a common identity.<sup>67</sup> The diffusion of norms is mainly concerned with whether a given norm is effective in obtaining the desired result by the party that has the power to approve or deny such a norm.<sup>68</sup> This is indeed true in the case of nation-states.

Norms are directly influenced by hegemony and Orientalism. Social norms must either be shared by other people or be partly sustained by their approval and disapproval.<sup>69</sup> Norms can spread across different individual entities, such as epistemic societies<sup>70</sup> or transnational advocacy networks.<sup>71</sup> At a nation-state level, norms are spread via epistemic groups, or people that share a shared identity based on the empirical method.<sup>72</sup> Hegemony and norms are intrinsically tied together. The case of the rise of China in the past twenty years is important here, especially in the context of global governance and the norms that hold them up. In the past two decades, China has re-emerged as a dominant power, with the world's second-largest economy and a world-class military. Indeed, as China embraced the open international order, it aligned itself with US values.<sup>73</sup> At present China is pursuing a multipronged strategy toward global governance. With the one hand, supporting international institutions and agreements aligned with its goals and norms, like aligning with the World Bank or the Paris Agreement regarding climate change.<sup>74</sup> With the other hand, China seeks to undermine those values and create alternative institutions and models

when it isn't convenient for it, such as in the case for human rights. Furthermore, in areas where norms or institutions are not fully present, like internet governance, China acts on its own accord to work with other authoritarian powers such as Russia to create standards that reflect their interests.<sup>75</sup> The divide between which norms nation-states choose to adhere to or not, will be an ongoing problem when trying to address common challenges. It also creates the narrative whereby having two systems of global governance will badly undermine any cooperation, as no one will be held to account.

Much like norms, soft power is incredibly influenced by hegemony and Orientalism. Nye's soft power is described as one country's ability to draw others so that they want what they want<sup>76</sup> by examining how said country might persuade another to want the same goal. The ambition to attract another is the capacity to modify the other's expectation over their choices such that one's end intention becomes the other's sought approach. In the case of nation-states, the effect of soft power can depend on how they gain admiration. The ambition to attract another is the capacity to modify the other's expectation over their choices such that one's end intention becomes the other's sought approach. Soft power can be expressed by intellectual capital, national values, and international policies. Some academics consider knowledge<sup>77</sup>, charity or philanthropy<sup>78</sup>, and diplomacy<sup>79</sup> to be modes of soft power. A country's culture embraces its views, goals, and group actions, as well as its popular culture. As Nye also says, the receiver filters knowledge and soft power in the form of community and other qualities.<sup>80</sup> Nye implies that credibility is one of the most valuable soft power tools<sup>81</sup> yet without defining how one becomes dependable to their soft power.

Perceptions of trust and attractiveness matter, as they shape behaviour, and how a country is understood. In turn, such understandings of a country have a direct impact on its economy by affecting the foreign direct investment

(FDI) and tourism levels.<sup>82</sup> The case of Georgia is incredibly interesting within this nexus. In the wake of the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, Georgia was sprung with a unique opportunity. The newborn Caucasian state created an image for itself as a trustworthy country through ongoing engagement with international norms, and greater alignment with the European Union. At the same time, its location as a cultural crossroads between East and West has shaped its open outward-facing culture and in turn influenced how others think of Georgia. Tourism is now a strength of the Georgian economy accounting for just under 8% of GDP in 2019.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, Georgia is now a partner in the Creative Europe Programme allowing for any cultural and creative organisation to team up with wider partners based within Europe, further supporting Georgia's cultural networks and influence. Moreover, Georgia punches above its weight in sports, and is currently ranked twelfth in the world for rugby.<sup>84</sup> From having the world's oldest winemaking industries to some of the most popular cuisines and a collection of cultural festivals, Georgia's soft power is growing.

Nation branding is a subset of soft power and is directly influenced by hegemony and the concept of Orientalism. Nation branding is driven largely by practitioners and there is an urgent need for conceptual and theoretical development of the subject.<sup>85</sup> Scholars pertaining to this political perspective on nation branding are critical about the emphasis on market positioning and competitiveness as outlined above, stressing that attempts to brand nations can be risky and even counterproductive, in that it might create mistrust and prejudice efforts to win the hearts of others.<sup>86</sup> Scholars looking at nation branding from a political perspective see it as coordinated government efforts to manage a country's image in order to promote tourism, investment, and foreign relations.<sup>87</sup> In this light, nation branding is seen as a powerful political tool, especially for small, peripheral

nations eager to strengthen their economic position and to compete against the economic, financial, or military clout of superpowers.<sup>88</sup> With the rise of digital world however, nation branding is now ever more complicated.

Historical contexts matter with nation branding, as history is a cornerstone of how countries market themselves. Hegemonic influences are as powerful today as ever before, just in different ways, through the utilisation of digital engagement. The concept of Orientalism also remains an important lens to examine nation branding, as how we compare ourselves to others is a vital part in identity building. National identity representation requires building a positive image to a variety of one's self to external and internal audiences. However, doing so in the context of the digital space can prove difficult. Indeed, search engines have indeed already exceeded the credibility of traditional media.<sup>89</sup> So how can nation-states build trust effectively, when we now live in an age where information is always available at the touch of a button, through search engines and other digital platforms?<sup>90</sup> Digital technology has upended how nation-states build themselves, how they define themselves, what they do, and how they do it.

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