



Dimming power: Naim or Nye?

by Costanza Caputi

What do the Tea Party, Wikileaks, Amazon.com, cybercriminals and the Huffington Post have in common? They all illustrate and demonstrate that 'power' today is being challenged by the proliferation of a host of new actors. Some of these have arguably become well-known established 'powers' themselves whilst others pose a less obvious threat to power structures, altering the current dynamics in more subtle ways. From social media to irregular warfare and venture capital, a new landscape characterised by power diffusion is clearly emerging.

Both Moisés Naím, former editor-in-chief of *Foreign Policy* magazine and currently with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Joseph Nye, a preeminent scholar on international relations and former Dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, acknowledge this reality in their recent respective books. Yet their conclusions could not be more different: Naím predicts nothing less than 'the end of power', while Nye is reassuringly confident of a continuation of the 'game as usual' - with the United States likely to remain the dominant player in the near future. How can these apparently contradicting narratives coexist, in particular considering that they share the same, important starting point?

With his recent book *The end of power* (subtitle: *From boardrooms to battlefields and churches to states, why being in charge is no longer what it used to be*, 2013), Moisés Naím challenges the 'two big conventional conversations on power' that

dominate the public discourse today: the internet as the primary explanation for changes in politics and the ubiquitous talk of a transition of power from the US to China. By contrast, Nye offers a contribution which elaborates on exactly these 'conventional conversations' in his work, *The future of power* (2011).

Naím holds that today's discourse is but a distraction from the more profound trend that is shaping the world around us, namely the 'decay of power.' He argues that in every public domain (geopolitics, national politics, business, religion), so-called 'micro-powers' are effectively eroding the 'power' of those at the top of their respective category. Hard facts back his counterintuitive claim: CEOs' tenures are becoming shorter, big businesses have less chances of surviving at the top, and governments are increasingly constrained by newcomers in the political arena. In short, despite its apparent concentration, power is slipperier than ever.

According to Naím, these developments cannot only be attributed to the dramatic innovations in the realm of information and communication technology, as many may conclude. Instead, he identifies three determinant factors (he calls them the 3 Ms: 'more,' 'mobility' and 'mentality') that are critically impacting on power dynamics. In essence, not only is the world experiencing a huge increase in population: people are also more mobile and more affluent than ever before. This, in turn, (re)shapes mentalities by generating higher aspirations and a general mistrust of authority.

Accordingly, power is challenged at three levels: there are *more* subjects to control, who are both *mobile* and sceptically *minded*. As a result, control is much more difficult to exercise in virtually all aspects of society, constraining power and ultimately leading to its weakening.

Joe Nye offers a different interpretation of today's power realities. He, too, acknowledges an unprecedented diffusion of power, but traces its roots almost exclusively to the spread of information technology. According to Nye, the so-called 'information revolution' is significantly driving down the costs of communication. This allows for a host of new actors to enter the stage of (world) politics more easily, thereby reducing the margins of manoeuvre of the current power holders. Yet, the power structures themselves remain essentially unchanged: the nation state remains the primary actor in the international arena. The diffusion of power simply adds new layers of complexity to the international system but is not leading to its radical transformation.

Thus, Nye famously concludes that the decline of the US is not inevitable, provided it learns how to navigate this ever more complex environment by combining its 'hard' and 'soft' power in a 'smart' way.

The state of power - and the power of the state

What appears to be clear when comparing these two arguments is that the authors resort to different conceptual frameworks. Nye places the nation state at the centre of his analysis as well as at the centre of power, which is typical of the 'realist' school in international relations theory, even on the sophisticated liberal wing he represents. Naim considers the individual, accompanied by his/her values and aspirations, as the primary explanatory factor (and driver) of change. Interestingly, however, he seems to be more concerned by the potentially negative impact of this process rather than celebrating the potentially positive implications of such an erosion (rather than 'end') of power. He sees a less governable world - with less governable states, organisations, societies - emerging from it.

Both authors offer insightful perspectives on the power shifts shaping the earth today. And, despite their apparent opposition, Naim's and Nye's worlds are not mutually exclusive. It is likely that

nation states will still be around for the foreseeable future, and will have to adapt to the complexities that stem from the advancements made through technological innovation. In this respect, Nye has good reasons to believe that a continuation of state-based power relations will occur. The 'conventional

'From social media to irregular warfare and venture capital, a new landscape characterised by power diffusion is clearly emerging.'

conversation on power' therefore retains its validity within this set framework of assumptions.

In a state-centred narrative, however, the dynamics at work *within* and *across* states can be overlooked or lost altogether. Naim reminds us of the importance of peoples' mindsets as he describes their impact on 'power'. Above all, he is keen to warn us of the danger of political gridlock and shortsightedness, which results from dimming of power(s).

Be it a benign (former?) hegemon or a multitude of smaller powers, understanding who is in charge remains crucial. For today's (old and new) power holders not only bear responsibility for governing their own people; in the current hyper-connected world, their actions also have global repercussions. Both Naim and Nye provide us with pieces of this new puzzle: stitched together, they may give us something resembling a full picture.

Costanza Caputi is a Junior Analyst at the EUISS

