

# Global Power Shift

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# Soft Power

The Forces of Attraction  
in International Relations



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*“What I call Attraction may be perform’d  
by impulse, or by some other means  
unknown to me. I use that Word here to  
signify only in general any Force by which  
Bodies tend towards one another,  
whatsoever be the Cause.”*

—*Sir Isaac Newton,*  
Opticks: Or, A Treatise of the Reflections,  
Refractions, Inflections, and Colours of  
Light,  
*The Second Edition, with Additions*  
(London: W. and J. Innys, 1718), Query  
31, p. 351.

# Preface: Lessons from the Fence

It is a remarkable historical coincidence that both the years of Samuel Langhorne Clemens' birth and death—1835 and 1910—saw the appearance of Halley's Comet in the night sky.<sup>1</sup> Today, Clemens, who himself had predicted this curious happenstance in his later life, is more commonly known by his pen name Mark Twain and his claim to fame is less based on an astronomical peculiarity but rather on his quips and aphorisms, his essays and travel descriptions, his poems and plays, as well as his short stories and novels. In fact, Twain's immense prolificacy, originality, and lasting impact earned him the epitaph "father of American literature."<sup>2</sup>

Among Mark Twain's works, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) arguably take pride of place. While the former has been a frequent contestant for the myth-enshrouded Great American Novel,<sup>3</sup> the latter, according to Lee Clark Mitchell, even "lays claim to being America's most popular novel."<sup>4</sup> In it, Twain tells his readers about the gests and follies of the eponymous hero growing up in the 1830s or 1840s along the Mississippi River in the small (and fictional) town of St. Petersburg. The author takes us into the rural world of Missouri, a world filled with deep-rooted superstition and imperturbable piety, boyhood friendships and adolescent love, kindhearted ladies, and reckless villains. In the words of Mark Twain himself, as set down in the novel's preface, the author's intention was not merely to present a children's book but also "to try to pleasantly

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<sup>1</sup>Ron Power, *Mark Twain: A Life* (New York, N.Y.: Free Press, 2005), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Allen P. Mendenhall, *Literature and Liberty: Essays in Libertarian Literary Criticism* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2014), p. 114.

<sup>3</sup>Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 258.

<sup>4</sup>Lee Clark Mitchell, "Introduction," in Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Lee Clark Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. x.

remind adults of what they once were themselves, and of how they felt and thought and talked, and what queer enterprises they sometimes engaged in.”<sup>5</sup> Arguably, the most famous among these “queer enterprises” is Tom Sawyer’s handling of the task to whitewash a fence.

Caught by his aunt Polly while climbing in through the window late one night with his clothes torn and tattered after scrambling with a newcomer to the town of St. Petersburg, Tom is condemned to “captivity at hard labor” the following Saturday. Tom’s task, set by the loving yet hopelessly overburdened Polly as punishment for this most recent misconduct, is to whitewash “[t]hirty yards of board fence nine feet high.” On a fair Saturday morning, when “all the summer world was bright and fresh, and brimming with life” and other children are out playing and enjoying themselves, Tom “surveyed the fence, and all gladness left him and a deep melancholy settled down upon his spirit. Life to him seemed hollow, and existence but a burden.” After a few spiritless strokes of his brush, Tom sits down in despair as a slave called Jim comes by, charged with fetching water, a task which “had always been hateful work in Tom’s eyes.” Yet considering his present situation, Tom is eager to swap chores with Jim, who, however, steadfastly declines. Even as Tom offers to pay him with an exceptionally beautiful marble (a treasured possession for a boy in those days for sure!), he cannot be easily convinced. While Jim eventually begins to waver, Aunt Polly puts a halt to further negotiations and Tom reluctantly returns to the tedious task imposed upon him. However, “Tom’s energy did not last” very long and he soon begins to count his meager worldly belongings which are “not half enough to buy so much as half an hour of pure freedom.” Thus discouraged, Tom “gave up the idea of trying to buy the boys.” Yet, as Mark Twain goes on, “[a]t this dark and hopeless moment an inspiration burst upon him! Nothing less than a great, magnificent inspiration.”

With this “inspiration” in mind, Tom takes a different approach to his plight and subsequently, the first boy to come along—a boy by the name of Ben Rogers—finds Tom deeply bound up in his work. Tom, pretending to not even perceive the boy’s presence, “surveyed his last touch with the eye of an artist; then he gave his brush another gentle sweep and surveyed the result, as before.” Expectedly, Ben commences to mock Tom for having to work while he is about to go swimming on this beautiful summer’s day. Tom, however, nonchalantly disregards such mockery and pretends to immensely enjoy his task, asking the perplexed Ben, ““What do you call work? [...] Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?”” These questions “put the thing in a new light” for Ben and as Tom continues to vigorously paint the fence, Ben ultimately takes the bait. ““Say, Tom,”” he begs, ““let *me* whitewash a little.”” Tom, however, does not give up his brush that easily, arguing that ““I reckon there ain’t one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it’s got to be done”” and even telling Ben—untruthfully of course—that both

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<sup>5</sup>Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Hartford, Conn.: The American Publishing Company, 1876), p. ix. As far as not indicated otherwise, all quotations in the following paragraph are taken from this, the first edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, pp. 25–32.

his half-brother Sid and Jim had been refused before for that very reason. Now it is for Ben, meanwhile irretrievably ensnared, to offer Tom compensation in the form of an apple in order to be allowed to whitewash a small portion of the fence in return. Tom, “with reluctance in his face, but alacrity in his heart,” finally yields to Ben’s proposition. Consequently, while Ben “worked and sweated in the sun, the retired artist sat on a barrel in the shade close by, dangled his legs, munched his apple, and planned the slaughter of more innocents.” Further “innocents” are not long in coming and finally, “when the middle of the afternoon came, from being a poor poverty-stricken boy in the morning, Tom was literally rolling in wealth.” What is more, “[h]e had had a nice, good, idle time all the while—plenty of company—and the fence had three coats of whitewash on it!”

While arguably in itself among the finest episodes in American literature, masterfully combining literary elegance and down-to-earth wit, which place does Tom Sawyer’s “queer enterprise” of whitewashing a fence have in a study on soft power in international relations?

To answer this question, we shall briefly recall what has happened more soberly than with direct recourse to Twain’s unrivaled pen: Tom Sawyer is faced with the unpleasant and wearisome chore of whitewashing a vast fence. Recognizing that to accomplish his task would take a considerable amount of time and effort, and perhaps is even beyond Tom’s capability altogether, he seeks the help of others. Considering the circumstances outlined above, getting others to help him in his troublesome task seems hopeless if not impossible from the outset. Having to choose between a day of carefree fishing and swimming on the one hand and the tedious whitewashing of a fence in the blazing sun on the other hand, chances seem to be very slim at best to convince others to lend a helping hand. Nevertheless, Tom—in different ways—tries to acquire assistance: At first, he seeks to exchange chores in order to take up a less gruesome task. Next, he contemplates to buy others’ help with his meager belongings. Recognizing the futility of both these endeavors, however, Tom sets out to win over the boys’ support in yet another way. Pretending to greatly enjoy the demanding task and even simulating reluctance in relinquishing it, Tom effectively changes the preferences of the boys to help him—without recourse to brute force or monetary inducements but solely by *attracting* the boys to the task he is instructed to perform.

On that score, Mark Twain’s famous fence episode offers an excellent (if literary) example to illustrate a core concept in human interactions in general as well as international relations in particular: the concept of power. Succinctly defined as the ability to get somebody to do something they would not otherwise do, power can be found in various guises.<sup>6</sup> Among these, to be elaborated in greater detail below, is the variety of soft power, which shall gain center stage in the work in hand and at whose very core lies the notion of “getting others to want the outcomes you want.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>For definitions and different varieties of power, see Chap. 2.

<sup>7</sup>Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York, N.Y.: PublicAffairs, 2004), p. 5.



It is in this vein that soft power—resting upon attraction and persuasion—complements hard power—resting upon (physical) coercion and/or (economic) inducement—and thus accounts for the classic (if somewhat simplistic) dichotomy in our understanding of power in international relations today.<sup>8</sup>

With these cursory insights regarding the concept of power in mind, we can now return to the episode outlined above: Which possibilities does Tom Sawyer have at his disposal to influence others in order to get them to do his bidding? Which course of action might he take to get the outcome he wants, which in this case is a whitewashed fence, preferably without much toil on his own part? One conceivable option is to resort to physical force. Tom might use hard power to coerce others and thus force them to whitewash the fence for him. As depicted in an earlier chapter of Mark Twain's novel, Tom by no means is averse to physical confrontation. In fact, his very wrangling with another boy got him into the position to whitewash the fence in the first place. However, Tom is not even contemplating to physically force or intimidate others to get the outcome he wants in this particular instance and apparently recognizes that the endeavor to coerce others to whitewash the fence for him is futile. Power, as we shall see in greater detail below, depends on context, and in the present context, the exercise of physical power does not present itself as very promising.

This option being off the table, Tom might attempt to economically or financially induce others in order to get his preferred outcome, thus resorting to the second component of hard power. In fact, he actually does. As briefly illustrated above, Tom first tries to swap chores with Jim and offers—in a more prosaic than belletristic phrasing—a non-monetary exchange. Jim, however, declines this proposition. In his desperation, Tom goes one step further and offers a marble for his help, which in the rural Missouri of those days is as close to pecuniary resources as a poor boy could possibly get.<sup>9</sup> As this attempt likewise fails due to the disruptive intervention of his aunt, Tom counts his modest belongings and recognizes his lack of sufficient funds to buy others' help. As a consequence, economic or financial instruments, just as physical coercion, likewise forsake Tom in order to get the outcome he wants in this particular instance.

Being thus denied the hard power options of either coercive threats or economic inducements, Tom, in his moment of "magnificent inspiration," in Twain's words, bethinks of his true capital: his personal, non-physical, and non-financial powers of attraction and persuasion. Instead of forcing or buying others, he sets out to get the other boys—to paraphrase Joseph S. Nye's key definition of soft power—to want the outcome he wants with recourse to the only means at his disposal in this particular context. Tom thus effectively changes the values of the boys who henceforth no longer want to wander the streets pretending to be a Mississippi steamer or go

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<sup>8</sup>This simplified dichotomy is frequently complemented by a third variety, i.e., structural power, to be elaborated upon below; see Chap. 2.

<sup>9</sup>To be sure, in the further course of the novel, Tom wins a fortune in a series of further "queer enterprises."

swimming in a nearby waterhole, but now rather wish to whitewash a board fence instead. In short: Tom applies soft power.

How does Tom succeed? He makes a wearisome task look attractive and leads by example in order to do so. He *pretends* to greatly enjoy his task and even refuses to give up the brush at first. Tom thus wields what might more precisely be called *delusive* soft power: getting others to do something one does *not* want to do oneself, but rather convincing others of the desirability of the task and then generously standing back. Tom, with his deceptive behavior, therefore, might admittedly be reproached with foul play as he brazenly exploits the boys' credulity. In fact, this reproach goes along perfectly with the observation that soft power, although conversely alleged by some commentators and critics, is by no means a mere normative concept but is explicitly impartial—being available for noble and selfish or downright bad purposes alike (as we shall also see in more detail later).

In any case, Tom's success at the end of his scheme is obvious and presents itself to be manifold: Not only is the fence whitewashed three times over and Tom's main goal thus more than achieved, Tom also enjoys a restful day and is later even rewarded with an apple by his aunt for his miraculous feat. Furthermore, Tom rakes in—besides the apple supplied by Ben Rogers in exchange for the first few strokes referred to above—a kite, a dead rat, a dozen marbles, and countless further goods certainly treasured by the other boys who gave them away. After this "substantial change which had taken place in his worldly circumstances," as Mark Twain puts it, Tom is able to re-trade his new-found wealth for more desirable objects with other boys later on in the novel.

Summarizing, the whitewashing of the fence and Tom Sawyer's scheme to get others to want what he wants (or in this case more precisely: to get others to want what he does *not* want to do) offers an excellent example of the successful application of soft power.<sup>10</sup> It depicts a situation in which an actor achieves his desired outcome while other forms of power prove unavailable or ineffective to him under the given circumstances. Attractive soft power, although perhaps less tangible and measurable (for it cannot be as easily "counted" as can apples, marbles, or dead rats), it turns out, can at times be even more resourceful than other varieties of power. Mark Twain himself elaborated on the immense powers of attraction when he argued that on this bright summer's day in St. Petersburg, Tom Sawyer "had discovered a great law of human action,"

If he [Tom] had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is *obliged* to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do. And this would help him to understand why constructing artificial flowers or performing on a treadmill is work, while rolling ten-pins or climbing Mont Blanc is only amusement.

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<sup>10</sup>With the reference to the attraction emanating mainly from a particular individual rather than other resources frequently attributed to soft power, the episode also foreshadows the introduction of a hitherto neglected source of soft power within the proposed taxonomy; see below, Sect. 3.1.4.

While the fence episode is, of course, fictional (even though Mark Twain states to have included autobiographical and personally experienced elements in his novel), most of us have experienced comparable situations in our daily lives. The attractive powers of activities, objects, ideas, or even individuals thus often rest upon the ability of somebody attracting us to them by praising them, by leading by example, or simply by possessing them and perhaps withholding them from us. Toys, for example, not uncommonly build their attraction upon the very fact that they are possessed by siblings or other children and—just as often—lose their value when others have lost their interest in them. In this understanding, soft or attractive power might indeed be understood—in Twain’s words—“a great law of human action.”

It shall be the objective of the work in hand to offer new insights into this “great law” by, first, introducing a comprehensive and sophisticated taxonomy of soft power and, second, by providing a methodological roadmap for its empirical study in international relations.

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Summer 2019

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# List of Abbreviations

AAUP	American Association of University Professors
CDU	Christian Democratic Party of Germany
CHA	Comparative Historical Analysis
CNN	Cable News Network
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
EU	European Union
IBE	Inference to the Best Explanation
ICC	International Criminal Court
IR	International Relations
IVLP	International Visitor Leadership Program
MNC	Multinational Cooperation
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
PD	Public Diplomacy
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SPD	Social Democratic Party of Germany
UK	United Kingdom (of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)
U.N./UN	United Nations (Organization)
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
USIA	United States Information Agency
U.S./US	United States (of America)
USNS	United States Navy Ship
USS	United States Ship
U.S.S.R.	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics



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