

form of coercion. Now, there are certain forms of coercion, which are military in character, that is you seek to either put military pressure, or you invade, or you intervene in various ways, trying to enforce your will. That's the hard version. Cultural imperialism, on the other hand, is what Americans often referred to as soft power. Joseph Nye of Harvard University was a champion of that particular form. And cultural imperialism is usually 'not' imposed; rather, it is something which wins over adherence because of its quality, its character, its attractiveness, and so on.



Hollywood Sign, located on Mount Lee in Griffith Park in Los Angeles, California.

So good films, good literature, and generally the means to amplify one's national culture on to others internationally, is a great power because it can penetrate intellectually in the hegemony of ideas, because the world is full of rival ideas, rival values, rival religions, rival ideologies, rival ways of looking and living in the world, rival economic ideas. So culture is really the realm of the battle of ideas. One sort of cultural imperialism is that which competes almost unfairly, because it has such great institutional and financial power behind it. For example, Hollywood is an incredibly rich and powerful media complex, it has the ability to project itself in many places, and there's no question that it's very attractive in all sorts of ways; and people are watching it legally and illegally in all kinds of places.

■ ■ That sounds very soft!

There are other kinds of cultural imperialism, in which a little bit more coercion is involved. It's again in the form of the aid given by imperial countries: Educational aid, aid to set up universities or think tanks, PhD opportunities, various kinds of grants for economic development or scholars, assistance to the scholarly elements of which the knowledge networks and institutions which are built. They then invent certain ideas about development, economic systems, political economy, or political ideologies, and embed these ideas in actual institutions that operate within those countries. Again, it's often called foreign aid for development, which is benevolent, but it can be a form of coercion because it comes from rich, powerful states, which are effectively able to back up their foreign influence with military power as well. It's very often given to poor countries which need investment and since have they have weak educational institutions, they often accept this kind of aid, not really fully understanding the way in which it can operate. And so when you look at the mechanism of these sorts of technical aids, educational assistances, the setting up of university systems, programs, departments, and offering scholars to go and do their masters and PhDs in, say, Harvard, Berkeley, Chicago, or Princeton, that is a form of ideological imperialism.



Blake Nissen (Getty Images)  
Harvard University's Dunster House in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

■ ■ Why?

Because it has the effect of developing mindsets; and rewarding mindsets for that matter, because there is actually money to be had, grants to be had, fellowships, years and years abroad to study, and you're well paid to do that, and then come back to your own country in order to apply those certain kinds of ideas, thinking, and maybe government policy in the universities in terms of teaching the new generations as well as working in think tanks or the media.

So I think that kind of imperialism is a far softer-sounding kind of imperialism. But from my own studies, it's often the case that with this form of foreign aid, foreign foundations and governments are trying to build a new ideological or intellectual elite in the recipient countries. Those newly-formed intellectual elites, in their turn, begin to promote certain kinds of ideas about the role of that nation, its national interests, and what how those national interests should fit in with the West. It creates a kind of ideological pressure to integrate the country into western international system, and it's very often allied with the military, which can lead to a very powerful alliance of economists, intellectuals, and the military.

A version of military-intellectual complex, to borrow from American concepts!

Correct, but on a much smaller scale. I've studied the example of Indonesia. The urban elite in Indonesia was considered by the United States and Westerners too urban, disconnected from 70% or 80% of the population which was in the countryside, and also disconnected from the military. And the military, which was receiving quite a lot of aid, was encouraged to see themselves as a force for national development. In doing so, western-trained economists linked with anti-communist political elements in the villages, and then linked both with the local police and the military, especially through the academies. In that way, they were effectively creating a new political force with military elements in it. That is properly called coercion. And that wasn't done openly. It wasn't like they were saying to the Sukarno government that "This is what we are doing, we want to support this." This was covertly, undermining the authority of the government and rebuilding the basis of a future coup, which was exactly what happened.



Getty Images  
Sukarno, first president of Indonesia, who was removed from power by General Suharto in a US-backed coup.

Since some 25 years ago, Iranian authorities began talking about cultural imperialism of the United States in war terms like "cultural onslaught" and "cultural surprise attack." Given that you argue that it's an actually coercive process, especially if we take culture in its broader sense, to what extent do you think a war discourse is warranted?

In a way, it is a battle of ideas, it is the combat of one way of living with other ways of living, which do not conform to certain Western ideas. You may not be running your economy the way they think it ought to be, it may not be open to foreign investment, it may not be open to repatriation of the profits of foreign investments, it may not be open in a variety of other ways as well. If you adopt a system which is not to their liking, for instance the Cuban revolution which runs a particular kind of social and economic system, it will be ideologically and intellectually attacked: There is a battle of ideas, tied to military and economic battles.

The Cold War was as much a battle of ideologies, clashing with each other, each representing a different way of looking at the world and being in relation to free enterprise, capitalist economy, and so on. So, yes, I would say there is a war and it's often seen as a war by the Western countries. It's a war even on an intellectual level. The development of the social sciences, and the use of the social sciences during wartime, for example, was often seen just like people are developing new weapons and new gun sites: Social Science, the kind of knowledge it produces, and the effect that knowledge has, is just as good as a gun site to the military.

This battle of ideas or ideals and ideological warfare remains very, very powerful: Once you can establish your ideological hegemony, i.e. the hegemony of your ideas, people think they have found it themselves and they have come to these conclusions themselves. They, therefore, stop asking and questioning it in any critical way.

They internalize it.

Yes. And once it's internalized, it's yours without you even necessarily knowing where it came from. There are the media, church, political parties, schools, universities; 1,000 different ways in which ideas are packed into us. A lot of what we know, is actually an internalized version of very large parts of those ideas. We may change them later on as we grow up and learn and meet different kinds of people, but that ideological hegemony or mindset is very difficult to shift once it's embedded. And the whole purpose is to get it embedded, and to wait for