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Smartness as prudence: smart power and classical realism

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ABSTRACT
The concept of smart power has gained wide currency. It may be argued, however, that the term is more persuasive than informative, a problem shared with the associated concepts of soft and hard power. This article shows that smart power covers a conceptual understanding with more depth than meets the eye, relying on elements of classical realism and in particular ideas of prudent statesmanship. Highlighting the connection between current, policy-oriented understandings of smart power, and key elements of classical realism, I bring increased theoretical depth to the concept and – in effect – a re-interpretation of the idea of smart power.

1. Introduction

‘Smart power’, the idea that efficient power needs to be a mixture of hard and soft power, has emerged as a focus both for primarily U.S. foreign policymaking, and for a developing debate on the nature of international power (Nossel 2004, Armitage and Nye 2007, Wilson 2008, Nye 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2011a, 2011b, Resnick 2015). There has also been attention paid to the possibilities and implications of smart power strategy in the context of EU foreign relations (Davis Cross 2011, Grøn and Wivel 2011).

Smart power is presented as an innovation, which may be true for the term itself but not for the concept as such. However, smart power presents some considerable problems of interpretation. In part, the problem resides in terminology and choice of wording. The term ‘smart’ is more persuasive than informative, a problem shared with the associated concepts of soft and hard power. We have little grasp of the meaning of soft power except that it is not hard, and the other way around. Likewise, there is no firm understanding of smart power on offer, except that it is more effective, more conducive to given goals, than the alternatives. From another point of view the idea of smart power as the successful combination of soft and hard power elements comes dangerously close to a truism. If the implication is that it is a good idea (smart) to consider some combination of means, rather than relying on one form of power, it is hard to see the concept as a groundbreaking contribution to either strategic thought or theoretical understanding of the nature of contemporary international power. Hence the question is if we are presented with a
significant concept, which adds constructively to the discourse of power, or if this is a rhetorical and perhaps nonsensical turn of phrase.

In this article, I argue that smart power is indeed a significant notion, which covers a conceptual understanding and ideals of practice with more depth than meets the eye. A main tenet of this argument is that the idea of smart power falls back on important elements of the classical realist tradition of international thought, in particular the role of prudence (Cf. Beer and Hariman 2013). Indeed, the classical realist tradition plays a significant but subdued role in Nye’s overall argument. This is particularly true in making the hard-soft power distinction where it is stated that classical realists were well aware of the soft side of power and in this respect, compare favorably with latter days’ neo-realist. Thucydides and Machiavelli are referred to as important originators (Nye 2011a, p. 28), and E. H. Carr is commended for taking a differential view of power (Nye 2011a, p. 82), but the foundation of soft and smart power in the classical realist tradition is not elaborated much further.

I will refer to classical realism as a tradition in order to emphasize that what I have in mind is not just the twentieth century proponents of realism, such as E.H. Carr, Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau, but an understanding of power and politics that goes back to antiquity (Cf. Lebow 2003, pp. 39–40). This is not to deny that there are different versions and even competing realist theories (Schmidt 2007, p. 44). Accordingly, Wohlfarth (Wohlfarth 2010, p. 136) sees classical realism as ‘the realist tradition in all its diversity as it unfolded prior to the publication of Waltz’s Theory of International Politics in 1979’. Forde (Forde 1992, p. 62) notes that “classical realism” … is a tradition that begins with Thucydides and extends through Machiavelli to the early social contract theorists Hobbes, Spinoza, and Rousseau (Forde 1992, 62). According to Smith (Smith 1986, p. 4), ‘Thucydides effectively defined a paradigm of realist thought’, and together with Machiavelli and Hobbes created ‘a rich mine of political thought which all modern realists draw from.’ (Smith 1986, 14). By highlighting the connection between current, policy-oriented statements and understandings of smart power, and principal elements of classical realism, I bring increased theoretical depth to the concept and – in effect – provide a re-interpretation of the idea of smart power. This will be done through a close reading of in particular Nye, with the aim of narrowing down to principles and ideas which are constitutive of the concept, but detached from the immediate context of current affairs.

By explicitly connecting ideas of smart power with the realist tradition of International Relations, this article relates to the work of Giulio Gallarotti on ‘cosmopolitan power’ (Gallarotti 2010). Gallarotti’s theory builds on the idea of smart power, and offers an attempt to bridge the realist, neoliberal and constructivist paradigms of International Relations to produce a conception of power that is adequate to the challenges of the contemporary international system. In particular, excessive reliance on hard power increasingly risks becoming counterproductive, actually causing disempowerment. In this light, sources and application of soft power and, more importantly, the careful balancing of different power resources become a priority. In developing his argument, Gallarotti shows that the key elements of cosmopolitan power are to be found in realist writings from Thucydides to Hans Morgenthau. My objective is somewhat different, however: I focus on smart power as an important but problematic concept of contemporary policy-oriented discourse, in dire need of interpretation. My
thesis is that the complex notion of prudence, one of the hallmarks of classical realism, is of signal importance for this purpose. Accordingly, the following section introduces the concept and establishes the connections between the ‘smartness’ implied in the practice of smart power, and traditional notions of prudence in politics. The third section further develops the argument that smart power essentially emanates from the classical realist tradition of thought. Finally, it needs to be pointed out that the article has an interpretative, not exegetical, focus. I am not in the first place attempting to clarify what Nye or anybody else have in mind when addressing the concept of smart power, but to explore the meaning potential and possible implications of the concept. In this sense, I engage in a re-reading and a subsequent re-interpretation of the notion of smart power, in order to provide a richer and more faceted understanding than what is on offer in the extant literature.

2. Towards an interpretation as prudence

It has been remarked that smart power is much older than the term as such (Dobriansky 2013, p. ix). However, the academic discourse on smart power was very much motivated by the shortcomings of the policies adopted by the Bush administration in the War on Terror and the insensitivity and even counter-productivity of the unilateral and massively military response to the challenges of terrorism and militant Islam (Armitage and Nye 2007, Gallarotti 2015). Consequently, the idea of smart power was readily adopted by the first Obama administration (Clinton 2014, p. 33–4; Nye 2011a, p. 209).

Smart power is defined in slightly different ways by different authors, but the mainstream understanding emphasizes the mixture of hard and soft power elements into efficient strategy. In Nye’s own terms:

Smart power is the combination of the hard power of coercion and payment with the soft power of persuasion and attraction (Nye 2011a, p. xiii).

I defined smart power as the ability to combine hard and soft power resources into effective strategies (Nye 2011a, p. 22–3).

Ernest J. Wilson echoes this view, defining smart power as

... the capacity of an actor to combine elements of hard power and soft power in ways that are mutually reinforcing such that the actor’s purposes are advanced effectively and efficiently (Wilson 2008, p. 110).

Hilary Clinton, who embraced the concept as Secretary of State, thus indicating the potential policy-making impact of the smart power discourse, adopted a similar understanding:

For me, smart power meant choosing the right combination of tools – diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural – for each situation (Clinton 2014, p. 33).

The term was originally introduced by Suzanne Nossel in a 2004 Foreign Affairs article (Nossel 2004, Cf. Davis Cross 2011, p. 691, n1; Nye 2011a, p. 244, n55). It is significant for the purpose of this discussion that Nossel’s understanding of smartness mainly amounts to raising consciousness about the central tenets of U.S. foreign
policy tradition, and more precisely what she takes to be ‘the great mainstay of twentieth century U.S. foreign policy: liberal internationalism’ (Nossel 2004, p. 131). The appropriate response to the challenge of terrorism would accordingly be to reactivate a well-established policy framework, which emphasized soft power measures as just as important as military might. Accordingly, smart power involved a reframing of the security issues facing the U.S. after 9/11 into a progressive liberal format, promoting American core interests and values ‘through a stable grid of allies, institutions, and norms’ (Nossel 2004, p. 132). The challenge was not to defeat terrorism by military means, as much as endorsing a liberal world order in which U.S. interests would harmonize with progressive forces in world politics. But the main point in this context was that smart power in foreign policy-making should involve attention to long-term goals, as well as an understanding of the social and political values that historically have guided American statecraft.

Joseph Nye has long been the most visible proponent and developer of the smart power concept. The focus on smart power has grown out of his engagement with soft power (Nye 1990, 2002, 2004). In The Future of Power (Nye 2011a), Nye provided further guidelines for an American smart power strategy. Essentially Nye’s analysis points in two directions. On the one hand, there is the instrumental definition of smart power as ‘the ability to combine hard and soft power resources into effective strategies’ (Nye 2011a, p. 22–23). On the other hand, there is an argument to the effect that smart power in practice involves a synthesis of the traditional opposites of realism and idealism (Nye 2011a, p. 231).

In this latter perspective, it is difficult to envisage smart power as merely a question of combining hard and soft means and instruments in a goal-efficient way; the idea of smart power seems to include attention to vision and values. Hence the most interesting and problematic word in Clinton’s statement above is ‘right’. Is ‘the right combination’ necessarily restricted to that which is most goal-efficient, or can this possibly be understood as indicating ‘the right thing to do’ in each situation, thereby encompassing a normative concern? At this point it seems important to note that it is possible to understand the projected meaning of the phrase in such a way that an evaluation of the right combination of instruments ought to include normative considerations. It is actually possible to find definitions of smart power with an unambiguously normative aspect, i.e. statements that tie the perception of smart power to achievement of specific values:

Smart power is comprised by two elements: the quest for building society among states and between states and non-state actors; as well as the desire for cleaner forms of power projection (Chong 2015, p. 233).

Smart power emerged on the foreign policy agenda in the context of a debate concerning the changing conditions for wielding international power, which potentially raises issues about what power means are admissible and for what purposes. However, the concept is usually defined in instrumental terms, focusing entirely on the issue of finding combinations of available power resources that are likely to be instrumentally successful. Nye’s writing on smart power is heavily tinged by the policy context out of which it has grown: the perceived need to provide a template and a narrative for U.S. foreign policy that is appropriate for the challenges of the 21st century. On this
view, smart power is apparently focused on outcomes, since for a power strategy to qualify as or being recognized as ‘smart’ it has to have proved effective. But does smart power conceivably involve a vision of what goals to pursue, and what means that are applicable and appropriate – or is it simply a question of coming up with the correct, instrumental, combination of any means, for any objectives? On the face of it, the latter is indeed the case. However, my interpretation is that detached from the immediate American foreign policy context, smart power opens to an interpretation in terms of general qualities of policy-making. In this regard, two important aspects are flexibility and reflexivity. Flexibility is about taking the whole range of policy means into consideration, in an unprejudiced manner, and thus the wisdom of not always acting in the same way, using the same means of response irrespective of context and situation characteristics. But flexibility in terms of not allowing oneself to get bogged down in habitual and simplistic patterns of strategy would seem to presume reflexivity, an ability to consider enduring interests and ensure that present actions and policies are reasonably consistent with the history and the long-term values and identity of the community. Policy-making is always, or should always be, a matter of calibrating means and resources, which presumes a clear understanding of how different kinds of instruments fit together, again a question of practical historical competence.

I argue that smart power is not always, at any given point in time, about making efficient use of hard and soft power resources in tandem. Rather, smart power is using hard and soft power, according to circumstances. There is more to being smart than the skillful balancing of different kinds of instruments: the capability to see that different means may be called for, and the willingness to adjust policy-making accordingly. In my understanding, the notion of smart power is rather directed towards the predisposition only to see big sticks or only to see soft inducement as the available means. In this sense, the virtue of smart power is not ‘the ability to combine’, but rather ‘the ability to discern and understand’ the ‘right’ set of means in any given situation. Or to paraphrase Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric (Aristotle 1991, p. 74), a parallel that is not entirely farfetched in this context, the capacity to observe the available means of influence of which any particular matter admits. On this understanding, current ideas of smart power have affinities with a tradition of social and political thought that emphasizes the role of judgment in relation to specific cases and situations, rather than the mastering of generalized rules (Toulmin 1990). In this perception, smart power reflects a holistic understanding, and as such requires an appreciation of goals and how they relate to available and appropriate means, and conceivable developments and consequences beyond the horizon of the of the immediate decision situation.

Thus, the idea of prudence emerges as a potential integral to the logic of smart power. In this respect, contemporary ideas about smart power have a counterpart in Barbara Tuchman’s analysis of folly in politics (Tuchman 1984, p. 5): ‘The pursuit of policy contrary to the self-interest of the constituency or state involved.’ The author adds the conditions that a misguided policy must have been perceived as counter-productive in its own time, that there were feasible alternatives available, and that the policy is that of a group and persist beyond any one political lifetime. Smartness is arguably the opposite of folly, if it is recognized that folly is about more than merely acting out of touch with well-understood self-interests: It is the essential inability to reflect on consequences in relation to goals and ultimately an idea of the
good of the community. What makes smart power smart, then, is the ability to settle for a strategy that is designed for and adapted for the particular qualities and demands of the situation at hand, even when there are readily available ‘standard operating procedures’, which based on historical experience are assumed to be effective in analogous situations.

The interpretation of smart power that I am attempting builds on the presumption that there are principles left unstated or implicit in more policy-oriented accounts. The practice of good judgment, or prudence, is one such principle, possibly at the heart of the idea of smart power. Again, there are indications in Nye’s work:

It is worth remembering that the ancient tradition of just-war theory asks not only about proportionality and discrimination in means, but also about how the probability of success will affect consequences. That is the case for prudence that realists properly extol in a smart power strategy. (Nye 2011a, p. 209)

A return to traditional prudence must be part of a twenty-first-century smart power narrative. Global leadership does not require global interventionism. (Nye 2011a, 230)

Nye relates his argument for smart power to the realist tradition by implicitly indicating the shortcomings of neo-realism. Thus, the whole argument is in a sense backward-looking, a narrative emphasizing understandings of international politics that are contained in the classical tradition, and at risk of being lost. The full range of power utensils at the disposal of states was apparently well understood by earlier generations of scholars and, presumably, policy-makers. Prudence then appears as a lost virtue that needs to be retrieved.

It is important, however, to recognize that a call for prudential judgment is not the same thing as to endorse soft strategies over hard ones. It is rather the ability to deliberate choices before deciding on action. In Chris Brown’s analysis

… realist prudence involves both a deep knowledge of statecraft, that is, of how to practice international relations, as well as the possession of the intellectual ability to think through how things might be different, and to weigh the consequences of action. (Brown 2012, p. 441)

The implication is that combining and balancing power resources involves appreciating and evaluating the situation, which is exactly what practical wisdom is all about:

[R]ealism, at its best, is based precisely on the classical Greek virtue of phronesis or, when drawing on the republican tradition of Machiavelli, its Latin near-equivalent, prudential. (Brown 2012, p. 448)

The question of how practical wisdom and prudence relates to smart power puts focus exactly on the idea of ‘smartness’ and how it can be applied to politics and power practices. As earlier pointed out, the term smart is possibly a misnomer in this context since it strongly connotes ‘cleverness’ and similar meanings. What is on offer here, however, is the claim that ‘smartness’ in smart power actually indicates a particular form of understanding, the ability to see and comprehend what is called for, not as the outcome of cunning or calculation, but in the immediate grasp of what is the appropriate thing to do in a given set of circumstances, in which case wisdom emerges as an alternative concept:
As both Aristotle and Aquinas insisted, wisdom is to be contrasted with cleverness because cleverness is the ability to take the right steps to any end, whereas wisdom is related only to good ends, and to human life in general rather than to the ends of particular arts. (Foot 2003, p. 109)

The question is what is expected according to norms and conventions, and in this sense what is called for or should follow from the kind of situation we are looking at. According to this argument, smart power involves a holistic appreciation of the situation at hand, and the best possible disposition of available means and resources. Holistic meaning that choice and design of strategy depends on the capacity to take in the whole range of objectives that may be affected, as well as the whole range of policy options. This understanding, in turn, is based on the idea that judgment is a necessary ingredient of good statecraft.

For the purpose of this discussion it is important to show ways of indicating that the smartness of smart power potentially covers more unfathomable qualities of statecraft than what is ideally depicted as the calculation of outcomes. Again, the allusion to the classical realist tradition is an antidote, focusing attention on the aspect of deliberation and political wisdom. On this view, the practice of smart power or smart power strategy is inextricably linked to the practice of (good) judgment, which, as Ronald Beiner has pointed out, is a concept that essentially escapes attempts at abstract definition or analysis: ‘we know it when we see it, and when we see it, we see it embodied in some exemplary judging subject’ (Beiner 1983, p. 162; Cf. Bain 2000, p. 458). The theme is vast and complicated, but the main notion is that factual knowledge and analysis can take us some of the way towards effective strategy making, but that there always is a margin, in general a wide one, that must be left over to judgment. A relatively analytical attempt to get to grips with the concept of good judgment is offered by Stanley Renshon and Deborah Larson in their 2003 volume on good judgment in foreign policy (Renshon & Larson Renshon and Welch Larson 2003). A radically different approach to essentially the same topic is Charles Hill’s (Hill 2010) more recent literary study of grand strategy.

To conclude, in this section I have attempted to explore and extend the potential meanings of smart power. From one point of view, smart power consists simply in finding a goal-efficient mix of hard and soft power resources. But finding that particular and successful mixture in any given situation depends on qualities and capacities on the part of decision makers that are best captured in terms such as reflexivity, good judgment, and prudence. These are concepts that I also take to be core elements of the realist tradition of thought.

3. Smart power and the realist tradition

Machiavelli’s metaphor of the lion and the fox, famously introduced in chapter 18 of The Prince, may give an indication of what is actually at stake in the smart power discourse. Thus Machiavelli points out that there are two ways of fighting, by law and by force. The former is natural to men, the latter to beasts. The problem is that since the former tends to be ineffective, the prince must understand how to make use of the qualities of the beast. By so doing, he must learn from both the lion and the fox (Machiavelli 1961, p. 99). The lion is physically powerful and imposing, but simple-minded and thus defenseless against traps. Foxes are clever and can recognize traps, but
are in turn defenseless against wolves. The Machiavellian moral is that the prince frequently needs to rely on the hard power of the beast but is well advised to make use both of the lion’s strength and the fox’s cunning: ‘Those who simply act like lions are stupid’ (Machiavelli 1961, p. 99). Apparently, the smart thing to do is to combine the best qualities of the lion and the fox. The prince needs to have a flexible disposition, ‘varying as fortune and circumstances dictate’ (Machiavelli 1961, p. 101; Cf. Skinner 1978, p. 128–30). Which appears to be the central idea of smart power: to consider the full range of power resources. It is stupidity to rely exclusively on violent force – there must be a readiness to attract and persuade others, in the Machiavellian perspective by deceptive and dishonest means if called for.

So, the basic logic of smart power runs deep in the realist tradition, which as such cannot be reduced to a set of behavioral rules; it includes premises about the meaning of power and politics and how these relate to human nature. Accordingly, classical realism is not just an alternative theory among others, but a continuous discussion on the conditions of international relations. It is as close as we get to a holistic understanding of international politics, since it expresses both fundamental, unalterable principles, and a reflective, prudent attitude oriented towards choice and action.

But smart power is usually presented as a guideline for foreign policy in the 21st century, and closely connected to what are perceived as exceptional and immense changes in the international system. The forces of globalization are inexorably transforming the conditions for international relations, and as a consequence the meaning of power in international affairs will have to be reassessed. All of this tends to put the need for smart power in focus:

Understanding smart power is especially important in a world that is changing at a historically unprecedented pace and generating tumultuous outcomes as a consequence (Gallarotti 2015, p. 246–7).

Hence understanding modes of change (and continuity) in world politics appears as a significant background to the smart power narrative. Realism, however, is frequently criticized for not paying attention, indeed not being able to address change in international politics. Jack Donnelly observes that the inability to comprehend change in international relations is a ‘standard complaint’ against realism: ‘Realism is a theory “tuned” to explaining constancy’, and this should not necessarily be taken as an unintended blind spot, but the whole point of realist theorizing (Donnelly 2013, p. 49; Cf. Jervis 1998, p. 984). In K. J. Holsti’s assessment,

[realism not only is based on a faulty logic (the assumption that anarchy necessarily leads to conflict), but fails to acknowledge the critical importance of developments in the vast domain outside state-to-state relations. The essential concepts of realism indeed act as blinders to a vast array of significant developments. (Holsti 2004, p. 4)

In a comment directed primarily against John Mearsheimer’s argument in The Tragedy of Great Power Conflicts (Mearsheimer 2001), Andrew Hurrell maintains:

Those who deny that there has been significant change in the character of international political relations rely on such a narrow view of the agenda of international order, such a one-dimensional view of the logic of power-political competition amongst states, and such a constrained account of the role of international law and institutions that it becomes
impossible to make sense of the far-reaching changes that have taken place in the character of international society, above all in the period since 1945. (Hurrell 2007, p. 8)

This kind of critique, in varying degrees, tends to beg three essential questions: What change are we talking about? What comprehension are we looking for? What realism is being considered? Propositions to the effect that momentous social and historical change is underway should immediately be followed by questions about everything that nevertheless remains the same. Whether people think of themselves as being located in extra-ordinary circumstances depends on the perspective of history they possess. Are we living through a phase of history which is out of the ordinary? Those who claim that there has been momentous change in the last three decades are making exactly this kind of claim, which always should raise doubts in terms of historical myopia. What is the ‘normal’ pace of historical change? Are there defining moments (for example large scale inter-state warfare), which constitute decisive turning-points in international life? Or is history the slow successive accumulation of change, and the effects on social, political, spiritual or economic life just discernable?

Arguably the only really interesting way of discussing and analyzing change is in the tension between change and continuity. The phenomenon (the empirical manifestation) of social change depends on the perception of continuity. So, we need to identify the temporary constants of the field: what theories and frameworks are capable of providing that assistance? There are quite likely several options or candidates, perhaps even any theory of international relations must necessarily address the interplay of change and continuity. The question is to what extent change and continuity are turned into central themes. I argue that classical realism is a theoretical tradition with sufficient historical depth and conceptual texture to comprehend significant change in world politics (Walker 1987). The emphasis on the concept of tradition is important in this context, and will be further elaborated below.

Postulating that certain determinants of international relations are essentially unaltered, and perhaps even unalterable, is in fact a way to enhance understanding of the dynamics of international politics, and how they may shape and reshape international behavior under different circumstances. This points towards a dialectical view of international change. The perception of ‘change in progress’, or ‘change having occurred’, or ‘change being likely to take place’ is based on another perception, that of stasis or ‘non-change’. If we are captured by the perception that international life is changing dramatically, to the extent that we need to reconsider our frameworks of understanding international relations, i.e. our theories, this is so because we have been captives of the perception that the scope conditions of international relations until quite recently have been essentially static.

One line of critique against realism holds that to comprehend change is to predict change. However, Donnelly comments that the failure to predict and explain the end of the Cold War is shared with all main theories of international relations. The expectation of prediction reflects a positivistic and natural science outlook. The explanatory paradigm is oriented towards accounting for the occurrence of events, but fails to deal with the context of events, which involves present manifestations, historical origins, and possible future developments. The distinction between explanation and understanding is notoriously problematic, but in keeping with Hans-Georg Gadamer, we may think of
this as ‘the difference between understanding meaning and explaining the occurrence of events’ (Warnke 1987, p. 2). My argument would be that realism, in its classical form, operates over the whole range, from prediction to understanding. To understand significance in international relations is an equally demanding task as to provide causal explanations, but it is a different kind of scientific pursuit. Even if it were possible to account for the end of the Cold War, that is to clarify according to what causal logic the Cold War came to an end, there would still remain the question what does it mean? What did the end of the Cold War signify? All of these are questions that presume historical reflection and not just knowledge of events and dates, but a self-reflected understanding of patterns and logics of history. This is not to say that history repeats itself according to unalterable patterns, but that there is need for a knowledge of what are, or tend to be, the prime and secondary movers of change. What are typical and thus possible developments? Actually, the whole idea of ‘the end of the Cold War’ is an idea, i.e. a particular interpretation of immensely complex patterns of interaction, self- and other-understanding. Events such as these are not possible to observe from a detached point of view since the very act of perception and subsequent interpretation presumes involvement, being a part of it all.

Understanding change in world politics involves the capacity to discriminate between consequential and inconsequential change, the capability for critical evaluation, to relate observable developments to ‘standards’. Classical realism offers such understanding by identifying those aspects of international relations that are not susceptible to changing circumstances, and by implicitly propagating an attitude of prudence in how to evaluate the significance of various processes of change.

As indicated, the strength of classical realism in accounting for significant international change can partly be attributed to the fact that this is a tradition of thought, i.e. a body of ideas and predispositions that has been continuously re-constructed over time, and the very point of which is to put contemporary developments into historical perspective. In this sense, classical realism emerges as a tradition of thought precipitated by the need, not in the first place to explain or to predict change, but to understand and manage change, which accounts for the perception that we can always expect peace and orderly international relations to be challenged by disruptive forces of one kind or another. I think it is important in this context that many of the writings that have been handed down as contributions to classical realism were conceived in periods of major political and cultural change. Thucydides wrote his history in the conviction that the war between Athens and Sparta was ‘the greatest disturbance in the history of the Hellenes’ (Thucydides 1972, p. 35), but also against the background of what Lebow has characterized as the ‘proto-Enlightenment’ of fifth-century Greece (Lebow 2003, pp. 29–31; 284–90). Machiavelli created his works in in the political upheavals of late 15th and early 16th century Florence, but also the predicament of the Italian city republics in the face of the threat of great power interventions. Hobbes developed his theory of the all-powerful state as a reaction to the anarchy of the English civil war. In the 20th century, Carr, Morgenthau, Niebuhr, Herz, Kennan, Kissinger and others all wrote in response to the crises of the two World Wars, or the Cold War.

Traditions of thought do not grow organically out of timeless concerns, however. Nor are they necessarily imposed as constructed or invented (Cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Rather they emerge in some measure as projections of the problems of
interpretation and decision-making raised by contemporary developments. But that power of projection is simultaneously conditioned by the consciousness (or equally possible, sub-consciousness) of analogous events and their interpretations in the past. As Henry Kissinger once put it:

\[\text{... it is no objection to a study of international relations in terms of history to point out that Napoleon is not exactly equivalent to Hitler or Castlereagh to Churchill. Whatever relationship exists depends not on precise correspondence, but on a similarity of the problems confronted. (Kissinger 1957, p. 331)}\]

For the purpose of this discussion, however, my argument is that the realist tradition should not be condensed into a pattern template, or a reservoir of loosely connected ideas; it rather constitutes a narrative which as such translates into authority. At the heart of the realist tradition is not a fixed set of principles, but an image of the essence of politics, an image that contains a strong element of narrative authority through the implied weight of historical experience. The fact that we talk and think in terms of classical realism suggests that we are looking at a tradition not only deeply rooted in history, but emanating a sense of authority, steeped in experience. This is not to suggest that writers in different epochs were somehow mysteriously engaged in the same conversation. We rationalize an order of tradition by understanding arguments as parts of a long evolving discourse. Morgenthau and the other modern realists were both re-appropriating historically well-established political ideas and developing the tradition of realism through these applications to current affairs. They were essentially reformulating a posture and an outlook on politics in general and international politics in particular under present circumstances, facing present concerns. Traditions are not fossilized structures that only serve as a backdrop for reactionary or nostalgic arguments and programs; working traditions are responsive, living things (MacIntyre 1984, pp. 221–3). E. H. Carr, for instance, did not use the term traditions to signify the realist and idealist strands of thought. Instead he used expressions like school, doctrine, philosophy, and mode of thought. But it is difficult not to read his work as an account of deeply settled argumentative attitudes to politics, i.e. as traditions. Morgenthau’s six principles of political realism were not a reiteration of a specific set of handed-down political beliefs, but precisely an act of interpretation, an attempt to define realism in the way that all traditions are sustained and reproduced. It is in the nature of tradition to be un-delimited and dynamic, yet preserving a core of meaning. This may be as explicit as a set of principles or dogma, but is more likely to come down to attitude, a characteristic way of framing and approaching problems and developments.

As has been pointed out, in delineating a smart power strategy Nye points to the need for closing the gap between realists and liberals; smart power should be a strategy based on liberal realism (Nye 2011a, p. 213 and 231; Cf. McDonough 2011, p. 17). The idea of liberal realism links that of smart power to the interconnections and tensions between two spheres of thought that conventionally are understood as each other’s opposites. Indeed, the allusion to liberal realism indicates that smart power potentially touches on a long-standing problem of realist thought, which concerns the philosophical as well as policy-relevant connections between realist and idealist political principles (Barkin 2003). The meaning of liberal realism is certainly disputable, but some of the central elements seems to be a recognition of
the multidimensional aspect of international power, the need for joint action among partners, and a sense of responsibility for the production of global public or common goods, ultimately for providing international order (Nye 2011a, p 231–34; Ikenberry and Kupchan 2004). Apparently, this kind of policy depends on resolving the tensions between realist and liberal outlooks on world politics, which were well recognized by the classical realists. Liberal realism is about reconciling the opposites of idealism and realism, on the assumption that well considered policy necessitates both points of view. It may even be that the apparent opposites presume each other: in a dialectical pattern the gist of realism cannot be articulated without its idealist anti-thesis, and the other way around. Realism is a position that presumes its opposite, just as utopian thought derives its power from an implied vision of reality. As Robert Cox has put it:

[E]ach assertion concerning reality contains implicitly its opposite . . . both assertion and opposite are not mutually exclusive but share some measure of the truth sought, a truth, moreover, that is always in motion, never to be encapsulated in some definitive form (Cox 1986, p. 215).

Again, we are confronted with the essentially dialectical nature of realist thought (Cf. Berki 1981). Carr’s denouncement of utopianism was conditioned by the emphatic conviction that sound politics could never ignore either pole, since ‘[t]he characteristic vice of the utopian is naivety; of the realist, sterility’ (Carr 2001, p. 12). The ambiguity in Carr’s writing on the proper relationship between power and morality makes ‘utopian realist’ a sense-making designation for his thought on international relations (Booth 1991, Cf. Cox 2001, p. liii). Likewise, Hans J. Morgenthau commented on ‘the curious dialectics of ethics and politics’ (Morgenthau 1946, p. 177). John H. Herz developed a realist liberal program, which in its international aspect, while recognizing the inevitability of power politics,

... looks for ways and means of bringing such policies into a workable system wherein power is applied in the interest of some order, in particular for the balancing of strength and the prevention of hegemony (Herz 1951, p. 225; Cf. Sylvest 2008).

Finding ways to recognize and combining a realist understanding of politics and international affairs, with a sense of morality and a vision of liberal order, is accordingly an ongoing concern in the realist tradition. On reflection, this is not just important from the point of view of balance and restraint in policy-making, but also for understanding the nature of politics and policy-making. Smart power raises the question of what ‘smartness’ implies, and one suggestion, which follows from the classical realist context, is a focus on practical reason. For classical realists, even with different normative and philosophical convictions, the understanding of international politics is inseparable from considerations of prudence and practice (Lieven and Hulsman 2006, p. 416). But as Chris Brown has pointed out, prudence is somewhat misleading as the accepted translation of phronesis, having connotations of caution and inaction, whereas practical reason concerns the ability to consider and evaluate consequences of action (Brown 2012, p. 453). Prudence in this sense figures prominently in Nye’s exposition of smart power, and my interpretation is that smart power, properly understood, is a call
for precisely the kind of prudential statesmanship that the realist tradition of international thought has developed over centuries, if not millennia.

In a sense, the problem is one of managing power in a world where the sources of power are becoming increasingly diffused. Rather than wielding the utensils of power for specific purposes, states and other international actors are frequently reduced to managing force fields that are more or less out of their control. Managing power is equally about using material and non-material resources for reaching policy goals, and having a sense of what is appropriate behavior; i.e. issues of value-rationality need to be addressed in the same context as issues of instrumental rationality. Managing power relations requires strategy that is sufficiently flexible to deal with the contingencies of international affairs, while maintaining a clear vision of long-term objectives and values.

Balancing hard and soft power elements into a strategy that is both instrumental and value-rational necessitates a kind of consideration, foresight, and good judgment, which is traditionally associated with the virtue of prudence and the Aristotelian idea of practical wisdom. Hence smart power also concerns the quality of the decision-making process and its institutional setting. Smart power is only made possible, or is even characterized, by a high-quality process of decision-making. ‘Smartness’ in this understanding stands for deliberation, impulse control, self-knowledge as well as relevant knowledge about the other, and the creative imagination to foresee possible consequences.

4. Conclusion

The principal argument of this article has been that smart power is a significant notion in the practice and study of international power, provided that the concept is not reduced to an instrumentally rational mixing of hard and soft power elements. Rather, it should be understood as the capacity to design policy and strategy that takes into consideration the full range of available resources according to circumstances. This capacity depends largely on qualities that are constitutive of the classical realist tradition of international thought, and the smartness of smart power should be interpreted as a variation, or an expression, of the virtue of prudence.

We have encountered the claim that fundamental conditions for international relations and foreign policy have shifted in a qualitative sense and in such a manner that efficient power requires balancing hard and soft aspects. The levels of complexity that policy-makers (and analysts) need to cope with are much higher today than at some earlier point in time. Nye, for his part, argues that there are two significant power shifts in the world. There is an ongoing transition of power among states, essentially the continuation of the cycles of rise and fall of powers, and mostly interesting from the point of view of the discussion about the unipolar status of the U.S., or emerging multipolarity; and there is diffusion of power, away from states to non-state actors. The further argument is that more and more activities tend to take place outside of the control of even the most powerful states (Nye 2011a, chapters 5–6). This needs to be qualified to the extent that a premise seems to be that once upon a time, or up until now, powerful states were capable of controlling most everything that went on in terms of human and social relations within or across borders. The territorial Westphalian state is and always was a most imperfect contraption, more an ideal than empirical reality. States – even totalitarian ones – have always exercised less than complete rule
over their inhabitants and their activities. Despite the narratives of momentous change, it turns out that adopting smart power strategies rather implies a return to classical realist ideas about the conduct of foreign policy; either a return to conditions that have applied before, or the need for attention to fundamental conditions that for some reason have been ignored or not sufficiently well understood. The smart power narrative seems to harbor an idea of cyclical order, which as such indicates connections to classical international thought. But classical realism is not only concerned with change and the consequences of change, but arguably with identifying constants. Even if there are technological innovations and institutional progress, human nature and the stakes of politics remain essentially the same. The wisdom of classical realism consists, *inter alia*, in avoiding oversimplifications, to search out and define the actual complexity of the situation, and to consider a wide range of policy alternatives.

In this interpretation, the roots of smart power are deep indeed. The essential advice contained in the current concept of smart power keeps reappearing in international thought. As suggested by Charles Hill (2010), a careful consideration of the entire range of policy means is the very foundation of prudent statecraft:

> Aristotle would use the *Iliad* to teach the first principle of statecraft: diplomacy and power are indispensable and must be used, for best effect, in tandem (Hill 2010, p. 9).

My argument, then, is that in indicating the continued relevance of classical realist thought, the enduring significance of practical wisdom, as expounded by Aristotle, is also highlighted. This follows from the previous references made to prudential politics, but I will attempt to develop the point further, as a means of concluding the paper.

Prudence is frequently taken to mean a concern with possible outcomes and consequences. Hence, Morgenthau in his fourth principle of political realism asserts that ‘[r]ealism … considers prudence – the weighing of consequences of alternative political actions – to be the supreme virtue of politics’ (Morgenthau 2006, p. 12), and as we have seen, Nye himself indicates, with reference to just-war theory, that this not only asks about ‘proportionality and discrimination in means, but also about how the probability of success will affect consequences’ (Nye 2011a, p. 209). This concern with evolving consequences points directly to an inherent tension between moral principles and political efficiency. By implication, smart power can be understood as signifying the need for not only foresight and restraint but actually virtuous action, and the practice of *phronesis*. Thus, smartness translates into virtuosity, not in the technical sense but in terms of the capacity to see what is the right thing to do. Statecraft and statesmanship involve the possession and practice of virtue. But the ‘master virtue’ of *phronesis*, in turn, is not in the first place about knowledge and command of moral rules, but the willingness to reflect upon consequences and to revise behavior on the basis of that reflection (Cf. Lebow 2008, pp. 81–2, 513).

The virtue of practical reason also highlights issues about what power means are admissible and for what purposes. My general point of interpretation is that awareness of and attention to ‘the whole range’ of means of influence cannot be a purely instrumental concern. On the contrary, concerns of legitimacy are inextricably tied up with the evaluation of different power means. Ends can be corrupted by the means; even the most noble objectives may turn into ignoble interests if the instruments of power used in their attainment fail to measure up to ethical and moral standards. Likewise, means of policy that *ceteris paribus* are considered appropriate from a
normative point of view may lose their legitimacy if used for vile purposes. In this perspective, command and coercion can be perfectly legitimate, while persuasion can be completely dishonest and deceptive.

To conclude, smart power has been defined as the ability to provide efficient combinations of hard and soft power. Accordingly, ‘smartness’ would seem to consist in the ability to provide the right recipe; being aware of the full range of power resources and how they can be combined into successful strategies. I have argued that this puts too much emphasis on the technical aspect of policy-making by giving prominence to the skills of (instrumental) combination. Instead the essential core of smart power is the faculty of fully grasping circumstances, the complexity of the situation at hand, and to discern what is called for in terms of action. In this understanding, smart power, although introduced and made popular in the context of contemporary policy concerns, is not an innovative notion. On the contrary, it is quite consistent with a tradition of political thought, well expressed in various branches and versions of classical realism. This interpretation underlines, finally, that awareness of the full range of power means does not necessarily imply that ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ always need to be mixed. Smartness as prudence suggests the understanding that a purely coercive, ‘push’ strategy sometimes may be the right choice, just as a purely co-opting, ‘pull’, approach may be preferable in other situations, and that a combination along the continuum in between may be the prudent course. This could potentially be seen as a way of eroding the meaning and utility of the concept of smart power, and indeed the underlying distinction between hard and soft power. The point is, however, a demonstrated willingness to weigh and consider alternatives. In this sense, smart power emerges as an attitude or approach to power and politics. It is not a formula or a strategy in the sense of a certain sequence of steps to follow and implement, but the capacity to view each situation on its own merits, i.e. not as similar or identical to this or that historical situation, but as similar in some aspects and always unique, and so requiring a flexible, unprejudiced strategic approach. Therefore, to say that ‘smart power’ actually is ‘prudent power’ is a way of indicating the particular kind of judgment that is conducive to successful strategy making in a highly dynamic environment.

Note

1. A first version of this text was presented at the 9th Pan-European Conference on International Relations: The Worlds of Violence, 23–26 September, 2015, Giardini Naxos, Sicily. The author is grateful for useful comments offered on that occasion, and by two anonymous referees of the Journal of Political Power.

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