

# Norm Osmosis

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## Abstract

Could norms be moving around the world through osmosis? In this article, Altinay argues that hard power and soft power are not sufficient in explaining several key cases of norm transformation. He identifies manifestations of norm osmosis across diverse tracks such as our norms concerning wealth creation, capital punishment, citizens' access to official documents, and fiscal prudence. Such a dynamic may be difficult to prove conclusively. However, if it is real and significant, this would mean that ours is a significant learning community, where latent definitions of good life are being perceived, contested, internalized and reproduced everyday by billions. Altinay argues that this process will intensify as power disparities subside.

## Policy Implications

- Global norms are quasi global public goods. They represent shared definitions of what is feasible and what is ideal, and as such they provide a critical and enabling backdrop to our growing interdependence. Norm formation deserves more attention.
- Hard power and soft power are not the only mechanisms through which interactions regarding norms take place. There is evidence that more ubiquitous and diffuse learning is taking place, and often below the radar of the policy makers.
- Taking the deliberative processes and faculties of other societies seriously is one important way we can better understand and assist this benign process. Not poisoning the international environment with hubris would be another way.

Does the outside world have a role as norms in a given society change? If asked this question, the first model that many international relations specialists would recall would be the transformation of Germany and Japan at the hands of the United States. The US militarily defeats these totalitarian and militarist countries, occupies them for a considerable while, supervises their constitutional overhaul, and two success stories emerge in due course. This would be the hard power option. It was no coincidence that in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 the trajectories of Germany and Japan were frequently evoked. There are also the 19th century precedents: Commodore Perry's opening of Japan, the Opium Wars and the practices once generically referred to as white man's burden would all fit into this category.

One can also imagine norm change through soft power. Changes in Turkey during the last decade have been explained through the EU's soft power; EU presented a better way of organizing a society and an economy; and Turks set out to join this prized club and accepted the conditionality to become a member. In the 18th century, Russians chose to cut their beards in their rush to imitate the Europeans and acquire commensurate might. After WW2, inhabitants of the Pacific islands built airstrips, because, from where they were standing, the cause and effect relationship was all about the construction of airstrips and the arrival of precious goods, a process that the anthropologists termed "cargo cult." Because soft power is still power, described as getting others to do what you want them to do, the quality of the deliberations by the weaker party is not the focus of attention. When

they are not intimidated by the barrels of our guns, they are still awe-struck by our capabilities. If they are found to be wanting in analytical capacities, then so be it.

After Joseph Nye coined the term 'soft power,' like many good ideas before, it achieved rapid adoption. The dominant reaction from the international relations field was that something like soft power may indeed exist but that its importance should not be overstated. Soft power was too soft for many; smart power, an intelligent way to pick and choose from a menu of hard and soft power levers, became the new near-consensus.<sup>1</sup>

At the risk of going against the prevailing current, I wonder whether there could also be a less power-centric way through which norms change. Can we, for example, talk about norm osmosis? Osmosis, as we may recall from our high school science classes, is the movement of particles across semi-permeable membranes without needing any external kinetic energy. Can we think of cases where norms changed, not because societies in question were coerced or were awe-struck, but because they observed and studied practices and experiences of other societies?

One such example would be the accepted norms about wealth creation. Not so long ago, David Landes described a world divided by cultures of making and cultures of taking. Today, it is very difficult to find societies where culture of taking prevails. While we may debate proper levels of regulation and taxation, the notion that systematic pillage and confiscation as a route to prosperity, no longer exists. Another example would be whether key political posts could be inherited to one's heirs: 300 years ago most such posts would be inherited. Nowadays, almost none are, barring North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Syria. Meritocracy has won over aristocracy. Another norm that is spreading is the desirability of having independent redress mechanisms. Swedes are often credited for establishing the first ombudsman in the 18th century.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the idea and the practice of instituting ombudsman-like structures have been adopted by more than 90 countries.<sup>3</sup> Are we to explain this norm osmosis through the size of Swedish gun boats? Not so long ago, high and hyperinflation plagued many developing nations; today, there are no policymakers who have not

been convinced about the detrimental costs of high and hyperinflation. World Economic Outlook database shows that several dozen countries had high and hyperinflation throughout 1980s and 1990s; none had it in 2010. Can we explain this transformation only through IMF conditionality? What are we to do with all the countries where IMF was never involved? Take the death penalty: Once a universally accepted punishment, currently two-thirds of the countries in the world, 140 by last count,<sup>4</sup> no longer resort to the death penalty. Amnesty International and the European Union have long advocated for the elimination of the death penalty, but crediting the perseverance of the advocates, or the size of their megaphones, may blind us to what happens at the receiving end of these proposals. Management scholarship about leadership was previously built around arcane and hierarchical notions of charismatic leadership where leaders were endowed with certain qualities and the followers simply followed. The current scholarship, led by Robert Kelley, Ira Chaleff and David Berg, has moved its floodlights to the followers and the workings of followership. It may be that, in order to understand fully the dynamic at play, we need to be less mesmerized by the norm entrepreneurs and more curious about the followers and their deliberative processes.

Abolition of the slave trade has been the paradigm case for transnational norm entrepreneurship. It was ideal for many reasons: it is an early example of a counter-intuitive success. While Bartolomé de Las Casas had championed the rights of the non-whites in 16<sup>th</sup> century, the campaign to ban the international slave trade is the earliest success story that we can point to. International slave trade was profitable by many accounts, and its abolition cannot be explained away by less than normative motives. The campaign also had the distinct advantage of having one identified advocate for change. Much scholarship has been devoted to the study of this norm transformation, and justifiably so. Because it has been the main prism through which we had to comprehend norm transformation, we may have been relatively inattentive to other kinds of norm change where the process is less complete, at least in the short term, and where there is no discernible institutional advocate. Take, for example, the extraordinary findings of the World Values Survey: self expression values have advanced by similar rates in five different cultural

zones of the world between 1981 and 2006, even with disparate base lines. It may be that enhanced self expression has been adopted through norm osmosis, rather than through the work of one clearly delineated advocate.

Commonplace assumptions of norm diffusion are often predicated on unidirectional movement from the center to the periphery. Osmosis, on the other hand, entails selective, or differential, permeability. Furthermore, the movement is multi-directional.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, norm osmosis does not mean we should expect a total convergence on all tracks, a homeostasis of sorts.

The story of how movement of capital, goods and people has rendered national border porous, has been well chronicled, yet it is the movement of ideas and narratives, which gives us norm osmosis. Not only news from different parts of the world but also visually compelling narratives of daily life are now routinely available to many of us. Furthermore, this is a field with many new entrants. You no longer need to double check CNN with BBC World, but can rely on Al Jazeera or France 24. Hollywood not only has to contend with Bollywood and Nollywood, but also with Participant Media, TEDTalk, telenovelas and YouTube. Turkish soap operas have defied the conservative clerics and effectively conveyed a depiction of a different good life across the Middle East. Every day, latent definitions of good life are being perceived, chewed over, contested, internalized and reproduced by billions. The chances are that the definitions of the good life which end up being absorbed through selective osmosis are those propositions which best interface with our past experiences as well as our tacit aspirations about the future.<sup>6</sup> Cumulative effect is norm osmosis.

What does all this mean? Or, rather what does it not mean? Norm osmosis does not mean we

should forget about norm change through hard or soft power. It does however mean that just because hard and soft power-centric options provide us with levers and a *raison d'être*, we should not assume that they are the only dynamics at play. Having a hammer at hand may nudge us into seeing only nails, but the reality tends to be more multifarious. Norms are shared definitions of what is legitimate and what is feasible. They give their environment a structure and a framework for predictability.<sup>7</sup> Norm osmosis, if real and significant as I claim, means that ours is, among other things, a virtual learning community. Through multiple interactions, we are negotiating and redefining what is feasible and what is acceptable. We are also known to seek each other's regard; at a minimum, we strive to avoid others' loathing.<sup>8</sup> The cumulative effect of these interactions is the emergence of a system of global conventions, albeit fragile and incomplete. This emergent system is as necessary as the system of formal rules and laws as we attempt to navigate our global interdependence.<sup>9</sup> It would not be unreasonable to assume that, as power disparities dissipate and cross border communication races ahead, this diffuse process will become more intense.

What we may need at this stage is more ethnographic surveys and a detailed combing through data. Norm osmosis is a diffuse dynamic where the multiple interactions that occur are separated by many layers of space and time. Therefore, combinations of cause and effect may prove elusive, and strong causal hypothesis may be difficult to prove.<sup>10</sup> Quantum physics has taught us that difficulties around measurement should not be allowed to conceal the underlying realities, and norm osmosis may be another case where we should not overlook a possible dynamic, only because methods to ascertain its prevalence are not immediately obvious.

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## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> There is, to be sure, the small but significant constructivist school, which has taken the ideational side of international relations seriously, and treated it as a possible independent variable in their analysis.

<sup>2</sup> It has also been suggested that the administrative law and practices of the Ottoman Empire, where King Charles XII of Sweden spent five years in self-exile before he established the Swedish Ombudsman in 1713, was a key source of inspiration. If indeed true, this would be a counter-intuitive example of norms moving from South to North. There are other examples of norms moving from South to North: Likes of Ayahuasca, Rumi, Ubuntu, yoga have provided layered references to those seeking to question Cartesian distinctions.

<sup>3</sup> International Ombudsman Institute reports that ombudsman like structures now exist in 93 countries.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.amnesty.org/en/death-penalty/abolitionist-and-retentionist-countries> (accessed 12 February 2012)

<sup>5</sup> The visual images we need for such a phenomenon may come from unlikely places such as fractal geometry or Hubble Telescope: [http://www.vladstudio.com/wallpaper/?infinity\\_1\\_blue/3072x768/](http://www.vladstudio.com/wallpaper/?infinity_1_blue/3072x768/) (accessed 12 February 2012) and <http://hubblesite.org/gallery/album/nebula/pr2005037a/> (accessed 12 February 2012)

<sup>6</sup> A key issue is what qualities of the international system hinder or facilitate osmosis. One can posit that events such as the illegal invasion of Iraq undermine the sense of a benign world community, provide further proof for the primacy of the law of the jungle, increase skepticism, and slow down osmosis. On the other hand, opting to admit mistakes may restore the propensity to give the international community the benefit of the doubt, and enhance osmosis. This hypothesis, too, is in need of experimentation and research.

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<sup>7</sup> For an early discussion, see "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change" by Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, *International Organization*, Autumn 1998.

<sup>8</sup> For an engaging discussion of these tendencies, see *The Honor Code* (Norton: 2010) by Kwame Anthony Appiah.

<sup>9</sup> See "Why a Global Governance Audit?" by Hakan Altınay, Brookings Working Paper, January 2012. Elsewhere, we had explored notions of fairness and concluded that taking each other's notions of fairness was indispensable in dealing with the next wave of global challenges: *Does Fairness Matter In Global Governance?*, Brookings Working Paper, October 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Another norm of Swedish descent is the freedom of information and the expectation of access to official documents. Swedes institutionalized this norm in 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the other possible causal factor, the US adoption of FOIA after Watergate, was in 1970s. Yet, 74 of the 88 countries with Freedom of Information laws enacted them in the last two decades. So, how do we establish cause and effect?