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## Joseph S. Nye Jr. *The Powers to Lead*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2008.

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**Joseph S. Nye Jr. *The Powers to Lead*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2008.**

The issue of power is at the heart of the study of politics. In spite of (or probably because of) its centrality, however, the notion and practices of power animate some of the most contested and intense debates in the study of governance. As a result, every generation of commentators tends to reconsider the concept of power in an attempt to place its own definitive stamp on one of the oldest conversations in the field. Joseph S. Nye Jr. is probably one of the most influential and recognizable interlocutors of this debate as he has been analyzing and shaping the study and practice of politics for over half a century.

Among Nye's many contributions to the field is his framing the notion of "smart power." *The Powers to Lead* can be read as part of the evolution of Nye's thinking on smart power. In fact, he indicates this in the opening sections of the book by referring back to the definition of this term as "the ability to shape the preferences of others to want what you want" (p. 29). The book's aim however is to take the term soft power outside of the ivory towers of the academe and popularize it. For this reason, *The Powers to Lead* offers detailed, yet accessible illustrations of the practical implications of soft power, in a way that can aid and enhance the decisions of business executives and consultants. Not surprisingly, therefore, Nye focuses on the content and capacity of leadership – as he insists "you cannot lead if you do not have power" (p. 27). Because of its target audience, the book concludes with an appendix of twelve tips for effective leadership. Yet, despite the manual-like quality of *The Powers to Lead*, Nye stipulates that while "leadership is not learned from books... a book like this can help make people more aware of the lessons of history and psychology so they can recognize and better understand the skills they need" (p. 144).

From the outset Nye makes it clear that for him leadership evinces power "as a process with three key components: leaders, followers, and contexts" (p. 21). His discussion therefore engages power as simultaneously a relational and a located phenomenon. On the one hand, the notion of power reflects the ability to influence others—that is, the ability to affect the decision-making behavior of other actors through the capacity either to make some policy choices more attractive than others or by limiting available the policy-alternatives. While Nye stresses the utility of soft power, he acknowledges that sometimes effectiveness might require the ability to use (or the threat to use) coercive measures. On the other hand, the practices of power are located within a framework of relations guided (and made possible) by history, resources, contextual understandings of social location, and the actors' judgment of those with whom they are interacting.

In this setting, Nye draws attention to the significance of "contextual intelligence" in leadership. For him, contextual intelligence implies "both a capability to discern trends in the face of complexity and adaptability while trying to shape events" (p. 88). The claim is that such contextual judgment is crucial ingredient of the capacity to influence others. What Nye is hinting at here is that the exercise of power is more often than not (as well as much more often than the literature on the topic would like to admit) prone to the random effects of contingency. Consequently, a contextually-intelligent leadership is one that is able to adapt and change with the complex context to which power is applied. While there is a wide variety of contexts to which power can be applied, leaders need to be particularly acute to five aspects: "culture, distribution of power resources, followers' needs and demands, time urgency, and information flows" (p. 91). The inference therefore is that effective and appropriate leadership demands the simultaneous maintenance of diverse strategies (as well as the willingness and ability to develop new ones) in response to the contingencies of specific decision-making situations.

Thus, *The Powers to Lead* draws attention to the complex interdependence between decision-makers and their environments. The assertion is that leadership is at its core about developing a set of relevant skills and mechanisms for reacting to change. In this respect, its effectiveness is embedded in the particular responses to the ongoing need to adapt to change—

rather than in attempts to contain or completely ignore its occurrence. As Nye points out, organizations require “adaptive leadership,” which involves muted command presence and “a flatter horizontal structure that produces collaboration in developing understanding and design for a new approach” (p. 104). Leadership in this setting emerges both as a pattern of nascent dynamics and a process of interaction through which participants can meaningfully act and interpret this pattern.

By drawing attention to the adaptive contingency of power, Nye infers that leadership entails taking responsibility for leaving an impact, for forcing things in one direction rather than another. The adaptive propensity of leadership also indicates a different mode of exercising power. Emerging from the active and deliberate act of persuading others, adaptive leadership can be understood as a dynamic process for the diffusion of ideas, attitudes, and habits of behavior. It also requires a much more comprehensive skill set than the traditional mode of hierarchical command-and-control. As Nye puts it, it demands from leaders “a broader bandwidth” and the ability (as well as intuition) “to tune carefully for different situations” (p. 91). Leadership therefore requires a capacity both to adapt to changes and to change in context.

In this respect, the leadership model developed by Nye provides a fresh framework not only for the explanation and understanding, but also for the application of power. Thus, *The Powers to Lead* provides much-needed analytical lenses and practical approaches for engaging the implications of the soft power paradigm in company boardrooms and business organizations. Nye’s injunction for prospective leaders is that in an age of globalization they “must better understand the nature of the contextual intelligence they will need to educate their hunches and sustain strategies of smart power” (p. 145). The thoughtful and comprehensive overview of the complex relationship between power and leadership will benefit anyone interested in the topic. It is expected that *The Powers to Lead* will have particular traction with practitioners, especially company executives and policy consultants. Moreover, owing to its jargon-free style and easy-to-follow treatment of the topic, Nye’s book is also accessible to lay readers and non-practitioners.

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