

Soulcraft and Statecraft in IR: The Battle for the Human 'Soul'

Written by Mohammadbagher Forough

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MOHAMMADBAGHER FOROUGH, APR 14 2023

Global politics is amazingly soulful but the field of International Relations (IR) shockingly soulless. There is a fierce battle raging over who defines, orders, and governs the human 'soul' (especially the souls of teenagers, children, and grandchildren), which IR and Political Science have been completely oblivious to. In contrast, politicians have been much less soul-averse, as evident in the four quotes listed below. But what even is a (collective) soul? How is it constructed discursively and materially? And, what does investigating souls reveal about the contemporary global reordering?

The Production of Souls in International Relations (Global Studies Quarterly 2022) explores these questions at length. In this piece, I offer the gist of that article and add a new secondary focus: the role of children's 'souls' in this context.

That is why we are here [...] to work for our European soul, for every person in Europe – for the teenagers in Kharkiv – [...] to ensure that the fundamental freedoms of women, men and children are better protected – Annalena Baerbock (2023), speech at the Council of Europe.

For a great historical Russia, for future generations, for our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. We must protect them from enslavement, from monstrous experiments to change their minds and souls – Vladimir Putin (2022), Annexation speech.

Teachers are the engineers of the human soul [...] shaping soul, shaping life, and shaping newcomers (children) – Xi Jinping, 2018 Speech on China's Teachers' Day (quoted in Chinanews 2020).

I don't want my grandchildren to live in a world dominated by the Chinese – Hillary Clinton (quoted in Goldberg 2016), on US-China Rivalry.

The four quotes above are not unique. Political practitioners, preachers, pundits, historians, philosophers, and activists have for long mobilized various conceptions of collective souls for all manner of (geo)political, (geo)economic, revolutionary, religious, emancipatory, and genocidal purposes. For instance, during the Spanish conquest of the Americas in the 15th century, Roman law and Aristotelian theories of natural slavery were used to debate whether 'Indians had souls or not, that is, whether they were a natural slave class' (Wiarda 2003, 35). In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (2015[1903]) employed the term in an emancipatory call to enhance justice and civil rights in the United States. With the rise of Japan as an Asian power, Lowell wrote *The Soul of the Far East*, wherein he tried 'to see the soul of their civilization' by asking 'why are these peoples so different from us?' (Lowell 1888, 205). He defined the region's peoples in terms of 'impersonality,' a racist stereotype still circulating today. The Nazi regime concocted the concept of 'race soul' (*Rassenseele*) as the mythical soul permeating 'the Aryan race' transcending individual souls.

During the Cold War, discussions of the 'Russian soul' (Williams 1970) were common among both Russian and Western scholars. At a ceremony celebrating literary authors in 1932, Stalin called writers 'engineers of the human

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soul' (a phrase that resonated long after him in the Soviet and Chinese political cultures), and argued that 'the production of souls is more important than the production of tanks' (quoted in Romeo 2014). Eisenhower claimed that the global battle against communism 'in the deepest sense, is waged neither for land nor for food nor for power – but for the soul of man himself' (Eisenhower 1953). Similarly, G.H.W. Bush called the Cold War the struggle 'for the soul of mankind,' a phrase that became the title of Leffler's (2007) Cold War history. Defining the term religiously, the conservative columnist Will (1984) argued that, in the United States, 'statecraft' should be about 'soulcraft', and vice versa. Criticizing 'collectivist society' and promoting her neoliberal policies, Thatcher (1981) argued that 'economics are the method; the object is to change the soul' of the population. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the triumphalist 'West' announced the end of humanity's historical soul-searching. Fukuyama (1989) and many others assumed that the liberal soul would be the last soul standing at the boring end of history.

History and geography begged to differ. Nowadays, we are witnessing a return of historical 'souls' laying claim to civilizational soils in the discourses of both authoritarian and liberal political elites. China has re-emerged as a global power. Xi is inspired by Stalin's quote about writers as engineers of the human soul, and applies it to (China's) teachers in his mission to introduce national educational reform, which took place in 2021. The aim of his reforms is to re-engineer Chinese (children's) souls, re-crafting them for a world in which China is a – if not *the* – dominant global actor, that is, in his own words, for China's 'national rejuvenation', one that is informed by 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Introducing Xi's 'Thought' in the country's educational system and the Constitution is part and parcel of this civilizational soul-reengineering.

Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, Putin (2021) asserted that Ukraine (and Belarus) is part of the 'Russian world' (*Russkiy Mir*), which is comprised of a 'single people', 'single whole', or 'what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space'. This imagined 'Russian world', he believes, is infused with and animated by the 'Russian soul' (*russskaya dusha*). He defines this soul as a 'sense of unity at their core,' a unity of 'the hearts and the memory' (ibid.). This mythical world is grounded in the pre-Westphalian geography and history and challenges the Westphalian concepts of sovereignty and international law. Currently, Russian 'souldiers,' forgive the pun, are advancing into Ukrainian territory, causing destruction, and leaving thousands upon thousands of people dead, precisely because Ukrainians refuse to be ordered and transubstantiated by the Russian soul and subsumed under the Russian world.

As is clear so far, soulcraft is not limited to contemporary illiberal systems. In the run-up to the 2021 presidential election, both Trump and Biden argued that they wanted to become president to save 'America's soul' (Dias 2020). Similarly, Michael Bloomberg, former mayor of New York, called Hillary Clinton's 2015-2016 campaign against Trump 'a tug of war for the soul of America' (CBC 2016). Obama became the first president to see the same tug of war globally, for the soul of the world, against China. Hence, his advocacy for the United States to pivot to the Pacific region.

EU leaders, both past and present, have also been trying to summon forth 'a European soul' for the Union, one that goes beyond national contexts of meanings and identities, and transcends technical, legal, and economic integration of the member states. Schumann, one of the founding fathers of the EU, stated in his book *For Europe*, that 'it [the European community] needs a soul, the conscience of its historical affinities and of its responsibilities, in the present and in the future, and a political will at the service of the same human ideal' (1964, 58). Quoting Schumann in her 2021 State of the Union speech, Von der Leyen called for 'strengthening the soul of our Union' (2021), a soul which EU leaders deem necessary in the context of the current global reordering. Along the same lines, Baerbock quotes Adenauer – who had said that '[t]he Council of Europe is the soul of Europe' – and then proceeds to formulate her 2023 speech at the EU Council, urging her audience 'to work for the European soul', which in her view, encompasses the children and teenagers of Kharkiv as well (Baerbock 2023).

What Is a Soul?

'Soul' is an overloaded concept, difficult to define precisely; but that is not necessarily bad. At the individual level, it relates to the moral, psychological, or metaphysical aspects of a person or thing, that are responsible for their feelings and thoughts. The word 'soul' or 'spirit' in various languages (including Farsi, Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin) is derived from the word 'breath', which is, what brings life, order, and unity into the body, that is to say, its imagined

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essence or vital principle. This essence is assumed to animate the body. A soul is generally viewed as transcendental and incorporeal but is always somehow embodied, hence the famous Wittgensteinian proposition that 'the human body is the best picture of the human soul' (Wittgenstein 1958, 178). The concept of soul should therefore be seen as a 'symbol,' a 'deliberately ambiguous concept' similar to all other 'ultimate symbols' such as matter, energy, God, life, and society that are fundamental to human thought (Hillman 1978, 46).

The idea of a society having a shared soul or spirit has been around for long. In the 18th century, the German philosopher, Herder, celebrated the distinctive local cultures of Prussia, by introducing the concepts of '*Volksgeist*' and '*Volksseele*' to describe the unpolitical idea of a national or ethnic 'spirit' or 'soul.' These concepts referred to a particular way of life, a common character or essence that arose from a community's unique historical traditions. Weil argues that a 'collectivity's soul' is based on the 'spiritual treasures accumulated by the dead,' (Weil 2003[1943], 7), which are then, I would argue, repurposed by the living to imagine a future. Hence, the importance of history and narratives of *Ursprung* ('origin' in German) as well as *telos* in the construction of a collective soul.

For the purposes of introducing soul as an analytical concept to IR and Political Science, it is important to establish a relatively precise definition of the concept of soul to analytically distinguish it from other related concepts such as 'civilization,' 'identity,' and 'culture.' To start, I define a collective soul as 'a historical-spiritual space, constructed both materially and ideationally and construed as the vital force which permeates, orders, and embodies—or transubstantiates (into)—a body politic, and engraves in it a mythologized *Ursprung* and *telos*' (Forough 2022a, 3). In what follows, I will expand on this definition.

The 'space' in question could range from a family, tribe, city-state, nation-state, group of nation-states (e.g., the EU), continent (e.g., Europe), 'civilization' (e.g., the Russian world), to the entire world of living beings. The concept of *anima mundi*, or 'world soul,' rooted in Platonic and Manichean ideas, was believed to be the vital force that animates and orders the universe. This is poetically referred to by Rumi as 'the Soul of souls' (*Jaana-e Jaanaan*) and by Ralph Waldo Emerson as the 'Oversoul.' The spatiality element is important as it relates the imagined collective soul to the 'geo' in 'geopolitical' and 'geo-economic' processes of soul production. That is why I argue (Forough 2022a) that critical geography offers very promising theoretical avenues in which to analyze the concept of soul in IR.

Oriented towards uncovering 'the hidden hyphen in the word geography,' critical geography tells us that geographies are both material and ideational and that 'the "geo" of every geography is "graphed," which is to say, produced by multiple, often unnoticed, space-making processes and space-framing assumptions' (Sparke 2007, 338). The processes can refer to material and policy dimensions and the assumptions are the discourses and narratives that accompany those processes. Through these processes and assumptions, a soul embodies — or transubstantiates (into) — a body politic, across a relatively demarcated space or geography, be it the Russian world, the world of 'Silk Roads', 'Europe', or 'the greater (cultural) Iran'. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, we can argue that the (Chinese, European, or Russian) 'body politic' is the best picture of its 'soul.'

Any conception of a collective soul involves a hegemonic ordering logic. Weil argues that 'order' is 'the first of soul's needs', as it creates a 'texture of social relationships' (2003, 9). Each body politic is partially transubstantiated through a certain hegemonic order(ing) logic. These logics are hegemonic as they determine the texture of one's social relationships, they define a certain 'us' or 'sense of unity', as opposed to 'others' in the world. Such ordering logics help position you ideationally and even materially in the world. Examples of such logics of ordering include 'harmony' in China, 'nezam' (meaning 'order' or 'system' in Farsi) in Iran, 'rules-based order' in the US, or 'norms' and 'values' in the EU.

The ordering logic, its imagined history and spirituality inscribe and interpellate the soul subject. Collective souls therefore produce logics of identity, membership, citizenship, and exclusion. The subject of the soul is thus *naturalized* as part of a certain soulscape. Soulcraft can be defined as the art, both discursive and practical, of summoning forth and producing a collective soul, which purportedly animates and embodies a body politic. Such soulcraft includes the production of 'like-minded' soulmates. For instance, it allows many U.S. politicians and pundits to pronounce India 'a natural U.S. ally in the new Cold War' (Mead 2020) against China.

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That leaves us with another slippery concept; 'spirit'. In the definition of soul offered above, the term 'spiritual' serves three functions that shape the 'historical space' at stake: Firstly, it discursively presents that space as mythological; secondly, as ahistorical; and thirdly, as quasi-transcendental. These three functions are interconnected. The first (mythological) aspect speaks to the *Ursprung–telos* dichotomy; *Ursprung* is a mythical prelapsarian moment of pureness or glory, which all collective (and individual) souls somehow assume (Forough 2022a). Its flipside is the soul's *telos* or manifest destiny. The second (ahistorical) aspect of soul discourses serves to produce a straightforward reductive historical narrative, by whitewashing contradictions, tensions, and suppressing polyvalent histories. Erasing polyvalence is necessary for the production of myth. When the majority of civilizational elites endorse a given myth, it has arguably become hegemonic. The third (quasi-transcendental) aspect ideologically enables soul-makers to uplift the soul discourse beyond legal-political debates and procedures by invoking ahistorical myths.

'Soul' as a New Battlefield for International Primacy

The battle for children's souls in the quotes at the beginning of this article should be understood in the larger context of the contemporary battle to define the very soul of humanity in this century. Contemporary world politics is undergoing a major reordering, due to, inter alia, the rise of Asian powers (such as China and India) and the end of the unipolar moment. Global political and economic geographies are undergoing transformations. Novel souls and soulscapes are envisaged, and a diverse array of geoeconomic (infrastructural) and geopolitical (military) strategies and tools are employed to actualize those soulscapes.

Russia, under Putin, is simultaneously pushing forward with its geopolitical-military occupation of Ukraine and the infrastructure-based initiative, Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) to materialize the historical spiritual space of the so-called 'Russian world'. This world can be best defined as a civilizational (read, neo-imperial) sphere of privileges, red lines, influence, and respect. China, under Xi, is mobilizing its own geopolitical and geoeconomic processes and assumptions (Forough 2018) to construct the civilizational soul of humanity in this century in general, and in the Silk Road geography of Afro-Eur-Asia in particular (Forough 2019). Geoeconomically, it is, among other things, promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), setting up the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to rival the World Bank, and helping materialize trade deals such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Geopolitically, it is raising the profile of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Forough, 2022c), modernizing the country's military, aggressively building islands in the South China Sea, and setting up military bases abroad, such as in Djibouti.

China's Silk Road civilizational soulcraft is resonating with most actors in the Global South such as Gulf Cooperation Council countries, all six of which have aligned their developmental visions and narratives with the BRI. Turkish political elites are also doing their own soulcraft through both military interventions in the region and infrastructural initiatives such as the Middle Corridor, in what they refer to as their 'Asia Anew' policy. In its 'pivot to (Eur-)Asia' (Forough 2021b), Iran is not only conducting geopolitical-military interventions in the region but also aligning its developmental and connectivity vision with the BRI (for east-west connectivity), and simultaneously advancing the International North-South Transport Corridor (for north-south connectivity). Iranian leadership is aiming to turn the country into 'a civilizational crossroads' (Forough 2021a), meaning positioning the country as the connectivity hub of (Afro-)Eur-Asia. Similar to Putin's idea of 'historical Russia', Iranian leaders are calling for 'the greater (cultural) Iran' (ibid., 303) as their desired civilizational soulcape.

The Western dream of the liberal civilizational soul transubstantiating the global body politic, and thereby putting an end to the human historical soul-searching, did not pan out. Obama's 2011 Pivot to Asia was the first major strategic admission of the return of history and geography by the United States. The new slogan became the 'rules-based order', which is a euphemism, in polite society, for the 'U.S.-led order'. Obama, who wanted to be known as the first Pacific president set the tone for this policy by arguing that if the United States does not set the 'rules and standards' in the 21st century, it will be China who will do that (Obama 2016); Hillary Clinton's quote about not wanting her grandchildren to grow up in a China-dominated world is inspired by this strategic logic.

Since the Pivot, the United States has been trying to advance geopolitical processes and ideas (such as the QUAD and the AUKUS) as well as geoeconomic initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Framework (Forough 2022b). It has

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thus contributed, along with Japan and India, to the creation of the “Indo-Pacific”, as a newly minted soulscape, a geographic construct which has become naturalized only in recent years. In 2018, the Pentagon changed its Pacific Command into the Indo-Pacific Command. One could argue that the liberal civilizational soul is trying to re-graph itself onto a new, more limited, geography (the Indo-Pacific) in a world in which its hopes for creating a universal ‘world soul’ seem no longer possible.

While generally favorable to the U.S. discourse of ‘rules-based order’, the EU leaders are increasingly looking for a strategically autonomous soul for the EU in this brave new world. Since 1945, Europeans have lived with cheap Russian energy, cheap American security, and cheap Chinese products. None of the three items are guaranteed anymore (especially Russian energy). None are cheap anymore. The EU has to develop a soul of its own, thereby needing its own geopolitical and geoeconomic tools in the world. Examples of the former include discussions about setting up a European military and the ceremonious inauguration of the Brussels Institute for Geopolitics (BIG), with which the EU hopes to think big, geopolitically speaking. Geoeconomically the EU has introduced its own infrastructure initiative, The Global Gateway, one that is independent of U.S. and Chinese initiatives. The EU is in some serious soul-searching mode now.

In much of the academic literature in IR, the concept of soul was already assumed to be relegated to the private world of personal and religious beliefs, not having much to do with global politics. But as this article showed, the concept has been and will be a living and dynamic one which, if analyzed properly, can shed considerable light on global politics, the contemporary reordering, and the shape and order of things to come. It can for instance reveal the uses and abuses of civilizations, defined as ‘contexts of meaning’ (Katzenstein 2010), mobilized as ‘single’ or ‘unified’ actors in global politics. It is therefore high time, IR scholars paid attention to soul and soulcraft as an indispensable, yet unacknowledged, component of statecraft in IR.

When it comes to the four geopolitical references to children’s souls at the beginning of this article, they can be analyzed along at least two lines. First, as a rhetorical device, or rallying cry, to mobilize audiences (that is, one’s population) in support of a cause. Second, and more importantly, those children’s souls can be considered as a crucial part of a larger battlefield, the human soul. There is an international battle raging on for primacy over who defines and refines the human soul, which is to say, who constructs the (next) global historical-spiritual space, who tells the story of humanity by assigning to it a certain *Ursprung* and *telos*, thereby hegemonically ordering and governing humanity. That *telos*, i.e. the future, is where children come into play, as they are obviously the future of humanity, the international battle for the human soul will inevitably demarcate – if not define – what they can and will become as humans. In this sense, I contend that the tug of war for the human soul is arguably the most crucial battle in global politics – as it is over the (imagined) essence of humanity – and simultaneously the least researched major global battle in IR and Political Science.

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