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The Stubborn Parochialism of American Social Science

By Charles Kurzman

For more than half a century, the U.S. government has been trying to internationalize American scholarship. That was one of the original reasons for federal intervention in higher-education policy, beginning with the National Defense Education Act of 1958 and its successor, the Higher Education Act, which is up for renewal.

The payoff for those modest federal investments has been remarkable. Today, by comparison with the late 1950s, international programs, research, and courses are a major presence on American campuses. In 1958, 23 students were studying Hindi in the United States; by 2009, the number was more than 10 times that. In 1958, fewer than 200 social-science books on sub-Saharan Africa were published in the United States; today, approximately 1,000 books on the region come out annually. In 1958, there were 382 international programs at American colleges; today, thousands of campuses have programs—research centers and institutes, administrative offices dedicated to international studies or affairs, and other projects—and more than a third of colleges include international perspectives in their mission statements.

For all of that growth, however, much of American higher education remains stubbornly parochial. Over the past two years, with a grant from the National Science Foundation, I've collected data on American social science, tracking attention to international subjects in millions of books, journal articles, and dissertations written in the past 50 years.

I've been disturbed to find that the ratio of scholarship focused on international issues to that on American topics has not changed

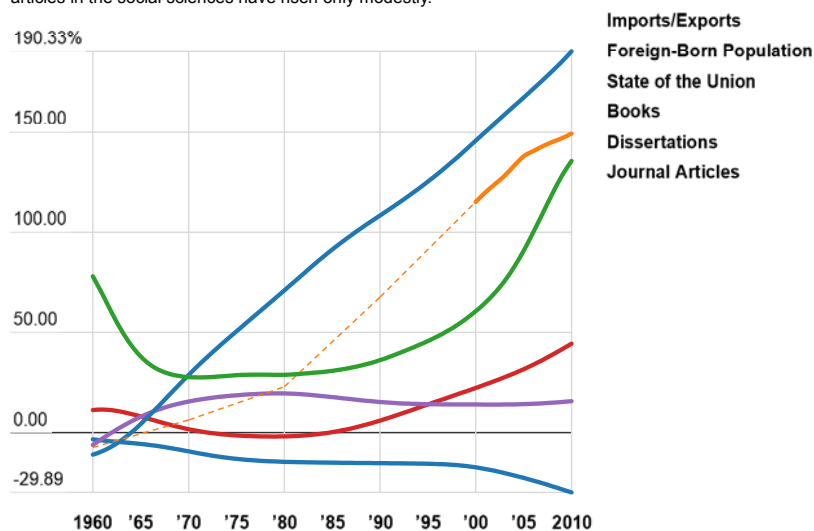
much for decades.

By contrast, and by numerous measures, the United States has internationalized strikingly over the past half century. The international share of the American economy—imports and exports as a percentage of gross domestic product—has almost tripled since 1960. The foreign-born share of the American population has more than doubled. The political agenda has also internationalized—the portion of paragraphs with international themes in the State of the Union address, for example, has doubled.

I examined more than six million bibliographic records: doctoral dissertations, articles in top-10 journals in seven disciplines (anthropology, economics, geography, history, political science, psychology, and sociology), and books in the Library of Congress [call range C-JX](#). The world regions studied in each item were identified through an algorithm that searched for geographic references in the title, subject headings, and (where available) abstracts. The procedure was not perfect, but its results matched those of human coders on a subsample of several thousand items as often as those human coders matched one another.

How American Social Science Ignores the World

The international share of the American economy has almost tripled since 1960. The foreign-born share of the American population has more than doubled. The portion of paragraphs with international themes in the State of the Union address has doubled. At the same time, international themes in dissertations, books, and journal articles in the social sciences have risen only modestly.



Source: OCLC; Proquest; Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, University of Minnesota; World Bank, World Development Indicators; The American Presidency Project, University of California at Santa Barbara [Get the data](#)

From 1960 to 2010, the share of social-scientific attention devoted

to international subjects grew by about one-third. International themes in dissertations in the social sciences rose from about 40 percent to 50 percent; in journal articles, from 30 percent to 40 percent; in books from 22 percent to 30 percent.

The figures vary by discipline. In journals, anthropology and history are somewhat more international in their focus than political science and much more internationally focused than economics, sociology, and especially psychology. Not surprisingly, the disciplines with more of an international focus are those that organize themselves, at least in part, around specializations in world regions.

Moreover, Western Europe remains the leading focus of international studies in American social science, occupying about a third of internationally oriented articles, a quarter of internationally oriented books, and an eighth of internationally oriented dissertations. Latin America is consistently second. Eastern Europe has lost "market share" by about a third since the end of the Cold War, while East Asia and the Middle East occupy more attention than in the past, but remain a small portion of the total.

This is not the first time that American academe has been faulted for insufficient internationalization. In 1979, two decades after the federal government began to invest in international education, a presidential commission on foreign-language and international studies [expressed alarm](#) at "a serious deterioration in this country's language and research capacity, at a time when an increasingly hazardous international military, political, and economic environment is making unprecedented demands on America's resources, intellectual capacity, and public sensitivity." More recently, a report to the National Research Council on international-education programs [concluded that](#) "a pervasive lack of knowledge about foreign cultures and foreign languages threatens the security of the United States as well as its ability to compete in the global marketplace and produce an informed citizenry."

Such reports typically justify international education on the basis

of national security or economic competitiveness, with occasional references to global awareness as a desirable goal in itself. Yet despite repeated calls to action, the level of public investment in international education has been limited. International higher-education programs in the U.S. Department of Education occupy less than 1 percent of the department's budget, and were cut by more than 40 percent three years ago. Adjusted for inflation, those programs are now smaller than they've been [in a generation](#).

Meanwhile, the pipeline for international studies has not kept pace with the overall growth of higher education. As American universities removed language requirements in the 1970s, the proportion of students taking a foreign-language course [dropped by half](#), from 16 percent in the 1960s to 8 percent since the 1980s. Languages other than the traditional Spanish, French, and German have grown, but still constitute less than a quarter of all language enrollments.

Social-science research on foreign lands has also been hampered by a relative lack of data. Far more surveys and census data are available on the United States than other countries, despite the efforts of international-research consortia such as the [Integrated Public Use Microdata Series](#), the [International Social Survey Programme](#), and the [World Values Survey](#). Fieldwork is periodically interrupted in many countries because of political upheavals or diplomatic disputes. The rate of growth in collecting international materials at American research libraries has stagnated for a decade because of budget difficulties.

Other institutional factors have limited international studies, as well. Graduate students at many universities face policies requiring "continuous enrollment" that complicate international travel. Contingent faculty members, a growing segment of American academe, are chained to their teaching posts.

On the other hand, the rise of online source material could make international research more accessible—a graduate student can already study political debates on Turkish Facebook pages from a computer here in North Carolina, for example.

At the same time, American social-science doctorate recipients are now one-fifth foreign-born, double the rate a generation ago, and the children of immigrants are entering academe in large numbers. That broadens the horizons and language skills of the next generation of scholars.

In other words, American social science may yet internationalize on its own. However, many of today's scholars remain loyal to the areas of specialization they were trained in years ago.

Inertia of that sort is built into faculty autonomy, and encouraging scholars to retool and expediting the hiring of international specialists will take a significant investment from universities, government agencies, and private sources. The weak pace of internationalization in American social sciences over the past half-century shows how much that investment is needed.

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