The Development of the Social Sciences Prior to Globalization and Some Thoughts on the Future

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Abstract

With some significant exceptions, the development of modern social sciences has been accompanied by a strong tendency to focus primarily on the national society. Even in dissenting fields, such as area studies, research on other societies tends to emphasize the local and particular, rather than comparative questions. In this essay, I attempt to explain the limited vision of the social sciences as a product of the rejection of early evolutionary theories of social change, the difficulties of obtaining comparative data, and the social context of international cooperation and exchanges. In spite of these limitations, I think that inherent need for international and comparative social science and modern technological change hold the potential of a major paradigm shift to a broader and more comparative social science in the twenty-first century.

INTRODUCTION

The classic works of early modern social science in the late nineteenth century by Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Emile Durkheim addressed big questions such as the development of capitalism, the rise of complex bureaucracies, class conflict, and how a moral order was possible in modern urban societies. These questions were addressed from both comparative and historical perspectives, as these scholars looked for empirical evidence from every available source to support their interpretations of societal development. For example, Marx drew upon examples from China and North America in his theory of changing modes of production.

Over the course of the twentieth century, this style of broad social analysis and interpretation fell out of favor, with a few notable exceptions. The typical example of contemporary social science research is a cross-sectional analysis of a fairly narrow topic based on a single country—or from one place in a country. Overall, the narrowing of focus has made possible a more cumulative and scientific social science. The formulation of testable hypotheses, gathering “objective” data, and the application of formal analytical methods of data analysis are more feasible when a project is focused on a narrower slice of human experience than on all humankind everywhere and at all times.

This narrowing of focus, while generally positive for the progress of the science, has had some less beneficial side effects—the most important of which is the tendency of most social scientists to study only their own societies. This is not entirely true; there have always been scholars who specialize in the study of other societies. Indeed, some fields such as anthropology and history are largely defined in terms of specialization by geography and time period. There are branches of other fields, such as comparative politics, which are explicitly international and comparative in orientation. The center of gravity in most of the contemporary social sciences (sociology, economics, psychology, and political science) is, however, rooted in studies of the home society. The research priorities of the majority of scholars inevitably shapes the intellectual agenda of the broader academic community, including the curriculum for students and the definition of significant questions that are debated and investigated.
One might argue that the “inward looking” orientation of the social sciences is inevitable because most scholars (i.e., social scientists) are inevitably more interested in their own society than any other. In my judgement, however, the scope of the contemporary social sciences cannot be explained simply by the interests of those who conduct research. The history of the social sciences, as with the history of all human endeavors, is a complex mixture of external forces and internal dynamics. In this essay, I offer an interpretation of how the current state of affairs came to be and imagine how the social sciences might develop differently given the revolutionary changes in communications, electronic data storage, and computing power that are underway.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THEORIES OF SOCIAL EVOLUTION
The classical social scientists of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century were big thinkers concerned with broadscale developments of their era: the collapse of empires and the rise of states based on new conceptions of national identity, the growing world economy that gave rise to the factory system of production and the erosion of local moral communities, and unprecedented levels of population growth and urbanization (Durkheim 1933, Gerth and Mills 1958, Marx 1932, Weber 1958). The theories and tools of these early scholars were what today we sometimes call “arm-chair social scientists.” The label is meant to imply that research was done by a scholar sitting in a chair (or at a desk) based on reading, reflecting on personal or second-hand observation, and critical thinking. The objective of social science was to infer (or to invoke) theoretical principles based on empirical generalizations. This strategy was pursued by scholars of the classical era drawing upon a broad base of knowledge of many societies, past and present, who were not reluctant to offer their imaginative interpretations to the phenomena observed. In the hands of a Marx or Weber, this strategy could lead to profound insights and original interpretations. Alas, not all scholars have the skills and interpretative powers of a Weber or Marx.

The basic problem of this approach is determining which, if any, of the many conflicting interpretations offered, were indeed true. This issue of verification—of testing hypotheses from theory—required an analytical as well as a theoretical approach to the study of society. Herein lies the dilemma of how to make the social sciences more “scientific” (Brown 1963, Durkheim
1938). This debate has continued over the last century and has yet to be fully resolved, though progress has been made (Blalock 1964). I return to this question momentarily, but it might be useful to first review how some of the initial efforts to create comparative social science led in profoundly wrong directions.

The major issues to be explained by early social science were the rapid technological, social, political, and economic changes that lead to European dominance of the world by the middle of the nineteenth century. Although European technological leadership and the imperialistic reorganization of the world were relatively recent phenomena, spanning only a 200-300 year period, the normal enthocentric impulse allowed most nineteenth-century Europeans to think that the present world order was the inevitable outcome of natural differences between peoples. These thoughts were elevated from ideology to social science theory with the linkage to Darwinian theories of social evolution.

Charles Darwin’s theory of natural evolution is probably the most important scientific discovery in history. By presenting a plausible account of the origins of species differentiation in response to environmental change, Darwin’s theory provided the central corpus of several sciences, including modern biology and ecology. Although Darwin’s theory provides an account for the origins of the species of homo sapiens, he did not attempt to explain the cultural, economic, and social changes in human societies over the last 10,000 years. Not all social scientists in the classical era were as cautious as Darwin, and more than a few assumed that sociocultural evolution among human populations paralleled biological evolution among plants and animals. According to this school of “social Darwinism,” societies were assumed to be akin to species. From this premise, it was only a short leap to the proposition that the relative success of European societies in economic, technological, and military terms was due to the inherent superiority of Europeans. One version of social Darwinism led to the modern form of racism that asserted the biological superiority of peoples of European descent. A somewhat milder version of social Darwinism asserted that European superiority was due to European culture and other peoples could make progress if they adopted European ways (for an overview of American social Darwinism, see Hofstadter, 1955).
As strange as these ideas may seem at present, they were the leading ideas, indeed the “modern scientific ideas,” which were pervasive among most intellectuals, including those in most branches of the social sciences well into the twentieth century. Although these ideas may not have directly caused the monstrous evils of modern times, they certainly provided legitimation for genocide and for the maintenance of colonial empires until well into the middle of the twentieth century. Perhaps because of the unsavory history of social Darwinism, much of social science has retreated from broad theoretical attempts to explain the development of the modern world. There is one evolutionary theory of social change that still persists, both as a branch of the social sciences and as a political movement—Marxian theory.

Marxism as a social theory (and its modern variants of dependency theory and world system analysis) shares some of the core features of nineteenth century evolutionary models, but without the assumptions of European racial or cultural superiority. Marx postulated an evolutionary model of societies from primitive communism to slavery to feudalism to capitalism to socialism. Social change, according to Marx, followed from a process of internal societal dynamics, beginning with changes in the technology of production and ensuing class conflict over the control of production. Although Marx and many of his intellectual heirs have occasionally produced significant empirical research (Baran and Sweezy 1966, Braverman 1974), there is almost no scientific basis for the Marxian interpretation of history. It is not just the political collapse and economic stagnation of socialist societies that led to the intellectual bankruptcy of Marxist social science, but the lack of empirical support for the central propositions of the theory (Chirot 1994: 82-88, Wright and Martin 1987). Indeed, Marxist social science, especially in socialist countries, largely discarded the scientific method of testing hypotheses and became a branch of philosophy that studied classical texts in search of contemporary relevance.

There are still efforts to develop social scientific theories to explain long-term patterns of economic growth, technological innovation, demographic transitions, and political transformations, but these are much more modest efforts than the evolutionary models that originated during the classical period. The increasing awareness of the complexity of social
systems and the relative ease of most well trained social scientists to empirically evaluate and critique theories have slowed efforts to create “grand theory.” Most contemporary efforts are directed at “middle-range” theoretical accounts that apply to a particular problem, often within specified geographical and temporal frames (Merton 1968, Chapter 2).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN SOCIAL SCIENCE

The application of scientific logic and methods to the study of human societies and human behavior is a twentieth century development. Although there is similarity in the questions and issues addressed by social science with earlier intellectual traditions such as moral philosophy and religion, the objectives and methods of social science are radically different from all other approaches. The aim of social science is not to define the good society or to justify particular forms of human behavior, but to explain the variations and similarities in societies, organizations, and behavior. The tools of social science are the collection of data through careful observation and measurement, and the analysis and interpretation of data by methods that allow for the empirical evaluation of hypotheses.

These ideas were gradually introduced over the middle decades of the twentieth century as social science disciplines were defined, introductory textbooks were written, and professional organizations founded scholarly journals to vet and publish research findings. The development of the social sciences was inextricably linked to the growth of major research universities and the expansion of higher education, especially in North America. The growth in tertiary education fueled the demand for college teachers in all fields, including the social sciences, and the training of Ph.D.’s became the major priority of research universities.

All of these conditions conspired to produce a more standard social science—one that could be defined in textbooks and recognized by scholars as encompassing coherent bodies of knowledge acquired by reproducible methods of inquiry. The standardization or professionalization of the social sciences meant an increasing focus on methods, both methods of data collection and data analysis. As the application of social science methodology assumed center stage in graduate training programs and as a barometer to ascertain the quality and contribution of research, the
armchair tradition of speculating about the nature of society has assumed a diminished status in
the professional community (Bulmer 1984).

A major obstacle in the development of the new social sciences was the lack of data that would
measure up to the higher standards of social science methodology. In the classical armchair
tradition, first or second-observations (the writings of other observers) were the primary source
of data for social science analysis and theorizing. Although such data are still widely used in the
social sciences, they are supplemented with governmental records and statistics, and by data
collected by researchers themselves. Researchers often collect data based on in-depth interviews
with a relatively small number of respondents and with the use of standard questionnaires
administered to larger population numbers.

All of these sources of data are more available for local populations than distant ones. Because of
cost considerations, psychologists tend to select participants for experiments from students in
their college or university. For similar economic constraints, many sociological surveys are
based on samples from nearby cities and communities. Economic and demographic data are
typically collected in a standard fashion by governmental units within regional or national
boundaries. Although social scientists may be interested in data from other countries, lack of
availability, problems of comparability, and cost considerations often make reliance on local
(including national) data the only practical choice. In addition, sources for social science funding
often specify the research question in terms of national priorities or problems.

These practical considerations do not foreclose the possibilities of international or foreign
research. In some disciplines or subdisciplines, anthropology is the best example, an extended
period of fieldwork in a distant (and preferably remote) setting is considered an essential element
in graduate training. The field of history is organized by time and place, and every college and
university tries to have specialists for the major world regions (albeit with a heavy influence of
past traditions). Historians are expected to work with primary records and to know the relevant
language(s) and cultural traditions in which documents are produced. Using a rather different
methodology, this statement also holds true for archeology. But with the exception of these
fields, university students enrolled in most social science classes in the United States (and I think that this would hold in many other countries as well) receive a rather narrow education about human societies—namely their own at the present time. A historical perspective may be presented, but only for purposes of contrast with the present. Change from then to now is a one-way street with little sense of alternative trajectories that could have been taken.

Even if the research agenda of most social scientists is circumscribed by national boundaries, there has been substantial progress in the contemporary social sciences. Progress is most evident in the careful measurement of trends and patterns of social, economic, and cultural phenomena. There is a substantial body of social science literature that provides a broad and insightful portrait of labor force patterns, economic inequality, family structure, the role of small businesses, religious beliefs and behaviors, diffusion of new technology among farmers, the availability of health care services, child rearing practices, and many other interesting subjects.

There is a considerable flow of the core theories and methods of social science research across international boundaries. Since World War II, the elite research universities in Western countries, particularly the United States, have trained a significant number of social scientists from Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The theories, models, and methods of Western social science have become largely incorporated into the research agendas and curriculum of social science throughout the world. One of the items usually exported, though it is rarely discussed or even noted, is the norm of studying one’s own country. This is not required and there are many exceptions, but the overall result is that research agendas are built around the availability of data and the comparative advantages of studying one’s own society.

In spite of the progress of social science within national boundaries, there are a number of significant limitations to the present system. I will return to the question of “national brands” of social science momentarily, but another critical problem is that most studies examine society at only one point at time. If I pick up any journal in my field, there would probably be studies of racial and ethnic inequality in education and employment, research results on the roles of women in politics and business, and analyses of religious beliefs and voting behavior. All of these
studies would be interesting and important, but a standard feature would the focus on the present—or a recent date when the data were collected. If the study were longitudinal, there might be data from two time points—perhaps from 10 years ago and the present.

Although there are occasional historical studies that cover long periods of time, these are relatively rare. Studies of large-scale social changes, such as long-term patterns of economic growth, political development, and the transformations of social institutions are much less common topics in contemporary social science than during the classical era. However one might lament the change in orientation (and I do), there are many good reasons for the changes that have occurred in the practice of the social sciences. The early evolutionary theories of social change were marred by racist assumptions and over-simplification of the complexities of human societies. One of the positive developments from the accumulation of social science research is greater humility about our current stock of knowledge and the limitations of grand theoretical explanations.

Other (non-evolutionary) theories or models of large-scale social change have not met with much greater success. During the 1950s and 1960s, the founding of new nations (former colonies in Asia and Africa) and economic growth were thought to be leading in the direction of mixed economies, political democracy, and greater liberalization (Apter 1967, Inkles 1969, Lerner 1965, Levy 1966, Rostow 1961). These ideas, loosely organized under the rubric of modernization theory, were knocked down by the realities of economic stagnation and authoritarian trends in many third world counties, as well as many internal inconsistencies in various branches of modernization theory (Portes 1974).

In the 1970s and 1980s, alternative social science models of development were popularized, such as world systems theory and dependency theories (Cardoso and Faletto 1979, Wallerstein 1974). These new theories seemed to be in accord with many international developments, including the slowdown of economic growth in both developed and developing countries and the apparent relative progress made by strong states with either centralized planning or state-centered development, as exemplified by Japan.
Events in world have, however, been no kinder to these alternative theories of development than they were to modernization theory (Chirot 1981). The demise of the socialist experiment in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the reversal of fortunes in East and Southeast Asian economies in the late 1990s have shattered almost every belief that central planning can outperform market economies. Political change, over the last 40 years, has been no less unpredictable—at least in terms of social science theories. The trend toward authoritarianism of the 1960s and 1970s was in contrast to the expectations of liberalization predicted by modernization theory. The striking increase in democratic transitions and movements toward political liberalization in the 1990s has reversed the conventional wisdom based on recent history. The revival of neoliberalism and the importance of unfettered markets is the current gospel, but many social scientists have adopted a more skeptical approach to grand theories of development or social change (Portes 1997).

The economic and political developments over the last century, or even the last two decades, have simply proven to be much more complex and unstable than any social science theory would have predicted. For example, the dynamic growth and unprecedented levels of wealth created by the computer and information technology sectors in the last decade seem to have been completely unpredicted by all theories of industrial and postindustrial societies. Social scientists who aspire to develop theories of social, political, and economic change or (even to draw empirical generalizations about the experience of the last 30 years) must contend with these largely unanticipated realities.

This environment of unpredictable social change reinforces the instinct of scientific caution to focus on narrower topics for which reliable data can be gathered and carefully analyzed. In contrast to the seemingly chaotic world of macro social change, there have been dramatic improvements in the quality and reliability of microlevel data on individual behavior, particularly from carefully constructed sample surveys. Indeed, social science has made demonstrable social progress in measuring and modeling patterns of intergenerational socioeconomic mobility, migration, marriage, and other aspects of family behavior. This progress has served to define the frontiers of modern social science in many national contexts.
The basic problem is that the data used by social scientists rarely spans national boundaries. Since scientific progress is evaluated by *how* one studies a topic as much by *what* is studied, the natural tendency is to search for the “best data” that will allow the application of modern analytical methods. And for most social science questions, this naturally leads to an analysis of national data (or even the study of one single community). This has led to a rather peculiar pattern of development of the modern social sciences. In the United States, the study of race relations is largely a study of American race relations. Courses on gender and sex roles draw almost exclusively on change in the United States from the 1960s to the present. Studies of political sociology will compare American patterns to other societies, but primarily North American and European cases.

The portrait that I have sketched of rather parochial orientations in the contemporary social sciences may be a bit overdone. Perhaps, evaluating progress in the mainstream social sciences in the United States may be too narrow a vantage point. Perhaps, if we look elsewhere, such as area studies scholarship and the growing international community of the social sciences, there may be less of a tendency to focus on one’s own country and vision of comparative social science.

**CAN AREA STUDIES “DE-LOCALIZE” CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCE?**

At many large universities, there are active interdisciplinary area studies programs that cover both the humanistic and social scientific study of most world regions. Professional organizations such as the Association for Asian Studies, the African Studies Association, and the Latin American Studies Association publish major academic journals, have popular annual meetings, and have thousands of members. Is it possible for area studies scholars to influence the mainstream social science disciplines and to push or lead in the direction of more international and comparative scholarship? My assessment, after almost three decades of trying to work simultaneously in both the area studies and the mainstream disciplinary worlds, is rather pessimistic. It is not so much intellectual rivalry or hostility, though these are not entirely absent, but rather complacency that is the major obstacle to greater cooperation between area studies
specialists and those in the mainstream social science disciplines. In general, neither tradition sees the other community as a major intellectual partner for their scholarly objectives.

First of all, the numbers of area studies specialists are so few in many disciplines as to make them all but invisible. With the exceptions of anthropology, history, and comparative politics, in-depth knowledge of other societies is not considered a particularly valuable attribute for an academic appointment in social science departments at most American universities. The Association for Asian Studies is the largest of the professional area studies associations in the United States with 7,500 members (the next closest is the Latin American Studies Association with 4,800 members). The smallest of the disciplinary associations is the American Anthropological Association with 11,500 members, and the figures range upwards to 13,500 each for the American Sociological Association and the American Political Science Association, 15,200 in the American Historical Association, 21,000 in the American Economics Association, and 151,000 in the American Psychological Association (most psychologists are clinicians, not scholars).

If one looks more closely at the numbers of area studies scholars in the United States by specific regions or individual countries, the numbers become almost microscopic. About a decade ago, I estimated that there were about 500 American scholars (who were members of the Association of Asian Studies) who claimed a specialization on Southeast Asia (Hirschman 1992). For specific countries, there were only a few dozen (or fewer) academic specialists. The problem is not simply one of relative numbers, however, but of a general lack of interest by mainstream social scientists in the intellectual contributions of scholars who study other societies. In spite of the growing emphasis on globalization and the internationalization of the social sciences, my sense is that “area studies,” with a few exceptions, has become marginal to the broader academic community.

In the 1950s and 1960s, area studies were seen as “new” (at least in relative terms), and universities were anxious to expand with the promise of foundation and government support. At the present time, academic budgets are tighter and there is much greater competition for very
limited amounts of national and local sources of funding. Maintaining academic positions for instruction in the “less commonly taught” languages is a very expensive commitment for research universities. Sending graduate students for more than a year of fieldwork and then supporting them for an additional year to write up their dissertations is thought to be an overly expensive luxury in the current institutional environment.

Although there is a considerable amount of hubris in the contemporary social sciences in their neglect of knowledge of “local” cultures, languages, and societies, it should be acknowledged that intellectual blinders exist on both sides of the fence. Many area specialists assume that there is little to be learned from the core areas of their disciplines, which are often considered to be hopelessly Western-centric. This often leads to neglect in the graduate training of fledgling area specialists in the core areas of their disciplines, particularly in research methods. This means that many area studies scholars position themselves at the margins of their disciplines. This unfortunate situation contributes to a lack of communication and considerable miscommunication. Consequently, there are very few efforts to work together for mutual gain.

One example might illustrate the depth of the problem of lack of communication. Over the last 20 years, there has been a sharp increase in the number of American economists conducting primary research on Malaysia and Indonesia with data from the Malaysian and Indonesian Family Life Surveys collected by the Rand Corporation. These data are in the public domain and are widely considered to be among the best longitudinal household data in the world (see http://www.rand.org/FLS/). The analyses based on these data are published in mainstream disciplinary journals with virtually no references to the work of area studies scholars (DeVanzo and Habicht 1986, Frankenberg, Thomas, and Beege 1999, Lilliard and Willis 1994, and Panis and Lilliard 1995). Similarly, specialists on Malaysia and Indonesia rarely cite this excellent body of research.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITIES OF SCHOLARS

Many scholars in Latin America, Asia, and Africa have close connections to the international research community—both to area studies specialists and to others who do not specialize in the
study of foreign countries. These connections are often fostered through postgraduate training in the United States and other Western countries. Perhaps these scholars can serve as the cultural brokers who will contribute to a more international community of scholars and scholarship, especially with the growing interest in “globalization” and the need to internationalize the social sciences.

Actually, there is already an immense flow of scholarship across international boundaries, but the dominant pattern is the diffusion of scholarly publications from Western countries to the rest of the world. The leading ideas, models of research, methods of social science analysis, and the occasional empirical study diffuse throughout the world through the printed pages of books and journals. This influence is, however, largely one-way, and consists more of ideas and styles of research than the actual substance of research itself. Increasingly, scholars and researchers from around the world speak the same language and use many the same metaphors. By reading the same journals (and often sharing the same teachers) as their counterparts in the West, Asian (and scholars from other regions) researchers can keep up-to-date on current theoretical debates and utilize similar analytical models. One of the lessons learned from such connections is to give priority to the study of one’s own society. My impression is that social science scholarship in most countries is even less likely to be international and comparative than it is in the United States.

Even with the paucity of comparative research studies by individual scholars, frequent personal exchanges across international boundaries holds the possibility of increasing both the number of comparatively organized research projects, as well as the systematic comparison of research studies across national contexts. Although such international collaborations do occur, and there are regional and international organizations that sponsor and encourage international conferences and exchanges, the reality is much less than the potential. There are several obstacles that inhibit close collegial relationships across national boundaries. These barriers are not limited to international exchanges, but the social and political dynamics of international relationships makes such ties more difficult to establish and more fragile once established.
For example, many American “area studies” researchers who conduct primary research in other countries have relatively little association with the local academic communities in these countries. Many of these scholars spend extensive periods of time doing fieldwork, are completely fluent in the language of the area, and have close personal ties to friends in their countries of study. But for a variety of reasons, many Western academics rarely give lectures at local universities, publish their research in local journals, or collaborate with scholars in the country in which they conduct their primary research. This situation is less typical in Southeast Asia than for other world regions, I believe, but some of the conditions that lead to these outcomes are present here as well.

Scholarly communities do not exist in the abstract, but are subject to the same pressures and realities that characterize all other aspects of economic, political, and social exchange. Interpersonal problems that arise from differential status, power, influence, and economic resources affect academic exchanges just as they do every other sort of human relationship. These problems are exacerbated when layered over the living memory of colonialism, which has a contemporary legacy. Before examining the present, it is important to examine the historical context that continues to shape present day international associations.

During the colonial period, a few administrators and scholars from Western countries developed a deep interest in the languages, cultures, and peoples of the countries in which they worked. The books and scholarly journals published during the colonial era are often the starting point for much contemporary research. The assumptions of European dominance and frequent stereotyping of other “races” are common in much (but not all) of this body of literature, and the label of “Orientalism” is widely used as an epithet to dismiss all writings of the colonial era. In spite of the many biases of colonial scholarship, there is actually considerable value in many of the first hand accounts and observations of some of their writings. Perhaps more important than content, however, was the division between foreign observers who were considered to be “objective” scholars and local authors who had little authority and recognition.
This profound institutionalized inequality was bridged, at least partially, in the post-World War II era with the development of Western influenced universities throughout the world and the growing numbers of Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans who received postgraduate training in Western countries. By the 1960s, there was a substantial base of academic institutions in most countries of the “developing world.” Over the last 30 years, the number of universities and the number of students enrolled in them have multiplied, as have the ranks of Ph.D. instructors and the volume of local scholarship, including in the social sciences.

In some cases, there are close collegial ties between scholars in Western countries and scholars in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Bonds between students and teachers, and bonds between fellow students, tend to be intimate and have the power to over-ride many tensions. Tensions exist, however, because of the continuing inequality that is rooted in the political and economic divisions in the world, which spills over to the academic and scholarly communities. Academic salaries and international prestige have usually been higher in Western countries (though this is less likely to be true than in the past). Academics in many third world countries must also face many more political and economic constraints on their research and teaching than their Western colleagues.

Over the last 20 to 30 years, some Western scholars, by their actions and comments, have certainly contributed to perceptions of injustice. Over the course of my career, I have heard many stories of arrogant behavior by Western scholars who have drawn upon the ideas of local academics that were then utilized in foreign publications without proper acknowledgement. This is but one example from a very long list of alleged actions by Western scholars that have created suspicions and made it more difficult to establish international collaborations that are genuinely equal. I have no doubt that many of these stories are true, and that some Western scholars have abused their positions of privilege and greater access to research funds and international prestige. The perceptions of success and prestige of many foreign scholars based on their overseas research may, however, be greatly exaggerated.
The more serious point is that the reactions to the abuses of foreign scholars may create even deeper problems for international scholarship than did the precipitating behavior. The most obvious point is that barriers “to keep foreign scholars in check” (e.g., restrictions on research visas, limited access to data, and generalized suspicion) are applied indiscriminately to the innocent and guilty alike. Most ominous, in my judgement, is the claim that there are different styles of understanding, and that only “insiders” can really know the truth about their own society (Merton 1972). Of course, outsiders often lack a deep historical perspective and may not always appreciate the nuances of culture and language that shape local understandings. This condition not only applies to foreigners, but also could be used to criticize the work of any outsider to an ascriptively defined group—men versus women or one ethnic group compared to another. While lack of familiarity with “insider culture” may be an added burden for certain types of scholarly work, particularly those requiring deep cultural interpretation, such as literary studies, the “insider-outsider” debate seems less applicable to most of the social sciences. Nonetheless, scholars in many countries have argued that only nationals can (or should) write national history, and that the scholarship of outsiders is always suspect.

These perceptions and fears are certainly a minority viewpoint—most international ties are collegial and potential frictions are held in check. But for those of us who wish to create a more open and interacting international community of scholars, it is important to acknowledge these latent tensions and to devise mechanisms for overcoming them.

SOCIAL SCIENCES IN THE ELECTRONIC AGE
I generally avoid discussions about globalization and internationalization. There often seems to be more “hype” than substance in the use of these terms, and I am skeptical that most speakers on these topics have anything really new or useful to say. Nonetheless, my academic work, and the everyday aspects of work (email, electronic transmission of papers, online library catalogs, online contents of some journals, and greater access to data) have been altered so much over the last ten years by technology that I am slowly beginning to appreciate the revolutionary changes first-hand. In the final section of this essay, I offer my interpretation (or speculation) on how
these technological forces may alter the organization of the social sciences, and the
international and disciplinary divisions in the social sciences, in the coming decades.

A central theme of this essay is how data, and access to data, have shaped the development of the
social sciences. Data in the form of books and other published materials were the empirical
sources used by the armchair social scientists during the classical era. Over the course of the
twentieth century, the social sciences continued to rely on published references, but also added
primary sources, including first-hand ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews, systematic
sample surveys, and national statistical materials. Access to such materials enabled the social
sciences to become more “scientific” and cumulative as research studies could be replicated and
even challenged by others with access to the same data sources. This new direction in the social
sciences meant that greater weight was put on analyses of verifiable empirical data than on broad
interpretations of societal development based on impressionistic data. Overall, these changes are
positive developments, but there are some unfortunate side-effects; the most important of these is
the tendency of most social scientists to be primarily concerned with their contemporary home
societies, to the neglect of comparative and historical work. “Area studies,” in many Western
brands of social science is generally situated on the periphery of most disciplines. Although there
are many international exchanges and conferences, the “nationalization” of social sciences has
tended to overwhelm many integrative patterns. So how is technology going to save us?

Most obvious are the changes in communications technology—all of us are in more frequent
touch with more people than ever before. The most important change in communications
technology occurred more than a century ago with the invention of the telegraph (followed
shortly by the telephone). For the first time in human history, communication was independent of
transportation. But the telephone and telegraph remained costly and were used infrequently and
only for short messages. Scholars, in general, have been dependent on communications delivered
through the old fashion channels, such as correspondence and the printed materials. In the last
ten years, really the last five years, electronic communications has changed everything.
At present, I can communicate with colleagues around the world, virtually instantaneously and costless. On a daily basis, I can read almost every major newspaper in countries of my interest. Indeed, I can read dissident newspapers that are only published electronically. This is to say nothing of newsletters and press releases from every imaginable organization, course syllabi on university courses taught throughout the world, and other collections of relevant information and data. Although this is more information than I can cope with, it is an almost unbelievable research resource that could not have been assembled for any price just a few years ago.

Although the impact of electronic communications has had a greater impact on scholarly communications, the lowered costs of travel and telephone communications may be more consequential for minimizing the impact of national boundaries. For the last century, governments have spent inordinate resources creating borders to regulate the flow of people, goods, and information. The influence of national governments has waned, however, as the lowered costs of travel and communications have made international borders more porous than ever. Because most countries in the modern world are increasingly dependent on tourist dollars, remittances from abroad, foreign investments, and access to new technology, it is going to be almost impossible to closely regulate national borders from international influences and exchanges. This means that scholars will have much greater access to travel and information from every part of the globe. The frictions of distance, the power of passport control offices, and official tendency to limit access to information are not going to disappear, but current trends are moving in the opposite direction, and very rapidly.

Scholars need not just information, or information on current events, but also data that are useful for modern social science research, whether it is based on ethnographic accounts of everyday life or national accounts of financial flows. Here, too, computers and technology are making a difference, with the increasing ability to store large quantities of data that can be processed with relatively simple technological know-how. The increasing ability of personal computers to store and process large amounts of data has been an evolutionary trend over the past two decades, but changes in the last few years have been nothing short of incredible.
Let me digress with an example from my own work. My first personal computer, acquired only about 15 years ago, was a marvelous machine to do word-processing and spreadsheet analyses. I continued, however, to do all my serious data analysis on mainframe computers. I am a demographer and my data files consist of very large census files—some with millions of records. In addition to several bookshelves of printed census volumes, I have a large cabinet with more than one hundred computer tapes that can only be read by tape drives on mainframe computers. About a year ago, I discovered that I could store this entire data archive on the hard disk of my PC. Moreover, I can process these large census files on my PC in about the same time that they can be run on the mainframe. These changes in computing power and storage will, however, not speed up my own work very much. My brain still works as slow as it always has, and the design of analyses is a much more labor-intensive task than the actual processing of data.

These changes in computing technology will transform social science research in ways that can only be imagined at present. There are no longer any economic constraints on the analysis of large data sets, and complex statistical models with iterative procedures that could consume days of mainframe computer time can be done on a basic PC. The costs of computer hardware and of very sophisticated, but increasingly user-friendly software, are only a fraction of what they were a few years ago.

The most important technological change of our era is the Internet. Only about five years ago, I first saw an example of the World Wide Web and how easily information could be read and transferred to any computer tied into the electronic network that spans the globe. Now every institution and organization seems to have a web site. Many of my colleagues and students already have their own personal web sites. (I am still working on mine.) Most of the information on web sites is descriptive materials copied from printed pages, but the important feature is that they are available anywhere and at any time.

For social science, the major value of the Internet is not the basic descriptive information, although this is often very useful. The major value of the Internet is that it is becoming an electronic warehouse for publications and data. My students and I already use the web-site to
store the primary data and codebooks for a research project that we are conducting in Vietnam. It is actually easier for me to download the survey data from this website than to carry around a bunch of disks. It is also much easier for us to share the survey data with our colleagues in Vietnam through the Internet than to send the data to them. In a similar fashion, most of the major social science research centers and data archives are putting their primary data files online for anyone in the world to access them. If the data sources are carefully documented with complete information on how to download files and codebooks, the burden on data distributors to answer questions is greatly lessened. Indeed, there are powerful incentives in the new Internet age to have a comprehensive web site that provides the maximum amount of useful information to other users.

This emerging trend reverses the prevailing pattern in much of the social sciences where data files, especially from other countries, were not widely available. It has always been the norm in the scientific community to share data, but the reality often fell short of the ideal. Documenting data for other users, making copies of data tapes and mailing them, and then answering questions take a lot of time. Once the data are put up on the web site, however, users can access the data directly with no costs of time or money to the data producers. There was sometimes a reluctance to share primary data because of the fear that other researchers could analyze and publish research results before the primary investigator could do so. Although this sentiment may not have disappeared, it has become less possible for primary investigators to hoard their data. Almost every national social science funding agency in the United States now requires that primary data collected with public funds be made available to the entire scientific community within a very short period of time. Indeed, researchers and research programs receive considerable public acclaim for making their data available promptly and in an easily accessible form.

Sharing data across national boundaries has been a major problem for the social science community. In addition to all of the problems that confront data access within countries, international boundaries led to many of the same problems that inhibited international exchanges and collaborations. Government agencies with control over data are often deeply suspicious of
social scientists, whether domestic or foreign. Foreign researchers or domestic researchers who collected their own data at considerable cost may have felt little interest or incentive to share their hard-won materials with others. Although none of these conditions have yet disappeared, I think that the tide is shifting. The incentives to have the most comprehensive websites on every topic is surely going to lead to an increase in data availability—including the primary data sources for social science.

If this scenario is correct, there will soon be dramatic increase in the availability of data from many countries in the world. The availability of such data will create the possibility of renewed focus on the comparative and longitudinal questions that motivated social scientists in the classical age. The retreat from these questions was not because they were unimportant questions, but rather because reliable data were not available to permit rigorous research. This constraint, along with many other forces discussed in this essay, led to creation of national-centric schools of research with “area studies” on the periphery. I hope that we are entering a new age of international social science where national boundaries begin to disappear.

REFERENCES


