

# Beyond the Universal

## The Cultural Myopia of US Social Science

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**T**he greatest conceit of US social science is its belief that it is trying to study the human condition and its findings are universally applicable to all societies. The greatest blindness is its inability to understand how culture-bound it has become.

The fundamental mistake that US social science (in economics, politics, sociology, or psychology) made was to extrapolate natural science thinking and methodologies to the social sciences. Quantification, abstraction, and emphasis on model-building and replicability led to a fundamental failure to understand the differences in human societies. The destruction of “area studies” made things worse.

Sadly, the damage done by this blindness of US social science has not been limited to academia. US policymakers educated by these social scientists have generated deeply flawed policies. Nor do these policymakers realize that they have to retool their minds if they are to understand the new era of world history that is emerging, marked by the end of Western domination of world history and the return of Asia to center stage. The greatest proof of the United States’ inability to understand other societies was when its troops marched into Iraq in March 2003. Perhaps Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld were a little extreme in believing that the US army soldiers landing on Islamic soil would be greeted with petals thrown on their military boots. But what was even more frightening than this massive delusion was the ignorance of the mainstream US establishment. Few US citizens seemed aware that the United States was once again seen to be pouring salt into the deep wounds of Islamic civilization.

This insensitivity to other cultures is neither new nor limited to the Islamic world. During the Vietnam War, US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara followed the modern social science approach: building strategy and tactics by amassing data without developing a deep understanding of Vietnamese history and culture. And as his *New York Times* obituary said, “The war became his

personal nightmare. Nothing he did, none of the tools at his command—the power of American weapons, the forces of technology and logic, or the strength of American soldiers—could stop the armies of North Vietnam and their South Vietnamese allies, the Vietcong.” And now the United States will wade even deeper into Afghanistan with similar ignorance.

There is one demographic reality that few Americans understand. The US population of 300 million makes up less than 5 percent of the world. And the remaining 95 percent will no longer kowtow to power. They want to be treated and understood as equals. Many US citizens, especially liberals, believe that Obama’s election has solved most of the United States’ problems with the world. Obama has shown great cultural sensitivity, especially in the tone and content of his speeches in Cairo and Shanghai. Because he has actually lived in other cultures, Obama can build bridges between the US and the world.

But the vilification Obama has received from the US media for showing sensitivity to other cultures during his overseas trips reveals once again the ignorance of mainstream US society on the nature of the world. The gap between US and Asian media reporting on Obama’s visit to Asia showed clearly how out of touch key US minds are with Asian cultures. Obama was criticized in the US media for being soft and sensitive, especially in handling China. Yet understanding and showing respect for other cultures’ customs is considered *de rigueur* in Asia.

In Asia, there is a growing conviction that US social science is failing in its mission of educating young US citizens for the Asian century that is unfolding. Paradoxically, Asian and other foreign students who study in US universities benefit a great deal more because they can see the world through at least two sets of cultural lenses. Most US citizens graduate with only one set of cultural lenses, which they mistakenly believe prepare them to understand the new era of world history.

The blindness of US social science will not be easily cured. But one simple step that US universities can take is to partner with Asian universities on an equal footing. To develop such an equal partnership, US academics will have to give up their assumption that they understand the real world better than other academics. Instead, a new approach of humility and willingness to absorb new perspectives will be needed to repair the enormous damage that US social science has done to US relations with the world. ■

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