

A Modest Case For Scholarly Nationalism

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I would like to do something unfashionable. Conventional wisdom in academia says that scholars should erase borders and engage in a global conversation about the advancement of knowledge. However, I argue in defense of borders, to a limited degree, in the field of public administration. Scholars should recognize and defend national and regional particularities in the aims and methods of public administration research.

I am driven to this position because of important changes in the knowledge production system in public administration over the last two decades. This system comprises the institutions and processes that have been constructed to generate knowledge about public administration and to certify that knowledge as reliable. The players in this system include professors, universities, journals, book publishers, scholarly and professional associations, and public officials. I do not mean to suggest that the system is highly formalized or that ideas are explicitly certified. Nevertheless, every country has a process by which ideas about governance are sifted, accepting some and ignoring others.

Over the last 40 years, knowledge production in public administration has become increasingly globalized. Scholars in different countries are more tightly linked than before. Rising numbers of scholarly and professional associations claim to have an international or global mission, and many journals make the same claim. Globalized bibliographic databases, like Google Scholar, and global ranking schemes for journals, like that provided by *Journal Citation Reports*, are now readily available. In addition, there are global accreditation and ranking schemes for academic programs and global systems for ranking scholars by productivity and impact.

These trends point to the emergence of a new global knowledge

Abstract

Methods for producing knowledge within the field of public administration have transformed over the last 30 years. A globalized system of knowledge production is increasingly displacing national and regional systems. This globalized system has a problematic homogenizing effect on scholarship. The system also reinforces the influence of a small number of Western countries, all former imperial powers. Excluded countries in the Global South should demand better representation within this system and pursue a research agenda that reflects their own national and regional concerns.

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production system that is displacing nationally based production systems. The new system is corporatized as well as globalized. Some components, such as journal publishing, are operated by multinational corporations and are highly profitable (Roberts, 2019b). The system is also metricized: it emphasizes quantitative measurement of scholarly achievement. In this perspective, successful scholars are those who achieve a high H-score by producing many articles published in top-ranked journals (Schimanski & Alperin, 2018, p. 5). The system also encourages Stakhanovism, to borrow an old Soviet term – that is, production for its own sake, regardless of quality.

The newness of this global system must be acknowledged. Today, when one talks about top-ranked journals, the meaning is universally clear. This accolade refers to an international ranking based on "impact factor," or the frequency with which articles in one ranked journal are cited in other ranked journals. Thirty years ago, however, scholars rarely talked about top-ranked journals, partly because no system for ranking journals had been created and popularized within the academic community.

This new global system exhibits a powerful homogenizing tendency. It pushes scholars in different countries to study the same set of problems. The mechanism is straightforward. Scholars face pressure to publish in top-ranked journals. To do so, they must demonstrate how their work connects to articles already published in those journals. Editors are reluctant to publish idiosyncratic articles that will not be cited in other journals, because doing so undermines the ranking of their own journal. The result is the emergence of an epistemological monoculture in which scholars around the world focus on the same limited range of topics.

Some scholars have encouraged the growth of this monoculture through their use of bibliometric studies. Globalized bibliographic databases make it easy for scholars to undertake statistical studies of what is being studied in the literature. Of course, bibliometric studies can be used for critical purposes, such as demonstrating how certain topics have been ignored. However, bibliometric studies appear more likely to be used for the alternative purpose of identifying "emerging themes" in a particular field. Authors can use this information to demonstrate how their work is connected to the existing research, while editors can easily judge which manuscripts are likely to be cited. This behavior encourages path dependency, as authors write about topics that have already been written about.

There are two primary reasons to worry about a globalized scholarly monoculture. The first is that the resulting global knowledge production system is biased in favor of a small number of countries. It would be inaccurate to say that the system is biased toward the Global North, because the skew is even worse than that. My own analysis of articles published in the "top ten" public administration journals in 2020, based on data drawn from *Journal Citation Reports*, reveals that half came from just three countries – the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. A recent bibliometric analysis that includes articles published over two decades by more than 50 public administration journals reaches a similar conclusion: "[T]he US, UK, and the Netherlands are always the main players in publishing highly cited papers" (Yu, 2022, p. 15).

In short, an immense swath of the world, home to most of the world's population, is grossly underrepresented in top-ranked public administration journals. Nine of the 10 most populous countries in the world are in the Global South. Together, these nine countries account for scarcely 4% of articles published in top-ranked journals in 2020, and most of these articles came from China. The other eight countries – India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Brazil,

Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Mexico – account for one-third of the world's population, but less than 2% of articles in top-ranked journals.

Furthermore, the topics highlighted in top-ranked journals are those that concern a small number of countries in the Global North. These are rich, politically stable countries with well-developed administrative capabilities that are largely unconcerned with problems such as peacebuilding, state building, corruption control, and democratization. For example, an analysis of articles published in one journal, *Public Administration Review*, indicates that only one out of 600 articles focused on development administration. Corruption control, defense, and policing were not even identified as relevant categories of research (Raadschelders & Lee, 2011, p. 24).

The global knowledge production system centers around only a handful of countries, all former imperial powers (Moloney et al., 2022). The governing body of the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), which describes itself as the "global standard-setting organization" for public affairs programs, is composed almost exclusively of Americans. The leadership of scholarly associations typically comes from the United States or Europe, and the profits generated by multinational corporations are usually kept there too. In fact, journal publishing exemplifies how old colonial practices have survived. Multinational corporations outsource low-level journal production work to the Philippines and India, while intellectual control and profits remain with their former colonizers, the United States and the United Kingdom.

One might think that the solution is to improve representation within international institutions in order for the research agenda to reflect the needs of the Global South. This thinking is only partly right. In reality, no single list of critical problems will suit every country. As I observe in my book *Strategies for Governing*, every country wrestles with a distinct set of challenges, and national leaders often reach different conclusions about the right way of addressing those challenges (Roberts, 2019a). Diversity in administrative styles, rather than homogeneity, is the reality of governance (Bayerlein & Knill, 2019). Because there is no single formula for governing well, there can never be a single research agenda that fits the needs of all countries.

Scholars in public administration should produce knowledge that will improve governance, and thereby quality of life, for their neighbors and compatriots. Toward this aim, scholars should focus on problems that are close at hand. In some cases, colleagues in other countries may be looking at essentially the same problems. However, this will not always be true. It may instead be the case that the problems studied elsewhere have little relevance to scholars' own communities. In such cases, priority should be given to the local rather than the global agenda. In other words, there is a case for some degree of scholarly nationalism.

Moreover, there is another sense in which scholarly nationalism is justified. The United States-United Kingdom bias that is built into the emerging global knowledge production system will not correct itself. In fact, this bias may be reinforced as this system becomes more deeply entrenched. What is urgently needed is a program of epistemic decolonization within the field of public administration (Smith, 2012). Improvements will only come if they are demanded by scholars in underrepresented countries, particularly those in the Global South.

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