



Are Academic Social Scientists in Thrall of a Cult of the Irrelevant and Will This Make Them Hors de Combat In National Security Affairs?

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Director,

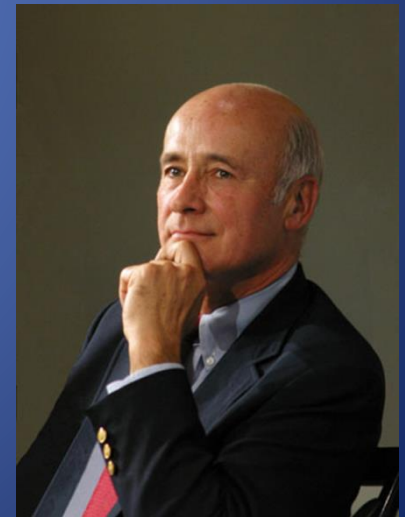
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What Is the Cult of the Irrelevant?

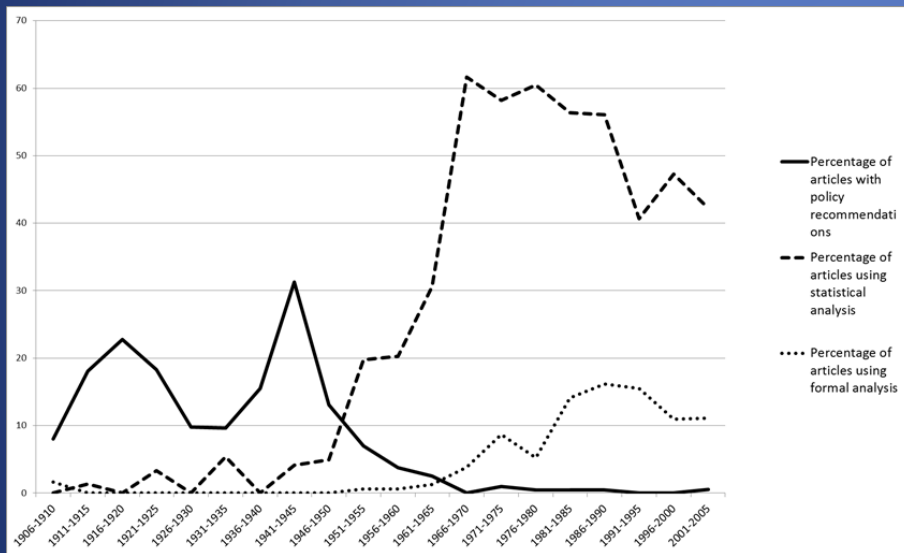
- International relations, like the social sciences in general, aspires to be both rigorous and relevant.
- The question is whether it can be?
 - When and under what conditions?
- What happens when the tensions between these two goals increase?
 - Cult = Technique > substance.

What's the Evidence There is a Problem?

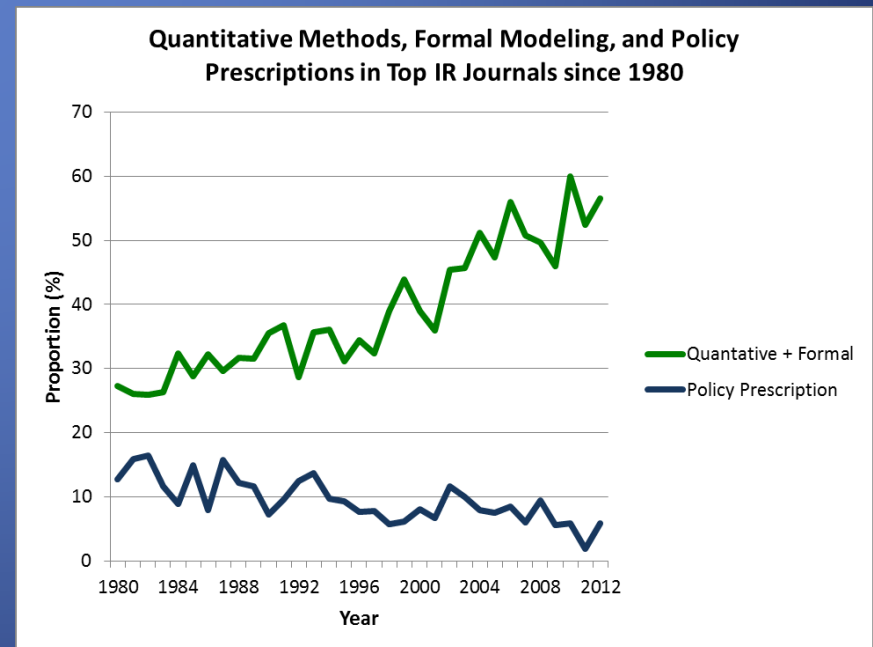
- “the relationship between the federal government and the social sciences generally and historically, while substantial in scope, has not been altogether harmonious.”
 - Advisory Committee on the Management of Behavioral Science Research in the Department of Defense, *Behavioral and Social Research in the Department of Defense: A Framework for Management* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 1971), 2.
- “the walls surrounding the ivory tower never seemed so high.”
 - Harvard Professor (and former high-level State Department, Defense Department, and intelligence community official) Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Scholars on the Sidelines,” *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2009, A15.



Some Data: Decreasing Willingness of Scholars to Offer Policy Recommendations As Discipline/Field Become More “Scientific”



Percentage of Policy Relevant Articles in APSR from 1906-2006



Why Does the Cult Persist?

- The Cult of the Irrelevant is largely the result of disciplinary professionalization:
 - Source of tensions between rigor and relevance.
- How?
 - Division of labor produces narrower and narrower work:
 - Most policy questions broader.
 - Professionalization leads to greater sense of “corporateness:”
 - Privileges disciplinary > societal agendas.
 - “Science” increasingly defined as “method:”
 - Math/universal models = hallmark of science.
 - Limits range of questions to which it can be applied.
 - Basic research > applied work:
 - “Objectivity” requires focus on former.

What Explains Its Waxing and Waning?

- In my new book, I look at the place of the subfield of national security studies in the discipline of political science from WWI through Minerva as case studies.
- Two Key factors:
 - Disciplinary dynamics:
 - Tend toward disengagement with policy/applied research.
 - International security environment:
 - Wartime/high threat:
 - Demand from govt./society for academic expertise.
 - Greater willingness to balance rigor and relevance = supply from the academy.
 - Peacetime:
 - Disciplinary dynamics privilege basic research.

Why Many Scholars Are Not Overly Concerned About These Trends

- A few believe science is all about the pursuit of “pure knowledge,” untainted by application:
 - It will never be relevant.
- Others think IR is too scientifically underdeveloped to expect relevance now:
 - That will change in the future.
- But most care about application and are optimistic:
 - Democratic Peace.
 - Trickle-down thesis.
 - Policymakers becoming more methodologically sophisticated.
 - New media offers alternative “transmission belt” for conveying applied implications of basic research.
 - Broader forms of relevance aside from policy recommendations for govt.

Why I Am More Pessimistic

- Democratic Peace:
 - Not clear most “scientific” version influences policy.
 - When it has influenced policy (Iraq), it has been disastrous.
- Trickle-down thesis:
 - Assumed rather than proven.
 - DoD studies of natural sciences and weapons systems not encouraging (HINDSIGHT).
- Policymakers becoming more methodologically sophisticated:
 - Assumes they weren’t before.
 - Assumes that aspiring policymakers appreciate cutting-edge social science.
- New media offers alternative “transmission belt” for conveying applied implications of basic research:
 - Assumes what needs to be proven.
 - Signals to noise ratio problem.
- Broader forms of relevance aside from policy recommendations for govt.
 - Agree in one sense.
 - But on the other hand, whether directly or indirectly, influencing govt. policy is the ultimate criterion of policy relevance.

Where Are We Today?

- Minerva = “mixed bag:”
 - Pro:
 - Renewed interest in govt. in “embracing egg heads and ideas,” as SECDEF Gates put it.
 - Many scholars have responded to the call since 9/11.
 - Con:
 - Minerva, especially NSF link, not popular in Congress:
 - Congress not enamored of funding basic research!
 - Minerva supported work more policy-relevant than normal IR (24% vs. 5%) but not as relevant as leading work published in subfield of security studies (*IS* = 38%).



What Is to Be Done?

- ≠ vs. science or advanced social science methods.
- =
 - Recognize tensions/limits of professional social science.
 - Strike balance between rigor and relevance:
 - Problem>method-driven research agendas.
 - Rebuild “transmission belts:”
 - Not just think tanks and other third parties but scholars themselves.
 - Δ disciplinary incentives:
 - Broader input into scholarly evaluation.
 - Reward policy relevance.
 - Reframe ethical debate:
 - ≠ just about our obligations to science.
 - = our obligations to broader society as well.

What NDISC And Other Groups Are Doing About This Issue

- Carnegie Corporation of New York has made major investment in portfolio of projects to “Bridge the Gap” between the Ivory Tower and the policy world:
 - BtG project at AU:
 - Train academics how to better navigate the in policy world.
 - William and Mary/TRIP project:
 - Collect data on scholars’ attitudes toward BtG and policy relevance.
- NDISC:
 - My new book ...

Discussion?

