

Plus Ça Change, Plus C'est La Môme Chose? Or, That Was Then, This Is Now!

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In 2011, when serving as President of the Academy of International Business, I held what I believe was the first AIB strategic planning exercise that was facilitated by Dr. William B. Werther, an expert in strategic planning. Among the issues that emerged were a series of “Task Forces” pertinent to where we, as an Academy, wanted to go. One of those Task Forces dealt with “The Domain of International Business and the AIB” – with Simon Collinson, Yves Doz, Tatiana Kostova, Peter Liesch, and Kendall Roth serving as its members. They produced a document, discussed at the 2013 AIB Istanbul Conference and subsequently published in *AIB Insights* in 2013. Subsequently, Simon Collinson has updated this report now entitled “The Declining Relevance and Legitimacy of IB Scholarship in a World That Really Needs It” and included in this issue of *AIB Insights*.

The 2017 version discusses the declining relevance and legitimacy of the Academy while another article in this issue asks a key question – namely “Is It Really That Bad?” – in terms of the implications of current economic, political, and social issues for international business (IB) education, research, and the Academy as a whole? Well, de facto, the nature of international business is always changing, but are the changes about to take us out of our ivory towers into the “abyss” or are we simply dangling on the edge of it?

First Scenario: The Situation is Bad and Getting Worse for IB

Why is the situation bad? The vicious elections we have just gone through in the United States and the populist elections facing much of Europe after Brexit but also Ecuador and South Korea have polarized segments of the world population more than I can remember in my lifetime. The net result is that we now have a poisoning of free trade, bans on immigration worldwide, a new rise in racism, attacks on religious rights,

misogyny, pullbacks on laws protecting LGBT members, and a general inward-leaning trend. So much for a “global community!”

These topics were not “front and center” in 2011, nor in 2013 when my presidential term ended. At that time, we touted the values of tolerance, we valued diversity, we were reaping the benefits of globalization, and *immigration* was not considered a dirty word. Yet, along the way, there were already signs that things were getting pretty bad, and as *The Economist* wrote in 2017, global companies in the new era of protectionism were surely in retreat.

The main premise of the “global firm” was its ability to be a superior moneymaking machine (*The Economist*, 2017: 11). However, over the past five years, the profits of multinationals have dropped by 25 percent. Haass in *Foreign Affairs* (2017: 2) wrote that “the US has for the first time in 70 years elected a president who disparages the policies and institutions at the heart of postwar US foreign policy.” The North American Free Trade Agreement is under attack, the Trans-Pacific Partnership has been cancelled by the Trump Administration, and threats of increased U.S. tariffs to its major trading partners (e.g., Mexico) will dampen goodwill.

Is this the sound of a working global system? Is the IB world that we thought we knew looking increasingly inward for guidance? Will the prefix “anti” – as in anti-globalization and anti-immigration – become the descriptor de rigueur, and will we increasingly look to what is happening at our frontiers or “fringes” where so much is going on to guide our thinking about changes facing international business “as we thought we knew it”? Don’t we want to be relevant in our educational and research systems to what is happening today? Admittedly, some of the above issues have happened before and, undoubtedly, will happen again – perhaps with a slightly

different twist whereby, instead of the Great Wall of China, we will have the Great Wall between the United States and Mexico!

Second Scenario: That Was Then ... This Is Now!

In today's world, we must ask ourselves, "What constrains our engagement with stakeholders and limits the contributions we could make to solving challenges facing global economies and academies?" (Collinson, 2017). The list of "usual suspects" is growing, from global corporations' practices of the kind that generate only wealth for the wealthy, to protective barriers that move us toward isolationism, and to socio/cultural/political/religious rivalries linked to fears of immigration and terrorism. Does this mean that the Divergence Hypothesis – all cultures will retain their "uniqueness" as they have for millennials – has won because we are not ultimately "converging" on Westernization? Back in 2013, Collinson and his coauthors asked a relevant question: "Do we have the right analytical approaches to add value to our stakeholders and help them make sense of our world which, by now, has significantly changed?" Boddewyn and Rottig (2017) said that we are definitely not prepared for this task, and that IB education and our research will suffer accordingly unless we undertake some radical changes.

Perhaps, as Collinson noted, it is true that we are lousy at asking the big important questions because we are stuck in outdated university incentive structures with little to offer to important stakeholders. Our deeply embedded peer review system drives out "full-voice meaningfulness" – an expression which Debra Shapiro, President of the Academy of Management, coined in 2016 to represent the fringes or frontiers of our IB/management world. Without having all of our voices heard, we are doomed to repeat solving the same old problems. Alternatively, we could be committing an error of the third kind, which refers to solving the wrong problems well. There is nothing wrong with the mainstream of any field, and it should be taught and learned, but why do we not study and teach about the fringe and frontier issues that represent the relevant and important changes happening today in our IB world?

Surely, we need to reclaim relevance! Wasn't that the hallmark of the early IB studies that looked at emerging issues for insights? An example might be how the changing strategies of MNEs affect globalization (Buckley, 2002) or, in today's world, how does the changing globalization affect the strategies? Or, to be even more realistic, how does anti-globalization affect MNE strategies? Might this change help us improve relevance to our important stakeholders and reestablish legitimacy amidst our new realities?

Globalization is here to stay because little stays local nowadays. Everything from tourists, terrorists, emails, diseases, dollars, and pollution can go almost anywhere. As Haass (2017: 5) noted: "Climate change is in many ways the quintessential manifestation of globalization. It reflects the sum total of what is going on; countries are exposed to and affected unevenly by the problem, regardless of their contribution to it. Borders count for naught."

If you believe that there is already a huge negative impact on IB education as well as a lack of relevance for our stakeholders, I beg to differ. "Necessity is the Mother of Invention!" Simply because we "researchers" have not always gotten it right does not mean that students don't yearn for answers to the modern vexing problems of our global world today.

Let me return to my metaphor "out of the ivory tower and into the abyss." Well, I am a sucker for a happy ending so that I invite you to watch a movie called *The Abyss* starring Ed Harris. An older film, it told a delightful story of a miracle that occurred. Without giving it away, we appear to be at the edge of an abyss so that we need more than just a "kick in the pants." We need to listen to those stakeholders who do not see relevance in the nth study on the same topic, to the exclusion of critically alarming issues happening in our world today. We should heed Collinson's (2017) and Delios' (2017) admonitions to make our work count for relevant stakeholders, rather than let it gather dust in some circular file.

I do not think that it is fair for us to settle for "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." For our leading journals, like the *Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS)*, failing to be relevant, readable, and engaging on important issues of the day are problems that need to be addressed. I would propose that we have a section focused on "relevance to current stakeholders about big issues and world phenomena" to be filled by all *JIBS* article submitters. I would further advance that we need an incentive system that does not count only "A" journals and causes us to lose "full-voice meaningfulness." Moreover, I would propose that several of the international academies conduct a forum with the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) to proclaim, "That was then, and THIS IS NOW!" Let's start to address real-world issues. There is much that we can do, in terms of research and the education of our students, but not if we lose our voice!

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