

Book review

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303

The Historical Evolution of International Business: Growth Trajectory of an Academic Field of Study

Lilac Nachum and Attila Yaprak (Eds.)

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Introduction

Students pursuing a PhD in international business (IB) soon discover that their chosen discipline appears to operate in a state of perpetual existential angst. As far back as 2002, one of the “founding fathers” of the discipline, Peter Buckley, was already asking if “the International Business research agenda was running out of steam”? (Buckley, 2002). More recent debates address the supposed “uniqueness” (or lack thereof) of IB scholarship, with some arguing that IB phenomena are uniquely complex (Beugelsdijk, 2022; Casson and Li, 2022; Eden and Nielsen, 2020) while others counter that such claims stem from a “false uniqueness bias” (Aguinis and Gabriel, 2022). Perhaps the greatest wound inflicted on IB’s sense of self-confidence was Hambrick and Chen’s (2008) use of IB as an example of a discipline that has failed to secure enduring legitimacy as a separate field of study. Like Scrooge’s encounter with the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, IB has ever since been haunted by Hambrick and Chen’s fateful epitaph:

It might be said that IB served its purpose by helping to internationalize business schools, rather than ensuring its own continued identity and status as an academic field. (2008, p. 47)

For the many IB scholars housed in non-IB functional departments, these words may ring true – Kwok *et al.* (2022) estimated the number of IB scholars located in distinct IB departments to be just 16% globally. Indeed, IB’s struggle for legitimacy and acceptance seems to have been present from its conception: Hymer’s 1960 doctoral thesis (often cited alongside Dunning’s 1958 book as one of the first “truly IB” publications, although see below) was rejected for publication by MIT because one of the selection committee members believed its argument was “too simple and straightforward” (Kindleberger, 1976, p. xiii).

All this might be enough to make an IB PhD student or non-tenured faculty member want to cry into his or her pint, and yet there are also signs of vitality and achievement within the discipline that offer encouragement about IB’s future prospects. The number of IB scholars located in dedicated IB departments, although small proportionally, has actually been increasing globally: from 6% in 2000 to 16% in 2020 (Kwok *et al.*, 2022). Likewise, the rise of IB’s flagship journal, *Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS)*, to an Academic Journal Guide 4* (AJG 4*) publication in 2015 has provided a reputable outlet for IB scholars, particularly those seeking to establish legitimacy (and job security) within other functional areas.



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IB scholars surveying the discipline's current plurality of theories and approaches might wonder how it all fits together and how we arrived at this point. As Mills (2000, p. 5) wrote in *The Sociological Imagination*, "[...] the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period [...]". It is here that *The Historical Evolution of International Business* provides an invaluable resource to IB scholars, both junior and (I would assume) senior, seeking to understand their discipline, its history and their current place within it. The book, edited by Lilac Nachum and Attila Yaprak, is the result of an Academy of International Business (AIB) initiative to research and catalog IB's history and development as a field of study. As Nachum and Yaprak note in their preface, its publication is timely, "[...] as some of the field's history has been stored only in the memories of those who were part of the founding process and laid the field's foundations" (p.xi). The book is dedicated to the last surviving founder of AIB, Jim Goodnow, who passed away soon after writing the chapter he contributed to the volume. The book comprises 24 chapters, usefully divided into three sections: the historical evolution of IB thought; the historical evolution of IB teaching; and the historical evolution of IB institutions. I adopt the same division of sections for my review in the pages that follow.

The historical evolution of international business thought

The book's investigation into the history of IB thought begins with an empirical study by Feng Zhang and Yuanyuan Li. The authors adopt an evolutionary approach to analyze the results of a bibliometric study of *JIBS* publications between 1976 and February 2022. One clear theme that emerges from their analysis is an increasing eclecticism in both theoretical approaches adopted and the phenomena studied in *JIBS* publications. The authors' results also track *JIBS* ascendance to top-tier status as a management journal and which journals have historically cited *JIBS* most frequently (and vice versa).

While the evolutionary lens they adopt provides a useful framework by which to conceptualize the evolution of IB as a field of study over time, they do not go into much depth in theorizing about the nature of the external pressures that caused certain strands of thought to be selected for reproduction while others failed. This is of course a potential limitation inherent in the evolutionary perspective and there is always the risk of tautological analysis: variants that survive and reproduce are, by definition, those that were "selected". However, given the nature of the incentive structures for publication, tenure and promotion that prevail in universities, it would have been interesting to see the authors discuss if and how these forces of external selection may have influenced the trajectory of IB's evolution over the years.

Here, the commentaries (from Peter Buckley, John Cantwell and Eleanor Westney) provide some useful supplementary analyses and critiques. All three authors lament the decline of books in favor of journal articles as the primary publishing target for IB research, arguing that books allowed for a greater variety and depth of theorizing that often cannot make it past the knowledge gatekeepers who edit and referee academic journals. Westney suggests that sociological evolution, rather than Darwinian evolution, provides a better framework for analyzing the trajectory of knowledge. IB knowledge is not so much "inherited" as "retained", as the selection processes that choose which streams of thought are propagated are socially determined, not simply responses to the external environment.

The historical evolution of international business teaching

Pinho and Pinho's chapter analyzes 64 IB textbooks, supplemented by 70 IB syllabi solicited from AIB members. The authors use content analysis (for textbooks) and word-count

analysis (for syllabi) to elucidate thematic shifts within IB teaching over the period 1966–2022.

The results of their textbook analysis find that the relative coverage given to the respective external and internal dimensions of international business has remained relatively constant over time. While coverage of core IB topics such as the MNE, FDI and entry modes has decreased from 25% to 14% during their time period, coverage of topics related to marketing has surged from 5% to 20% of total coverage.

Teresa da Silva Lopes' chapter examines IB teaching at Harvard Business School (HBS) between its founding in 1908 and the decision to dismantle its IB department in 1973. Drawing on both archival research and interviews, the author calls into question the previously established notion that IB teaching at HBS began in the 1960s and demonstrates that IB courses were taught from its founding in 1908. She presents compelling evidence to show that the teaching at HBS contained a recognizably IB focus from its very inception, refuting the commonly accepted narrative that IB teaching at Harvard began with the works of Ray Vernon and John Fayerweather in the 1960s.

Two commentaries follow da Silva Lopes' chapter, both written by Harvard IB scholars: Geoffrey Jones and Louis T. Wells.

Wells' commentary provides valuable additional context to da Silva Lopes' account. He was a DBA student at HBS from 1961 to 1966 and then a faculty member until 2012 and, as such, was an eyewitness to the expansion of the IB area in the 60s and its disbandment in 1973. His account provides insights into the decision that led to the area's disbandment, and how IB-related topics fared afterwards as IB topics and faculty were moved to various functional areas.

In his commentary, Jones draws a lesson from da Silva Lopes' chapter similar to those in Westney and Cavusgil's commentaries, but with a twist: individual actors exercised great influence in both the advance *and decline* of IB's fortunes. At HBS, IB teaching was advanced by energetic faculty. Its decline was likewise the result of a decision taken by an energetic dean (and IB scholar), Larry Fouraker.

The historical evolution of international business institutions

IB teaching institutions

Goodnow's series of "vignettes" covers the birth of early US-based IB teaching institutions from 1946 through the 1960s such as Thunderbird, Harvard Business School, MIT Sloan School of Management and others, as well as later influential IB programs such as those at Georgia State University, University of South Carolina and others. He also recounts brief histories of institutions outside of the US such as Reading University, INSEAD, Uppsala and Keio University in Tokyo.

Although it is largely descriptive, Goodnow's chapter provides the IB scholar with a uniquely broad view of IB's early years as a young discipline across many institutions and helps "connect the dots" between early leading institutions and individuals. One sees how these institutions were "cross pollinated" by the movement of influential faculty and/or their PhD students between the leading IB institutions early on.

In Chapter 14, Attila Yaprak supplements Goodnow's account with an overview of the historic development of IB institutions outside the USA. Yaprak's account focuses on the contributions to IB development made by Ivey Business School (Canada), the Economics Department at Reading University (UK) and the Uppsala School of Business (Sweden). As with Goodnow's account, Yaprak's reveals the key roles played by individual change agents at these universities: Paul Beamish at Ivey, John Dunning at Reading and Jan Johanson at

Uppsala. In each case, the IB programs that emerged bore the enduring imprint of the founding pioneer.

The academy of international business chapters

Athreye and Śliwa conducted interviews with AIB chapter founders and current chairs. They supplement these interviews with secondary materials from: the AIB's official website and AIB chapter webpages; and [Boddewyn and Goodnow's \(2020\)](#) historical account of the AIB. Drawing on these sources, Athreye and Śliwa highlight key events in the history of AIB Global and the founding of its regional Chapters. Notably, a number of Chapter Chairs refused to be quoted by the authors in any way. Moreover, they could not find a single interviewee to comment on the founding of the Latin American and Caribbean chapter. These facts both raise some interesting questions about the health of the relationship between AIB Global and these Chapters. It is suggested that some of the Chapters may feel marginalized by the failure of their Chapter members to be selected for paper presentations at global conferences, citing overly stringent standards set by global conference reviewers and organizers.

Lilac Nachum's chapter on the history of AIB's Shared Interest Groups (SIGs) gives a historical account of this rather recent innovation in AIB's global structure. Interestingly, the absence of SIGs in the early history of AIB was the result of a deliberate decision to organize along geographic lines rather than thematic ones, the intention being to encourage interdisciplinary connections in the early years when IB scholars tended to come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Nachum likens the SIGs to the functional areas of an MNE, in contrast to the Chapters which resemble an MNE's international subsidiaries. Nachum's chapter on the history of the SIGs is followed by a personal account of the founding of Women in AIB (WAIB) by its founder, Lorraine Eden.

International business as a field of study

The book's final section seeks to identify and bring together the outlines of the historical narrative that emerges from its disparate chapters and draws tentative conclusions regarding the future of the IB field. The section includes a comparative history of IB's evolution, written by Patrick Manning and a concluding chapter by the book's editors, Attila Yaprak and Lilac Nachum. Manning's chapter is followed by a commentary from Gabriel Benito. Yaprak and Nachum's chapter is followed by three commentaries by Rolv Amdam, Timothy Devinney and Jean-François Hennart.

Manning's chapter provides an interesting overview of IB's history as a field of study from the perspective of a historian from outside the IB discipline. As an outsider and scholar of "macro-level" history (Manning is a scholar of world history and the history of academic disciplines), his chapter provides useful context from the broader academic environment in which IB's (comparatively short) history has unfolded. Among the macro-trends that have shaped IB's evolution, Manning points to the globalization of academic disciplines under the auspices of UNESCO (established in 1945) which has encouraged the formation of global federations for academic fields (such as AIB). The growth of global FDI through an increase in the number and reach of MNEs, and the concomitant interconnectedness of the global economy, are also macro-trends listed by Manning that have influenced the growth and spread of IB as a field of study. To the extent that these insights were arrived at independently from those of the book's other authors (which Manning references), it provides some external validation to the narrative that, as an academic field, IB's growth and focus have tracked that of its object of study.

In their concluding chapter, the book's editors, Yaprak and Nachum, suggest that IB's interdisciplinarity has the potential to be both an opportunity and a threat. They note the necessity of adopting theoretical insights from different disciplines when analyzing the complex and multi-level phenomena at the center of IB studies. However, this interdisciplinarity has also made it more challenging for IB to define clear boundaries for its own identity. Future IB research, they argue, could explore and better elucidate the domain boundaries of IB thought.

Acknowledging the potentially alarming trajectory for IB that is signaled by some of the book's findings (including declining AIB membership and the disappearance of IB departments), Yaprak and Nachum suggest that perhaps IB is just experiencing a natural ebb and flow common to many academic fields. They point to Ivey Business School as an example of an institution where IB scholarship continues to thrive, despite the absence of its own department. The book's editors conclude with a call to "more extensive dialogue than hitherto between the history of IB and its contemporary developments to preserve our collective memories and inform and steer future evolution" (p.424).

The editors' conclusion is followed by three commentaries, by Rolv Peter Amdam, Timothy M. Devinney and Jean-François Hennart. The first (Amdam), building upon Hambrick and Chen's (2008) framework of aspiring academic communities as "admittance-seeking social movements", calls for further investigation into the borders between teaching and research in the formative phase of academic fields. Drawing upon evidence in the da Silva Lopes' chapter on the history of IB teaching at Harvard Business School, he notes that, at least in the case of IB, teaching preceded research.

The second commentary (Devinney) provides a critical supplement to Yaprak and Nachum's chapter. Looking across the history of IB, Devinney argues that IB "has hardly ever really been a first mover when it comes to intellectual developments" (p.446), but has, rather, borrowed heavily from other disciplines "and usually only [...] when their core development has been established elsewhere" (p.446). Looking forward, Devinney argues that "IB needs to become more of a driver of grander theoretical developments rather than a blender in which theories that were developed in very different contexts and for very different reasons are tossed" (p.448).

In the third commentary, the book's "final word" is given to Jean-François Hennart, where he assesses the current state of IB as a field of study based on the contents of the book. Drawing upon a number of different data points (AIB membership numbers, the proportion of *JIBS* publications coming from top American business schools and the number of American IB scholars housed in dedicated IB departments), he concludes that IB's prospects in the USA are poor and have been declining for some time. "Fortunately", he writes, "IB scholarship is increasingly developing outside the United States, particularly in Europe. If the IB field is to prosper, it will have to grasp the opportunities offered by these changes" (p.461).

Discussion and conclusion

The Historical Evolution of International Business is an excellent scholarly work and a gift to the IB community. As a recent PhD graduate and junior IB scholar (housed, like the majority of my IB brothers and sisters, in the strategy department of a business school) this book answered many unanswered questions and, to return to C. Wright Mills's quote in my introduction, helped me "locate myself within my period". I only wish I could have had access to this resource earlier in my career as it would have helped me orient myself to the state of the IB field much more quickly. It should be required reading for all IB PhD students.

One of the most commendable features of the book is the wealth of commentaries provided on its content in each section. As an official publication of the AIB, it would have been understandable if the editors had chosen to exercise greater control over the narrative, and simply present the history of IB in its most favorable light, perhaps alluding to some of the challenges that IB currently faces, but with a hearty dose of encouragement about “better times ahead”. Instead, the editors solicited commentaries from a wide range of voices, both optimistic and skeptical about IB’s history and future prospects. It is evident that the authors who contributed the book’s commentaries were free to express their opinions frankly, and their inclusion is a testament to the integrity of the editors and their confidence in the value of its empirical contributions. It was both refreshing and enlightening to see prominent voices from both inside and outside the IB “camp” opine on the discipline’s history, its accomplishments and its current challenges with a candor that isn’t often possible in a peer-reviewed journal.

After reading the book in its entirety, one is left with the sober impression that IB’s heroic age is in the past and that we are currently, at best, in Kuhn’s state of “normal science”. Stagnant AIB membership and the fact that so few IB scholars work in dedicated IB departments point to maturity or even decline in the prestige of the discipline. The one bright light in IB’s current situation is the prestige of its flagship journal, *JIBS*. However, even here there are concerning signs. As a number of the commentators note in the book, IB is often an importer of ideas from other disciplines, but rarely an exporter. This is reflected in the patterns of citations between *JIBS* and other top management journals. As Jean-François Hennart points out in his concluding commentary:

JIBS receives no citations from other top functional journals such as the *Academy of Management Review*, *ASQ*, the *Journal of Finance*, *JM*, and the *Journal of Marketing Research (JMR)*. This suggests that *JIBS*, except for strategy with *SMJ*, is still not seen by functional fields as legitimate.

Both Hennart and Devinney suggest that the problem is a lack of theoretical coherence in IB research. Devinney points to the need of faculty for quick turnover of research outputs, which mitigates against the publication of books that allow for deeper theoretical treatment. Hennart points to an overemphasis by *JIBS* editors on theoretical novelty rather than the development of coherent and cumulative knowledge.

Devinney and Hennart’s commentaries point to the book’s main limitation. As one reads about the “evolution” of IB as a field of study, one becomes increasingly aware of outside changes that appear to be exerting strong “selecting” influences on the trajectory of its knowledge, teaching and institutions. Almost all the commentaries lament the decline of books in favor of journal articles and an associated lack of depth in theorizing within IB which has created the “theoretical blender” of which Devinney and Hennart both write. The history presented is largely agnostic as to these external influences, recognizing that incentive structures have changed, but without shedding light on the external forces that have led to these changes. In *The Fall of the Faculty*, political scientist Benjamin Ginsberg (2011) charts the historic shift of power in universities from faculty to administrators. To what extent has the move towards the “all-administrative university” shaped the selection pressures for publication, not just in IB but throughout academia? How has the growth and importance of academic journal rankings lists in the evaluation of faculty tenure and promotion decisions steered IB and other disciplines, towards shallower theorizing and a quest for theoretical novelty? The book’s scholars seem to broadly agree on the problems that face IB, so why do the repeated calls in IB journal editorials for “less theory” and “deeper understanding” seem to go unanswered? My economist friends would tell me that there is a collective action

problem that arises from the incentive structures that prevail in the current university system (see, e.g. Brennan and Magness, 2019): what would reform look like? These questions obviously fall outside the scope of the book's mandate, but are crucial to understanding both the historical evolution and current state of IB's three dimensions: knowledge, teaching and institutions.

As I read and reread the chapters and commentaries, in many ways I felt like I was poring over a family photo album, "warts and all". Parents and grandparents were there, first in the prime of their youth, then into middle age and later as distinguished or departed patriarchs and matriarchs. Family friends and eccentric aunts and uncles all made appearances, as well as one or two mischievous black sheep. Family ancestors whom I had not heard of before were described and their contributions to the family heritage were honored. Key milestones in the family's history were celebrated and tragic events were also recounted (e.g. the disbanding of Harvard's IB department). There were stories of family disagreements and the history of some current family arrangements were also explained (e.g. the relationship between AIB and EIBA). Like a family photo album, *The Historical Evolution of International Business* is the result of the concerted efforts of many individuals. The editors, authors and contributors all deserve our deepest gratitude for the work they have done assembling and organizing the history of IB into this volume. Attila Yaprak and Lilac Nachum have done the IB community a wonderful service and the care with which they tackled their mandate from AIB is evident.

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