

69. Knowledge divides: social science production on inequalities and social justice

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This contribution discusses the extent of the knowledge divide by analysing through bibliometric data who the researchers are who study inequality and social justice, in which disciplines they specialize and the region and country where they are located.

The study of inequality and social justice is the research domain *par excellence* of social scientists. In the second half of the twentieth century, numerous books were published by sociologists, economists and political scientists which animated a large debate on inequality in Northern countries. However, no reliable bibliometric statistics on the production of social research are available for this period. Recent statistics from the Web of Science (WOS) on articles published after 1991 show that the number of social science and humanities publications on inequalities and social justice increased steadily throughout the period (*Figure 69.1b*). The number of publications on inequalities and social justice increased in absolute and in relative terms, growing from 4.3 to 5.9 per cent of all social science and humanities publications in just ten years, from 2003 to 2013. This illustrates an increasing interest in the topic. This contribution analyses who the researchers are who study inequality and social justice in the largest numbers. In which domain and fields of study do they specialize? An important knowledge divide is geographical: where, in which region and country, are researchers writing on inequality and social justice located? Are they located where they are most needed, in areas where inequalities are most acute? The analysis presented here is based on a series of tables prepared by Science-Metrix using the Web of Science data. The full tables and a methodological note are presented in *Annexes A and B*.¹

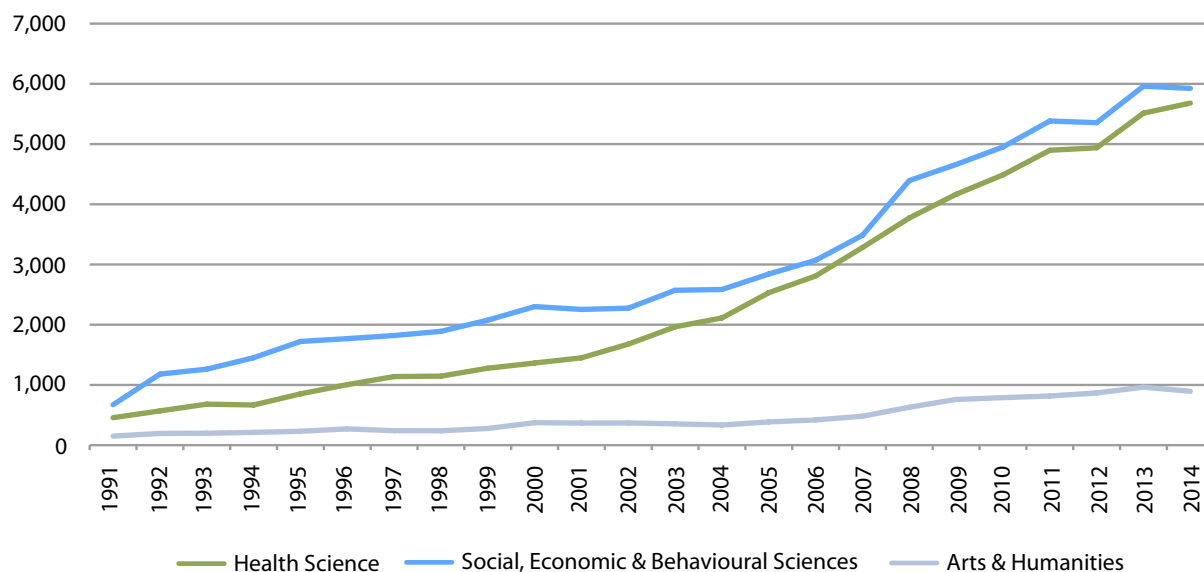
Distribution of articles produced by disciplines and fields of study: a knowledge divide?

In which domains and fields of study are studies on equality and social justice conducted? A first surprise result is the large number of articles published on equality and social justice in the health science domain. Nearly as many articles are produced here as in the economic, social and behavioural sciences. If we leave psychology and cognitive sciences in the health sciences domain, as does the classification of Science-Metrix, the number of articles published in health science surpasses those in the economic and social sciences from 2004. The number of articles under health sciences – notably in public health and health policy – increased particularly rapidly from 2000. The exact reason is unknown. Is it related to the need to implement and monitor the MDG on health?

Arts and humanities specialists also write on the subject of inequalities and social justice, notably historians, anthropologists and philosophers. But as *Figure 69.1a* illustrates, the number of articles in this area published in the arts and humanities increased only slowly during the same period.

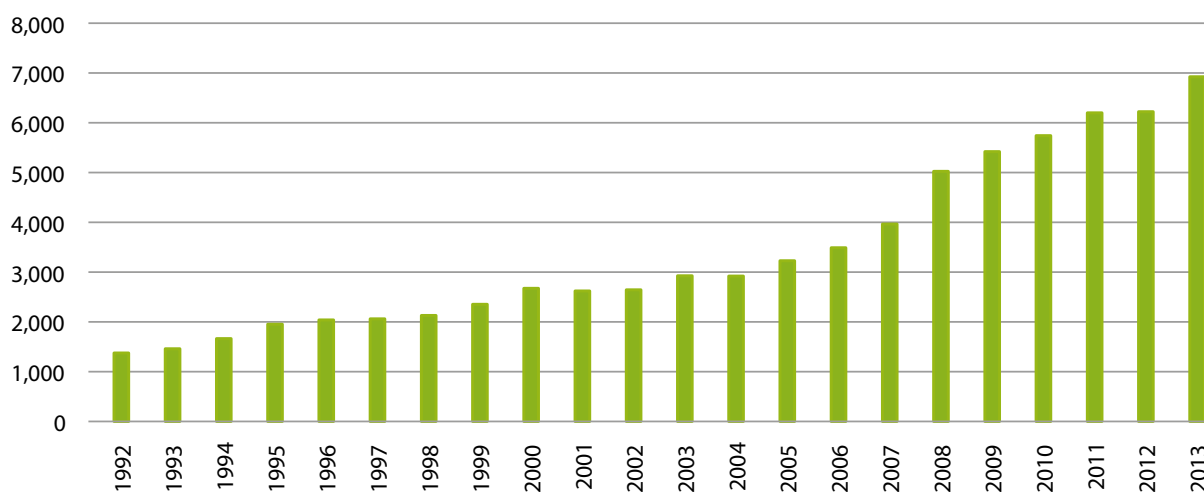
Researchers in the economic, social and behavioural sciences publish the highest number of articles on inequalities and social sciences. The number of publications increased throughout the period, with a sudden acceleration from 2007/08.

Figure 69.1a Worldwide publications on inequality and social justice per year, 1991–2014



Source: Table B1, Annex B.

Figure 69.1b Number of social science and humanities publications on inequalities and social justice produced worldwide per year, 1992–2013



Note: Social sciences are understood as including social economic and behavioural sciences.

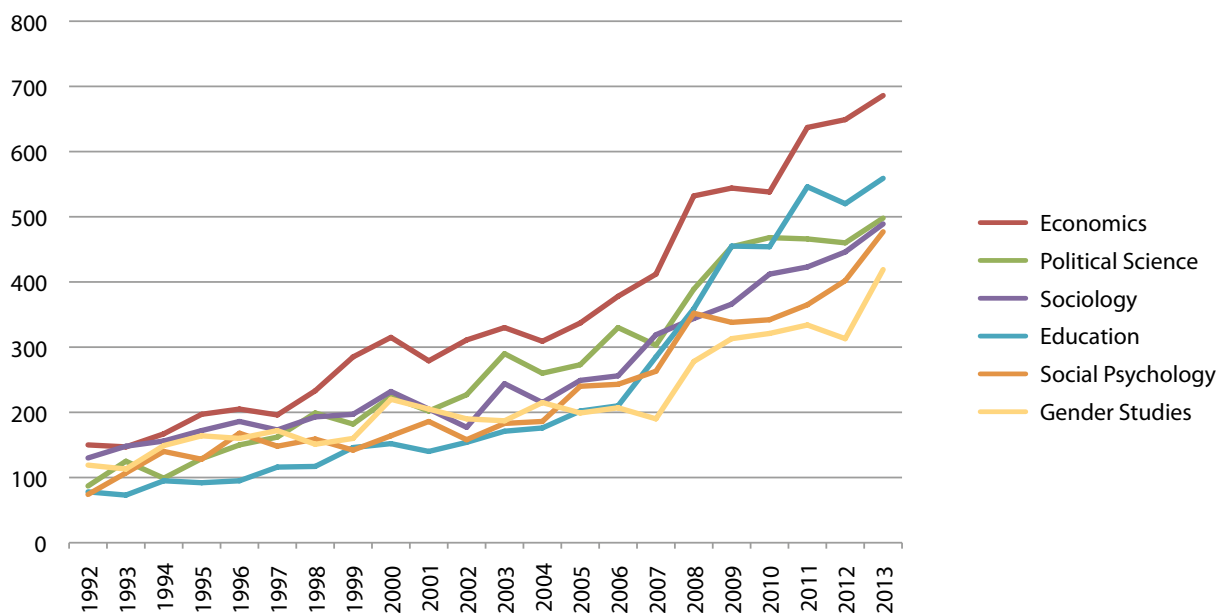
Source: Table B2, Annex B.

Research has subsequently been carried out on social and human sciences (SHS) to integrate publications produced in philosophy, history and anthropology into one larger field.

Economics, political science, sociology, education, social psychology and gender studies are the six subfields that dominated the production of SHS articles on inequality and social justice between 1992 and 2013.

At the beginning of the period, sociology and economics were producing more or less the same number of publications, ahead of all other SHS subfields. But since 1994 economics has been the subfield that produces the largest number of articles. Political science overtook sociology in 2000 and became the second largest subfield under which inequality articles are written, until 2011 when education became the second most important field after economics.

Figure 69.2 Number of SHS publications produced worldwide on inequality and social justice per subfield, 1992–2013 (fractional counting)



Source: Table B3, Annex B.

It is not easy to measure the extent to which multidisciplinary work is taking place through bibliometric statistics. The disciplinary orientations of research still seem quite strong. In certain areas of study, possibly those that are more action-oriented – education, health studies, gender studies – multidisciplinary teams involving economists, sociologists, education specialists, psychologists and political scientists are found more frequently. Intellectual links and cross-fertilization between disciplinary traditions occur more frequently in policy-oriented research, such as between economics, sociology and political science, which contributes to loosening disciplinary boundaries (Lebaron, in ISSC and UNESCO (2010), *World Social Science Report 2010: Knowledge Divides*).

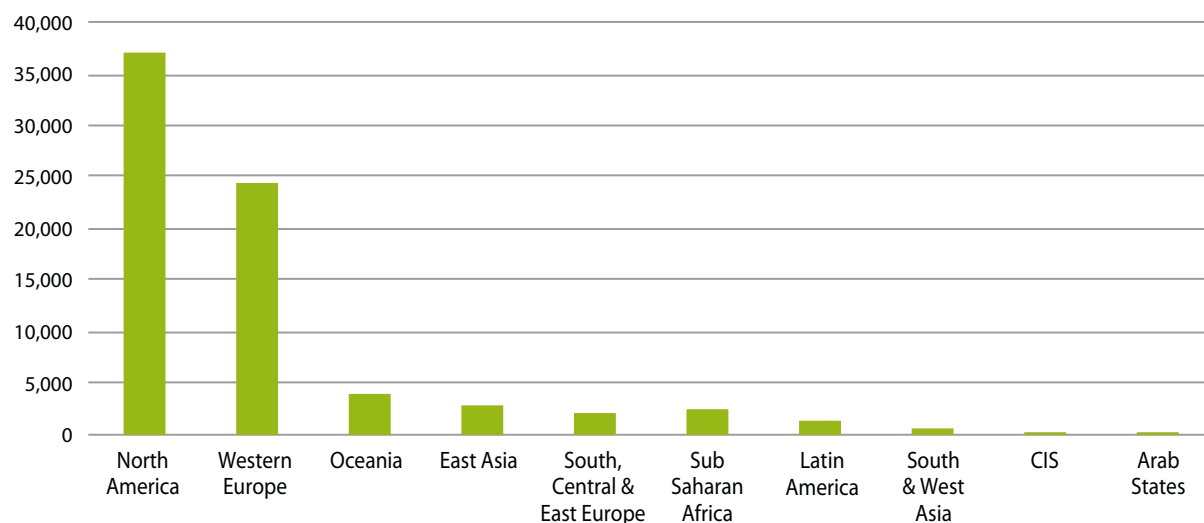
Knowledge inequality: where is research on inequality produced?

Regional disparities in social science and humanities production have always been very high, with North American and European journals and researchers dominating the production of social science knowledge.

Regional disparities in the production of publications on inequalities and social justice are also very high, as shown in *Figures 69.3* and *69.4*. Nearly half of all SHS publications (49.3 per cent) on the theme of inequality and social justice² between 1992 and 2013 were produced in North America. Another 32.4 per cent was produced in Western Europe. Far behind came Oceania (4.6 per cent), sub-Saharan Africa (3.2 per cent), East and Southern Europe, and Latin America (*Figure 69.3*). All other regions, including East Asia and Southern Asia, produced relatively few articles on this theme. The dominance of North America has diminished slightly in the past decade as the number of articles increased more rapidly in almost all other regions (*Figure 69.3b*). Europe nearly caught up with North America between 1994–2003 and 2004–13.

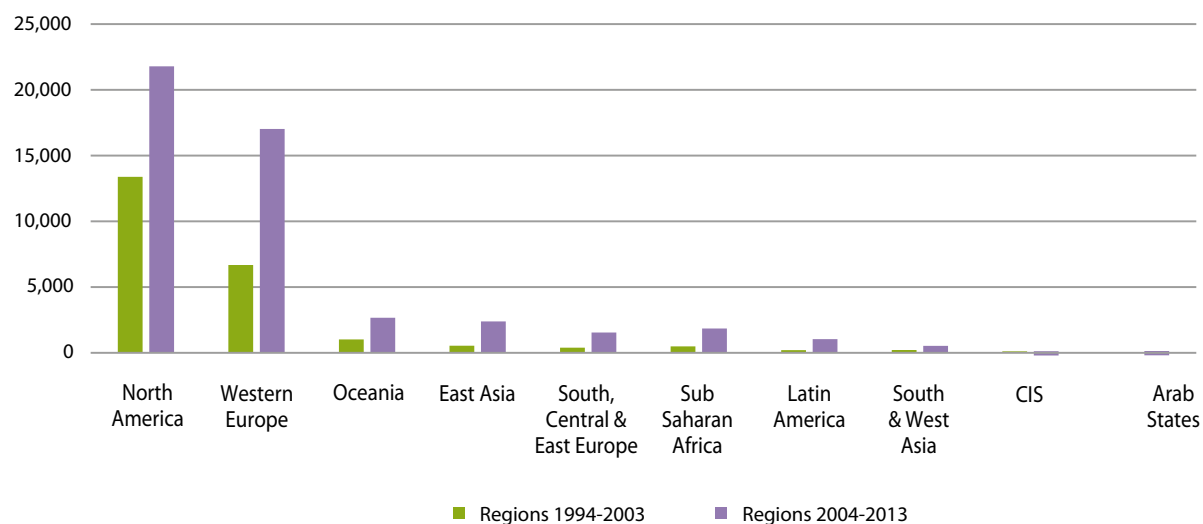
In terms of country, the USA produced the largest number of SHS publications during the period 1992–2013 (43.8 per cent) followed by the UK (13.7 per cent), Canada, Australia, Germany and South Africa. In other words, the institutions of two countries produced 57 per cent of all publications on this theme between 1994–2003 and 2004–13.

Figure 69.3a Number of social and human science publications on inequality and social justice per region, 1992–2013 (fractional counting)



Source: Table B4, Annex B.

Figure 69.3b Number of social and human science publications on inequality and social justice per region for two periods, 1994–2003 and 2004–13

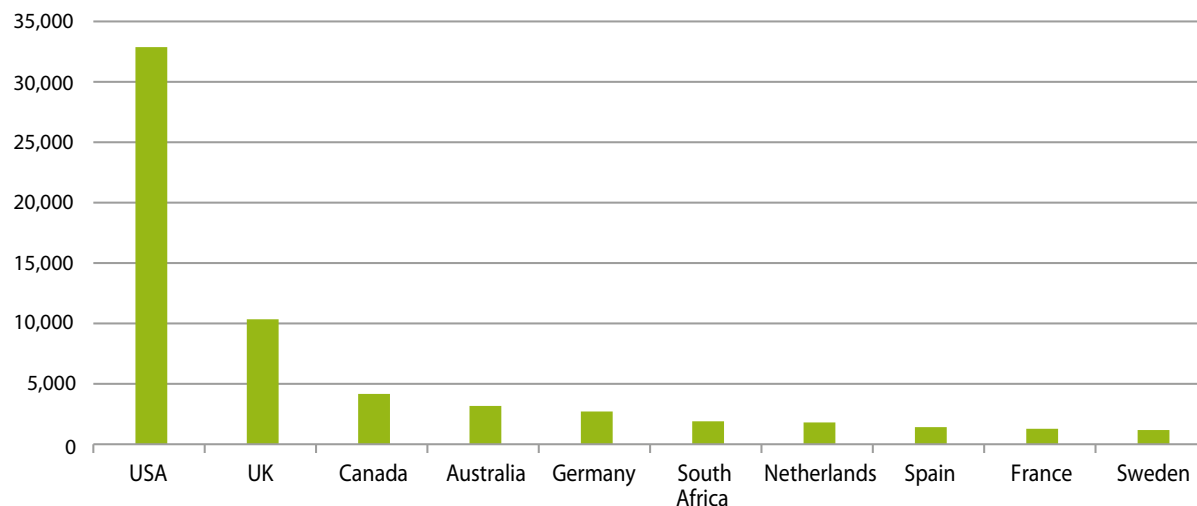


Source: Table B4, Annex B.

An interesting point to note is the relatively high number of publications from South Africa, which produces more publications on this theme than France, the Netherlands and other European countries, and more than three times as many as India, China and Brazil. South Africa is the sixth largest producer of articles on this theme, while it is only the eighteenth largest producer in the social sciences altogether.³

On the other hand China, which is the second largest producer of articles in the sciences overall and the sixth largest producer of social science articles, is producing relatively few articles on the topic of inequality and social justice.

Figure 69.4 Number of social and human science publications on inequality and social justice per country, 1992–2013 (fractional counting)



Source: Table B4, Annex B.

What are the possible explanations for such disparities? There may be several, including the higher importance attached by some countries (such as China, India and the Republic of Korea) to the natural sciences than to the social sciences.⁴

Another is the brain drain. A good number of African researchers from all over the continent work in South Africa; a high number of Indian specialists working on this theme are based in the UK or in the USA. In addition, the theme of inequality and social justice can be politically sensitive. A lack of funds in local universities to conduct research, and the lack of academic freedom, may explain why researchers on this topic often work outside their native countries.

A final possible reason may be that in some countries, especially the francophone nations, social scientists stand to gain greater prestige from publishing book-length monographs rather than articles. Books are read by a wider audience outside academic circles and may be discussed in traditional media. The bibliographical databases, such as WOS, are much better at counting articles in peer-reviewed journals than monographs. They are also well known for their linguistic and geographical bias. Language is part of the knowledge divide. These reasons were discussed for all social science publications in the 2010 *WSSR* (ISSC and UNESCO, 2010). As discussed above, they are even more valid for the theme of inequality and social justice, which is of considerable popular interest.

Conclusion

Three main lessons can be drawn. First, social scientists are not the only scientists writing on issues of inequality and social justice. Other scientists are writing on this topic, particularly health scientists. Over the past twenty years, social science research on the theme has largely been dominated by economics, and to a lesser extent political science, but in recent years new fields – and possibly more interdisciplinary fields – have emerged as important producers of knowledge. Education is an example of this trend. Third, the research and academic knowledge available on this theme is very much dominated by research in the North (by northern researchers, institutions and reviews). Yet inequalities are a major issue worldwide. The geographical divide in the study of inequality and social justice remains a major challenge.

Notes

1. See *Annex B* for the results of the bibliometric analysis of social science and humanities research into inequalities and social justice, detailed statistics, and the methodological note. Science-Metrix carried out the bibliometric analysis on social and human science publications using Web of Science (WOS Thomson Reuters) data. A publication is considered to be part of the social sciences if the journal in which it has appeared is classified in the 'Economic and Social Sciences' domain in the Science-Metrix data. For the purpose of this project the fields of 'Psychology & Cognitive Sciences' and 'Anthropology' were added to the domain of 'Economic & Social Sciences'. Scientific publications relevant to the field of inequalities and social justice were retrieved using keyword searches in the titles, author keywords and abstracts of scientific publications indexed in the WOS database. More details on the method used are provided in the methodological note in Annex B.
2. In the fractional counting method, each publication is attributed to the institutions which appear in the address fields on the basis of the number of authors from that institution. In the full counting method each paper is attributed fully to all institutions appearing in the address field. As a result there is some double counting. In the full counting method, more than half of all publications (51.9 per cent) would be attributed to North America.
3. Source, Tables A6 and B4 in *Annex A and B*. Data for 2008–13.
4. This is evident in Table A6 in *Annex A*.

Bibliography

ISSC and UNESCO. 2010. *World Social Science Report: Knowledge Divides*. Paris, UNESCO.

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