Who still cares about “international social science”? How can such a venture, now that it seems to have been derailed, be brought back on its tracks? Over the last ten to fifteen years there has been a distinct trend among social scientists to draw in their horns and go local. Partly in keeping with the rollback in prestige and funding that followed the great boom of the 1950s and 1960s, partly as a reaction against the unmanageability and abstract nature of very ambitious and widely ramified projects, partly in a spirit of involvement and commitment, many practitioners have decided that charity begins at home. Instead of rushing to Amazonia to study the mores of vanishing tribes, anthropologists may be found working in slums not a mile from their offices. Sociologists are pronouncing themselves not on the comparative performance of different national educational systems so much as on the functioning of mixed classes in immigrant neighborhoods. In China, economists divide their time between academic pursuits and advice on the running of factories which they have “adopted,” sometimes because they worked there at one time. In India, development research is being increasingly conducted at the level of states and in view of their particular situations and problems.

There is a return to the concrete, to what can be encompassed by a person alone or a small, tightly-knit group. This also reflects the widespread failure of social science to generate a division of labor consistent with the overall scale on which it is conducted. It reflects the rarity of teamwork pursued by a fairly large number of participants over a fairly long period to a common purpose. Going local has diminished interest in the remote aims of “international social science” with its uncertain outcomes and complex logistics.

What sort of careers can be made in “international social science”? While there seemed to be certain slots in the international civil service, in overseas universities, in some foundations and elsewhere, a number of ambitious and mobile persons could persuade themselves that there was a future in attempting to transcend the classic national avenues by hitching one’s wagon to the dynamic of an emerging world enterprise. On the whole, this has proved to be an illusion. The world enterprise, such as it ever was, has turned shapeless and compartmentalized. It functions, when it functions, according to intrainstitutional rules and constraints rather than as a broad framework within which professionalism can flourish. It is often easier to shift from a university in Finland to one in New Zealand than to obtain promotion by professional performance within an international organization, or to ensure steady employment by alternating between, say, the United Nations and the European Economic Community (EEC) or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The nongovernmental network of professional associations is solidly anchored in its national membership: the permanent secretariats are tiny, often rotate, and devote most of their time to pure administration. There is a small jet set of cheerleaders and conference attenders who turn up all over the world regularly and are the life and soul of get-togethers on a variety of subjects, but their credibility suffers from chronic itinerancy, and they generally do not have command over resources in proportion to the mileage they cover. By and large, there are no successors to the first generation of international social scientific entrepreneurs. This is not surprising in view of the discouraging realities to be faced. This is beginning to affect the nongovernmental organizations seriously, too, and may account for their notable failure to diversify and enlarge their sources of support.

The passive, self-serving attitudes of national scientific communities toward the international enterprise is well illustrated by the preliminary assessment of the consequences of U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO prepared by the National Research Council in 1984 at the request of the U.S. State Department. This found that the level of U.S. participation in the social science program was “embarrassingly low” and that U.S. withdrawal would therefore have a “negligible impact on current research projects ongoing within the U.S. academic community,” yet the report expressed concern that “future access by U.S. researchers to field sites in some Third World countries might well be constrained” and that “it might be more difficult to gain access to social science networks in the East European countries, since UNESCO is the principal forum for such contacts.” Indigenization is reported as something of a threat because “such a methodological prescription is not value free and ‘veers dangerously to-
ward ideology. Clearly if the United States is absent from this debate within UNESCO, it will be able to do very little to prevent this view from prevailing, with all its implications for the direction, vitality and legitimacy of international research.” The world's largest and richest social science community frankly signifies that the international enterprise mainly represents a way to extend its scope on its own terms: that it should be regarded as an opportunity for professional solidarity or for overarching scientific sharing comes across incidentally, if at all.

What about facing squarely up to the incontestable fact that an international social science enterprise without full U.S. participation is grotesquely crippled? The bulk of the participants in “international social science” therefore remain what they were originally: persons who accept specific, occasional commissions or assignments, in-and-outers, internationalized professionals rather than professional internationalists. Such people cannot be expected to care deeply about the detailed implications of an enterprise that concerns them only in an ad hoc context. They will notice whether a meeting is more or less well run, whether their tickets and hotel accommodation have been satisfactorily arranged and how their texts are published. They will be indifferent to other problems of the organizers because they do not recognize them as colleagues but rather as officials, as agents, and may even resent their attempts to steer proceedings for reasons that appear foreign to substantive concerns. Other participants are highly flattered at being invited to international events and naively imagine that this marks the start of wider appreciation of their work. They may be quickly disillusioned when it is shredded into the obscurc mass that the international machinery turns out with such indifference.

There is worse still. International work at all levels has, by its manifest inequities and thanklessness, its instability and ruthless disregard for personal investment, its discontinuities and infighting, caused so many casualties among those most generously disposed toward it that it has gained an evil reputation and exhausted a large fund of goodwill on which it was able to trade earlier. Many of those involved in the history of the social sciences at UNESCO no longer wish to have anything to do with an enterprise they served to the best of their often outstanding abilities. When we think of a university basking in the solicitude of its alumnæ, a hospital drawing gladly on the experience of specialists and surgeons long after they have retired—all the services that may be obtained gratis from people whose loyalties are engaged in certain causes, we must wonder by what miraculous ineptitude UNESCO manages to make enemies out of its former best friends.

Who still cares about “international social science”? Precious few still care in the sense of considering it as a lifelong career, thinking about it in its widest implications, promoting it by word and deed, improving the conditions under which it must be conducted—in short, professionalizing it. Many more care when it comes to accepting what it may have to offer without taking too much risk or getting excessively involved. It is pleasant enough to pursue an assignment, to act as a consultant, to accomplish an advisory mission, even to take a Secretariat job with just moderate commitment, keeping a nest at home warm for easy retreat. But that is no way to build up a cadre of specialists in international cooperation and promotion and to transmit know-how in these domains. A small but devoted band of scholars also exists who make it their business to study relevant issues and to observe critically both institutional and substantive developments. They mainly choose to maintain their credentials by remaining outside the actual arena of action. This is wise enough in that it allows them an independent stance, but inadequate from the implementational point of view. However sound scholars may be, immersion in daily rough-and-tumble action is an experience of another sort.

What is now needed is a set of conditions that will again encourage the entry of talent into the “international social science” enterprise—not timidly and half-heartedly, but in the conviction that it is a worthwhile career with rewards comparable, if not identical, to those that might be anticipated from respectable lifework in a national context. Nor should that be so difficult psychologically. Social scientists have always shown a predilection for mobility, partly in search of comparative material, partly in pursuit of other opportunities, partly out of sheer footlooseness. The treatment of American problems by Europeans—Alexis de Tocqueville, Lord Bryce, Gunnar Myrdal—have become classics. Without the careful field work of thousands of anthropologists, Frazer’s The Golden Bough might still be considered authoritative. What would happen to social science if students and teachers were no longer willing to travel and to spend sometimes long spells abroad? A modest push is all that is required to motivate the reprofessionalization of an appropriately institutionalized international enterprise.

What is the appropriate setting for “international social science,” and why have I irritatingly chosen to place the phrase in quotation marks from the beginning of this article? Let us widen the frame of reference by examining the notion of internationality. According to a distinction drawn by Samuel Huntington, an international operation is one in which control is shared among citizens of more than one nationality, e.g., an intergovernmental organization (IGO). A transnational operation is one with significant centrally directed activities in more than one country, e.g., a firm with foreign branches. A multina-