**Political Philosophy beyond Methodological Nationalism**

**Abstract**

Interdisciplinary work on the nature of borders and society has enriched and complicated our understanding of democracy, community, distributive justice, and migration. It reveals the cognitive bias of methodological nationalism, which has distorted normative political thought on these topics, uncritically and often unconsciously adapting and reifying state‐centered conceptions of territory, space, and community. Under methodological nationalism, state territories demarcate the boundaries of the political; society is conceived as composed of immobile, culturally homogenous citizens, each belonging to one and only one state; and the distribution of goods is analyzed according to a stark opposition between the domestic and the international. This article describes how methodological nationalism has shaped central debates in political philosophy and introduces recent work that helps dispel this bias.

**Introduction**

Political philosophy and its major categories of analysis, including political authority, sovereignty, territory, and equality, have emerged over centuries of nation building. This is true of the social contract tradition from Hobbes to Rawls and the law of nations pioneered by Vitoria and Grotius. While these traditions continue to generate insights for assessing and criticizing political practices and institutions, they selectively highlight some aspects of political, social, and economic and ignore or warp others. As a result, political philosophy is ill-equipped for theorizing mobility, transnationalism, or the ways in which public and private organizations have become blurred and intertwined. We can fruitfully investigate the epistemic and methodological legacy of nation building through an understanding of how methodological nationalism has shaped how we categorize and perceive the social and political world.

Methodological nationalism is a cognitive bias that contributes to the reification of the nation as the proper and dominant form of political organization (Dumitru 2014). It shapes the assumptions of academic fields such as international relations, sociology, history, and philosophy, rendering some phenomena invisible and other phenomena as pathological. It is a product, as well as part of the process, of nation-building, under which social scientists receive funding and use state-produced data to solve national problems (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002: 306). This in turn reinforces, naturalizes, and legitimizes state institutions.

Identifying how methodological nationalism has shaped the social sciences and our normative categories is a first step in moving beyond simplistic dichotomies such as global versus local or national versus cosmopolitan. It is also a step in recognizing and counteracting the erasure or subordination of indigenous peoples, ethnic and racialized minorities, and recent immigrants, who are excluded from national narratives. Attention to methodological nationalism vaccinates us against the attempted erasure and ongoing legacy of empire and colonialism. It reveals phenomena that have been invisible to political analysis, suggesting a richer set of political categories, agents, and units of analysis such as ethnic groups, corporations, national and international non-governmental organizations, religious groups, borderlands, and transnational networks.

In what follows, I first describe criticisms of methodological nationalism in sociology, anthropology, and international relations. I then turn to how it has shaped political philosophy. Finally, I suggest tools and perspectives that help unmask and overcome the prejudices that arise from methodological nationalism.

**The Cognitive Bias of Methodological Nationalism**

Methodological nationalism permeates the fundamental assumptions and approaches in political philosophy, shaping debates about political authority, legitimacy, democracy, territory, and distributive justice. Like all generalizations, there are exceptions to this claim; indeed, one of the purposes of this article is to share approaches and resources for overcoming methodological nationalism. Nonetheless, methodological nationalism has a pervasive and often insidious impact on many of the most influential works and debates in the political philosophy.

While methodological nationalism manifests itself differently in each disciplinary context, at its heart is what sociologist Ulrich Beck called “the *container theory of society*” (Beck 2000: 23), situating social groups, cultures, economics, and politics within state territories (Brubaker 2010; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002: 307). International relations scholars have referred to this as the territorial trap, which posits a strict division between the domestic and the foreign and pictures states as fixed, sovereign units of space (Agnew 1994). Conceiving space and society as bounded within a fixed territory makes it difficult to see, let alone understand, transnational activities and ways of life and to capture dynamic social phenomena and ecological processes. Theorists under the influence of methodological nationalism are unaware that how particular categories shape their experience or they take the categories for granted without interrogating them or considering the alternatives.

Under methodological nationalism, every person is conceived as belonging to one and only to one state. Sedentariness is the norm and, as Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller put it, cross-border migration “appears as an anomaly, a problematic exception to the rule of people staying where they ‘belong,’ that is, in ‘their’ nation-state.” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003: 585) States are imagined as political communities united by a shared national culture, common to all residents who also enjoy full political membership through citizenship. This imagined community (Anderson 2016) is reproduced through an array of banally nationalist symbols and activities, including national anthems, flags, sporting events, and symbols that pervade state educational institutions, government propaganda and mass media (Billig 1995). Citizens have obligations of solidarity to this political community that supersede local or international obligations.

The methodological nationalist vision ignores how most states are highly diverse, often hosting binational or multinational communities – including indigenous nations – and containing significant immigrant populations. Methodological nationalism means that transnational membership, communities, and activities remain unnoticed or misunderstood. Diversity within countries is overlooked. When their presence is acknowledged, immigrants are categorized as non-members, foreign, or “other”, outside the social contract (a status reinforced by denying them central political and social rights).

In economics, methodological nationalism manifests itself in the choice of countries as the unit of analysis for analyzing economic activity. While trade is multinational and supply chains crisscross the globe, economic indicators such as gross domestic profit measure activity within state boundaries. Economists treat development as something that happens to countries (which in turn shape the narrative by supplying most of the data). Michael Clemens and Lant Pritchett have pointed out that relying on state-level metrics and ignoring migration (which is part of development and not merely a consequence of it) can lead to paradoxical results. When people migrate from a lower to a higher-wage region, this does not count as development even if the people have significantly increased their standard of living. In fact, if the emigrants earned higher than average wages in the country they left and moved to countries where they earn less than the average wage, then the level of development goes down in both the sending and receiving country, even though no individual is worse off than before (Clemens and Pritchett 2008). Analyzing development at the country-level has also fueled much of the normative discussion about skilled emigration, often referred to as “brain drain” (Author 2016a).

A couple of caveats are needed to prevent misunderstanding the charge of methodological nationalism. Methodological nationalism is a way of seeing or categorizing the world, not a substantive claim about the nature of the world itself. Critics of methodological nationalism generally do not endorse the now unfashionable claims that globalization has rendered nation-states obsolete (Friedman 2005). Rather, awareness of methodological nationalism’s biases allows social scientists to scrutinize their axioms and findings. States continue to matter, but not necessarily in the ways that they contend. In fact, given the tendency to take many aspects of nation-states for granted, any study that does not take the distorting effects of methodological nationalism into account risks crucial omissions or misinterpretations.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Methodological nationalism as a cognitive bias is also distinct from nationalism as a political ideology. It is possible to criticize methodological nationalism as a cognitive bias but nonetheless advocate for a national community as the appropriate unit of political representation, solidarity, and distributive justice. Similarly, while some scholars have advocated that we should adopt the perspective of methodological cosmopolitanism (Beck and Sznaider 2010; Selchow 2020) as an antidote to methodological nationalism and to open up new avenues of research, criticism of methodological nationalism does not commit us to endorsing cosmopolitanism as a moral or political view.

Finally, work on global justice, including work that adopts a cosmopolitanism as a moral view, does not necessarily overcome or even engage methodological nationalism. Individualist positions like effective altruism largely take existing institutional structures for granted in determining individual obligations (Singer 2015). Moreover, debates in global justice are often structured by methodologically nationalist assumptions. For example, cosmopolitans who argue against the special obligations toward compatriots often accept terms of debate set by methodological nationalism. Arguing that there is no compatriot priority (a moral position) may lead the methodological nationalist paradigm intact unless it leads to further question of the epistemic assumptions about political society, membership, territory, and sovereignty.

**Why Methodological Nationalism Leads Us Astray**

The nation-state is an analytic category to help us analyze and understand the world. It also serves as a normative category. While this is explicitly the case for nationalist theories (Miller 1995; Tamir 1995), methodological nationalism structures theorists’ normative assumptions – including the assumptions of many cosmopolitans – who imagine political community, authority, and justice to be primarily located within state borders. It does so by naturalizing some features of political institutions, populations, and territory and by erasing other possibilities, in large part by selectively ignoring imperialist and colonialist history and by dismissing sub-state communities and cultures as viable or legitimate political units.

While my focus in this essay is on political philosophy, the stakes go beyond academic debates. Nation-states are the product of decades of nation-building, spreading propaganda to sustain national histories that could not withstand disinterested scrutiny and using coercion to quell dissent. The ideal of the nation-state, which in reality has always been at best imperfectly realized, has justified atrocities attempting to bring it into reality. In many cases, states have expelled ethnic minorities from their territories (Mann 2005) or used national education to erase the culture of indigenous groups, ethnic minorities, or immigrants (Churchill 2004).

Political philosophy has promoted and legitimized nationalist and statist ideologies, as well as benefited from them (not least by providing employment for philosophers in state-funded universities). As Stephen Toulmin observes, political philosophers from the seventeenth century until the 1950s largely assumed that the nation is the basis of political legitimacy and state unity, asking: “How do nation-states acquire and retain legitimacy, and by what means are they entitled to enforce the political obedience of their subjects?” (Toulmin 1993: 140) They have largely followed Max Weber in claiming: “Today, however, we have to say that a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” (Weber 1946: 77). Weber defines the state as *the* modern political community that enjoys sovereignty over a bounded territory, including the legitimate use of force within the territory and the power to exclude external actors from without.

The social contract tradition from Hobbes to Rawls further buttresses the presuppositions of methodological nationalism. This tradition presupposes a territorially bound community whose consent or agreement authorizes and legitimizes the government. The question of who counts as a member of this community – sometimes referred to as the “boundary problem” (Whelan 1983) – often does not arise. In *Theory of Justice* (1999a), John Rawls built justice as fairness on the presupposition of a closed society in which people enter by birth and exit by death. He located the basic structure – the major social, political, economic, and legal institutions that distribute benefits and burdens – within the state. In the *Law of Peoples* (1999b),he posited a society of largely independent, self-sufficient “peoples”, replacing the state (the major unit of analysis in international relations) with a moralized vision of societies.

Contemporary political philosophy is still very much in Rawls’ shadow (Forrester 2019). This is true of the communitarian responses to Rawls’ abstract conception of persons and aversion to thick description (MacIntyre 2007; Walzer 1983), as well as to liberal nationalist and liberal multicultural interventions which drew attention to the importance of national identity and multicultural diversity. These nationalist and multicultural theories largely retained the container theory of society and the isomorphism between nation-state and society. While these theories added needed complexity, people are still thought of as primarily belonging to one and only one culture and immigrants and national minorities are treated as exceptions that need to be accommodated in a just society. For example, Will Kymlicka sharply distinguishes between minority nations, who have claims to autonomy or self-determination within larger territorial states, and ethnic groups, who have claims to special rights and representation to protect their culture (Kymlicka 1995). Under this taxonomy, indigenous groups find themselves obliged to adopt nationalist rhetoric to justify their self-determination and to accept a concept of governance and territory that may not adequately capture their relationship to community, land, and nature.

Methodological nationalism is also prevalent in the political philosophy of migration (Author 2016b; 2018). The open borders debate is largely about whether states have the right to restrict immigration (Carens 1987; Song 2019; Wellman & Cole 2011). Central topics include the obligation to regularize the status of long residing immigrants, the means states can use to encourage or compel integration (e.g., through citizenship tests), or the permissibility of bringing in temporary workers with circumscribed labor rights and no path to permanent residence (Carens 2013; Miller 2016). All of these topics presuppose a normative standard defined by the “non-ethnic” citizen fully assimilated to a largely homogenous, monolingual majority culture.

Similarly, much of the literature on territory attempts to justify why states have territorial rights, debating over Lockean, Kantian, and nationalist approaches (Miller 1995; Moore 2015; Simmons 2017; Stilz 2019). This literature scrutinizes political boundaries, recognizing that most state boundaries were established through settler colonialism, imperialist fiat, theft, and forced migration. Nonetheless, most of these theories justify the sovereign state system under which political collectives (e.g., conceived as states, peoples, or nations) exercise territorial rights over resources, cross border trade, and immigration. Though these theories are not uncritical of injustices in the state system, they largely mirror the methodological nationalist world view with little attention to the recent and contingent emergence of our contemporary concept of territory (Elden 2013). Often their consideration of alternative forms of rules is limited to a dismissal of world government in favor of the state system, with short shrift to the possibility of forms of rule that decouple sovereignty and territory or have overlapping, fluid, or non-contiguous jurisdictions (Ruggie 1993).

Another major area of research shaped by methodological nationalism is distributive justice. The distinction between domestic and international is at the core of these debates. Rawls denied that his difference principle – that social and economic inequalities be distributed to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (Rawls 1999a) – applies across state borders (Rawls 1999b). The questions of international distributive justice have enjoyed vigorous debates between nationalists and statists who see principles of equality as properly located within state borders (Blake 2001; Miller 2007; Nagel 2005) and cosmopolitans who maintain they apply globally (Beitz 1999; Pogge 2008). Notably, many cosmopolitans contend that cosmopolitan justice can and should be achieved by reforming the state system so that it realizes justice, rather than through new, post-national/state institutions (Brock 2009; Tan 2004).

While methodological nationalism still dominates the landscape of mainstream social science and political philosophy, the cracks in its edifice have widened in recent decades. Social scientists, philosophers, and legal scholars have discovered that methodological nationalism’s conceptual tools are inadequate to understand and evaluate the social and political world. Many of the insights about methodological nationalism come from migration studies, especially studies of transnationalism and diversity. Researchers found that nation-state-centered conceptual tools failed to capture the transnational lives of many migrants (Basch et al. 1994; Bauböck & Faist 2010) or the “superdiversity” of contemporary states (Vertovec 2007).

Work on non-residential citizenship and voting (Bauböck 2009; Ellis et al. 2007) and on the voting rights of refugees and other non-citizens (Finn 2020; Ziegler 2017) renders untenable the methodological nationalist isomorphism between citizen, territory, and cultural membership. Many long-term residents do not enjoy equal status, legal rights, or full belonging (Cohen 2009; Reed-Sandoval 2020). This is true of people without legal rights to territorial presence, but also of many groups who are denied full membership through racialization and segregation (Massey 2007). Intriguingly, many of the inequities studied in international migration are replicated within states as internal migrants find themselves deprived of rights, spatially segregated, and denied full status (King & Skeldon 2010).

Within democratic theory, discussion of the boundary problem has demonstrated the need to justify who is included in the demos (Abizadeh 2012; Arrhenius 2018; Goodin 2007). States regularly exercise power over people outside of their territories, employing visa regimes, agreements with state and private actors, and maritime interception to prevent migration (Mountz 2013). Whether one thinks that a right to democratic representation is triggered by subjection to coercion or the impact of policies on one’s interests or life plans, it seems necessary to create meaningful opportunities for democratic participation that go beyond state borders. Moreover, democratic theory has powerfully argued for the inclusion of long residing non-citizens in the franchise, a point illustrated by groups such as illegalized immigrants who demand recognition and equality, making claims through “acts of citizenship” despite states’ efforts to exclude them (Isin and Nielsen 2008).

Non-state people also sit uneasily within a methodologically nationalist paradigm. James Scott has synthesized scholarship on Zomia, an enormous region spanning the highlands of Southeast Asia that has largely evaded state control (Scott 2009). Upending the prejudice under which non-state people are deemed “primitive” and unaware of the benefits of “civilization” (identified with the state), Scott contends that many of these groups actively resist state taxation, conscription, and slavery. While it is increasingly difficult to live outside of state strictures, many people such as the houseless are partially invisible to the state, sometimes by choice. Nomads also have an uneasy relationship with states, in part because they offer a non-territorial mode of life and model of governance (MacKay et al. 2014; Ringmar 2020).

Scholars in law, the humanities, and the social sciences revealed the inadequacy of conceiving borders as lines demarcating state territories (Parker and Williams 2009). Borders are not lines; rather they are institutions that extend both inward into territories and outwards into other states and international waters (Nail 2016; Rumford 2014). Borders are tools for governing space and individuals, achieved through laws, policing, and surveillance. Big data and biometrics have allowed for increasingly fine grained, individualized interventions, discriminating with morally troublesome algorithms (Molnar 2019). Nowhere is this more problematic than in the role of borders play in racializing groups and producing illegal status.

Ayelet Shachar has documented how states shift borders through legal fictions, expanding control while abjuring corresponding responsibilities (Shachar 2020). The externalization of borders and the manipulation of space to exercise power outside of traditional territorial boundaries challenges models of political legitimacy and authority based on state sovereignty. Even powerful states cannot unilaterally govern their borders. Even when there are vast power asymmetries, migration and trade policies are not unilaterally imposed, but rather negotiated and jointly administrated. For example, not only is deportation impossible without the assent of another state to receive deportees, but many migration restrictions are implemented by and in sending countries. Bi-national governance of trade, migration, and borders compromises the methodological nationalist conception of sovereignty, diffusing power or imposing new forms of empire (Longo 2018; Ochoa Espejo 2020). Since state sovereignty is usually justified on the grounds that states, however imperfectly, guarantee the basic of rights of their population and provide a venue for self-determination, decoupling the exercise of power from defined state territories, shifting borders and overlapping jurisdictions poses a fundamental change to political philosophy.

Border scholars have also revealed the complex ways in which borders construct people’s identities (Mezzadra & Neilson). Borders play a major role in the creation of national identities by defining a territory and stipulating that people within it share politically and culturally salient characteristics. Defining borders enables the invention of tradition that serves to legitimize political units built on conquest and fiat (Hobsbawn and Ranger 2012). Nations define themselves in large part by whom they exclude, with particular attention to people in the territory who disrupt their self-image.[[2]](#footnote-2) While historians have played a major role in perpetuating nationalist narratives (Vasilev 2018), histories of global migration, transnationalism, and diaspora are a powerful antidote to a nation-state centered world view (Hoerder 2011; Wang 1997).

Nationalist narratives also neglect borderlands, which constitute social, cultural, and economic spaces that cannot be reduced or assimilated to either side of the frontier (Anzaldúa 2012). Borders are porous and our societies, cultures, and economies are mobile, hybrid, and fluid, eluding capture by static concepts and categories. Border walls, far from stopping cross border flows, are a lethal genre of political theatre; their symbolic resonance often trumps their role in impeding, redirecting, filtering people and goods (Brown 2010).

Finally, methodological nationalism prevents coming to terms with the ongoing legacy of colonialism and imperialism. It is only recently that political philosophers have begun to take empire seriously despite (or because of) how legitimacy of white settler colonial states rests on silencing or erasing indigenous populations (Bell 2016; Mehta; Pitts 2010). Presupposing that the nation-state is the modern form of political organizations neglects how decolonization is recent and ongoing. Moreover, it is far from clear that national liberation movements have superseded imperial rule. Nandita Sharma locates the origin of distinctions between natives and migrants in colonial strategies of divide-and-conquer and argues that national liberation projects have resulted in “much old imperialist wine has been repackaged in new national bottles.” (Sharma 2020: 268) States have continued colonialism through the construction of categories of National-Natives and Migrants (Sharma 2020). Rather than creating a new community in which individuals with equal status making up “the People”, nationalists repurposed imperial discourses about autochthony to construct racialized groups and to designate them as out of place.

**Moving Beyond Methodological Nationalism**

Today political philosophy needs to supersede methodological nationalism and embrace new perspectives and categories. Bridget Anderson has called for “methodological de-nationalism … an approach that builds on the insights of transnational studies, mobilities’ paradigms, and bordering and decolonial approaches, that is, that recognizes that borders and citizenship are politically constituted and historically and economically embedded.” (Anderson 2019: 5) As Olúfẹmi Táíwò, puts it, the social sciences and political philosophy need “to figure out how to form and reform political institutions in a way that tracks the actual basic structures that exist.” (Táíwò 2019: 80)

Moving beyond methodological nationalism requires using a variety of frameworks and methodologies. Social and political reality is complex, with no lens fully capturing all empirically and morally salient features. History alerts us to possible forms of political organization and also helps us identify emerging institutions, structures, and actors (Sassen 2008). It encourages us to engage in multiscalar analysis, theorizing relationships between deterritorialized networks, transnational social fields, cities, international institutions, and states (Glick Schiller 2018). Important work in cosmopolitan democracy and global governance challenges to think about how to organize political institutions to better fulfill the ideals of democracy and to address transnational and global problems (Archibugi 2008; Held 1995). Work on multinational corporations encourages us to move away from statist models and grapple with the nature and responsibilities in transnational spaces (Wettstein 2009).

I have already discussed research that queries, dispels, or at least complicates the methodological nationalist paradigm. More ambitious projects challenge us to take up new perspectives and categories. Ulrich Beck advocated for a methodological cosmopolitanism to overcome dualisms of global and local and of national and international. He used this perspective to investigate the ways in which people’s lives and fates are interconnected across borders through emerging cross-national and post-national constellations (Beck and Sznaider 2010). Anderson’s methodological de-nationalism connects to the no borders movement, which is both a normative critique of borders imposed by states and capitalist markets and an invitation to explore alternate forms of community and solidarity (Anderson, Sharma & Wright 2009; King 2016).

Social scientists have proposed a “mobility turn” or “new mobility paradigm” which places motion and mobility at the center of the research agenda (Blunt 2007; Cresswell 2010; Sheller and Urry 2006). In philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari’s chapter on “Nomadology” from *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) challenges us to reimagine history from the view of the nomad. In a remarkable series of monographs, Thomas Nail has sought to re-center philosophy around an ontology, ethics, and politics of movement, challenges us to rethink our categories from the perspective of the migrant or for a world in flux, rather than stasis (Nail 2015; 2016). This challenges us to imagine what just institutions would look like if their subject was not the immobile, nationalist citizen, but the migrant.

Whatever strategies one adapts, political philosophy needs to emerge from the fetters of methodological nationalism, engage with the most innovative recent work in the social sciences, and embrace categories of analysis that allow it to respond to today’s world. While there is little reason to think that the nation-state will disappear in the foreseeable future, it has been transformed. Moreover, political challenges such as international migration, the revolution in information technology and surveillance, and climate change are transnational. We need to abandon nation-state centered epistemology to understand how power is wielded and how resources are distributed. Only then will we be able to come to terms with what a just world today requires.

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1. This led the scholar of nationalism, Anthony Smith, to argue that sociologists’ tendency to take the nation-state for granted “as part of the basic furniture of the mind” hindered the study of nationalism (Smith 1983: 26). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The kerfuffle over the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project was not primarily a dispute about facts; rather, it was an often visceral reaction to the effort to placing black Americans, racism, and slavery at the core of the nation’s identity (The 1619 Project, August 14). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)