



Jean Monnet Series
TEACHING EUROPE

**"Is Sociology Trapped
in Methodological
Nationalism"?**

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Teaching Europe Series



The series provides a platform for public debate on how to teach Europe as well as on the major methodological and pedagogical issues in European sociology. The idea is to engage in pedagogical debates on learning objectives, learning outcomes, innovative teaching, skills attainment, and the European Research Area.

Provisional topics:

- a. Supranationalism and methodological nationalism;
- b. Transnational network analysis;
- c. Discursive and constructivist approaches;
- d. European media and public sphere;
- e. Comparative, intercultural research;
- f. Quality Teaching and Research in European Studies.

Example



Teaching Europe Series



Example

<https://jeanmonnetsociology.wordpress.com/>



Teaching Europe Series



Supranationalism and methodological nationalism

The subject of debate for today is *supranationalism and methodological nationalism* in sociology/the social sciences.

What are the challenges – theoretical, conceptual, as well as empirical - when sociology studies and researches realities beyond the standard research object: the nation-state?

These challenges are particularly important when the explicit focus is on supranational realities, such as the European Union, but evidently they have relevance in sociological research more in general, in the context of globalization, transnationalization, and mobility.

Example



Methodological Nationalism



1. Some examples of phenomena that challenge the nation-state
2. What is «methodological nationalism»?
3. Europe as an antithesis to the system of nation-states?
4. Is (European) sociology trapped in methodological nationalism?
5. The best ways forward (?)

Example



Methodological Nationalism

The Google logo, consisting of the word "Google" in its characteristic multi-colored font (blue, red, yellow, green, red, blue).

Google is *inter alia* being contested for its handling of users' private data

The global search engine controls ca. 90 per cent of market share

Critics worry that Google 'may have incentives to distort its 'results' in ways that increase its profits but harm society' (Teubner 2012)

Example



Methodological Nationalism

The Google logo, consisting of the word "Google" in its characteristic multi-colored font (blue, red, yellow, green, red, blue).

‘Its worldwide digital networking activities, which have enabled massive intrusions into the rights to privacy, informational self-determination and freedom of communication, represent typical problems for the constitution of the global internet. And the lack of transparency in Google’s governance structures points to *constitutional questions* of democracy and of public controls.’

(Teubner 2013: 44-5)

Example



Methodological Nationalism



It is however very difficult to assess which (constitutional) laws and sites are affected and which nation-state or other actors should undertake action

What is clear is that nation-state constitutions and law fail to take up the challenge

Example



Methodological Nationalism



In May 2014, the European Court of Justice ruled that people had a “right to be forgotten”. So individuals could have links to articles about them expunged from search engines.

It meant that the most popular search engine, Google, was required to delete “inadequate, irrelevant or no longer relevant” data from its results whenever a member of the public requested it. (Greenslade, The Guardian, 19-9-2016)

Example



Methodological Nationalism



Kapitalismus

Public debates about the economic crisis focus on how individual countries are performing since the crisis.

In scholarly debates, the debate on *Varieties of Capitalism* (VoC) argues that American and German capitalism are the most successful capitalist systems in the world, and that these systems are densely coordinated internally, as *national* systems

Example



Methodological Nationalism



Kapitalismus

VoC however does not pay attention either to the process of European integration, nor to the internal complexity of capitalist systems and divisions in countries (e.g. Italy), nor to multi-level interactions

Example



Methodological Nationalism



Kapitalismus

Indeed, 'both the «methodological Europeanism» and «methodological nationalism» fail to consider the important links between economic and political processes at different spatial scales, and hence, asymmetries and phenomena of uneven development'

(Jaeger and Springler, *Asymmetric Crisis*, 2016)

Example



Methodological Nationalism



The Greek crisis resonates across Europe. While many faults are looked for internally (corruption), a European dimension is hard to deny (Euro). Greece can serve as a 'study of the pan-European economic turmoil as the «Greek crisis» is heralded as a warning on national stages throughout the continent' (Knight 2013)



Methodological Nationalism



The Brexit referendum was much about «Making Great Britain Great Again», but to what extent is it really possible to think of a full-blown sovereign and self-contained nation-state in current times?



Methodological Nationalism



In the case of execution of *constituent power*, that is the making and reform of constitutional rules, national states are not free to set their own rules as they wish, in particular in Europe, where the European Commission and the CoE's Venice Commission are frequently involved in national reform.



Methodological Nationalism



2. What is Methodological Nationalism?

“The assumption that nation, state, and society are the same entity, and that this entity is the natural unit of both social organization and social science inquiry. It can be extended to imply that the epistemological frameworks of social sciences are nationalized (for example, political science is conceived as distinct from international relations, sociologists study national-level societies), such that transnational phenomena are hidden from view”.

(Dictionary of Human Geography 2013)?



Methodological Nationalism



What is Methodological Nationalism?

Different understandings :

1. The idea that social change is predominantly an *internal process*, caused by endogenous conditions of a nation-state/domestic society;
2. Political and territorial *boundaries* limit distinctive societies (Beck's "container model" of society: state-constructed and state-controlled borders define societal relations);
3. The nation-state is taken as a *natural unit of research* in macro-sociological, comparative research;
4. A bias towards the *study of states and government* in social-scientific research (Beck and Sznaider);
5. The nation-state is grounded in a *Western/Euro-centric idea*, which equates Western modernization with modern society as such.



Methodological Nationalism



What is Methodological Nationalism?

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- a. the boundaries of the nation-state are becoming more porous, flows of people are becoming more intense, transnational networks emerge;
- b. the “myth” of the modern state, as the container of political power, is eroding: many key decisions are taken beyond the state-level;
- c. rapid changes, contemporary problems (environment, migration) and “societal acceleration” ask, and push, for forms of transnational cooperation;
- d. nationalism is a problematic and exclusionary project (normative); cosmopolitan efforts point to more inclusionary forms of living together;



Methodological Nationalism



What is Methodological Nationalism?

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- a. the nation as an idea and nationalism as a practice is still very much with us;
- b. most meaningful forms of social interaction are still taking place with national boundaries;
- c. the opposite of 'methodological cosmopolitanism' is equally problematic.



Methodological Nationalism



Is sociology trapped?

According to Ulrich Beck, sociology is still defined by a 'still-dominant methodological nationalism' (2012: 651).

A 'national perspective' is held by social actors, whereas 'methodological nationalism' is what shapes the perspective of social-scientific researchers



Methodological Nationalism



Such a methodological nationalism assumes that nation, state, and society are the “natural” social and political forms in the modern world. It assumes that humanity is “naturally” segmented into a limited number of nations that are internally organized as nation-states and that demarcate themselves externally from other nation-states. It goes even farther and presents this external delimitation as a central category of political organization in the context of competition between nation-states. Much sociological thought to date, indeed the sociological imagination itself, is in fact a prisoner of the nation-state. And this very methodological nationalism prevents the social sciences from bringing the process of cosmopolitanization in general and of Europeanization in particular into their analytical field of vision.

(Beck 2012: 651).



Methodological Nationalism



Is sociology trapped?

“society,”
“social inequality,”
“classes,”
“families,”
“gainful employment,”
“religion,”
“state,”
“democracy,” and
“imagined communities.”

(Beck 2012: 651).



Methodological Nationalism



Is sociology trapped?

How can we escape a nationalist sociological imagination? Beck points to 'methodological cosmopolitanism', which is reflexive of its units of investigation and explores complex processes and (inter)dependencies.

(Beck 2012: 651).



Methodological Nationalism



Best ways forward (?)

1. *Reflexivity and sensitivity* – embracing complexity - towards ‘external influences’ (through processes of diffusion, social interaction, transnational formation of groups and networks);
2. *Denaturalizing the nation-state*, emphasizing the ongoing struggle that defines any national project;
3. *Combining attention to global and local forces* (‘glocalization’);



Methodological Nationalism



Best ways forward (?)

Sociology of Europe

1. Acknowledgement of interdependence societies and multi-level interaction (against 'closed container' idea);
2. Society is not necessarily tied to the nation-state; society should be understood as a 'relational field of interconnections' (Delanty 2016);
3. Something like a European society has been in the making for a long time (since 19th century, Delanty 2016);
4. Europe does share certain values and social practices, beyond national societies ('stakeholder capitalism', 'human rights').



Methodological Nationalism



Best ways forward (?)

Interesting examples:

Wiener, A., 2008. *The Invisible Constitution of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nash, K., 2009. *The Cultural Politics of Human Rights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

