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# **Methodological Nationalism, Migration, and Political Theory<sup>1</sup>**

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Political theorists of migration have largely operated within a conceptual scheme that treats the nation-state as the natural political unit for analysis at the expense of transnational, regional, and local analyses. Migration is discussed in the contexts of nation-building or in an international framework of autonomous, sovereign states. I show that this paradigm of “methodological nationalism” ignores transnational networks, associations, and organizations and global social and economic structures. This in turn, blinds political theorists to questions of agency and structure and to causal relations that entail moral responsibilities. My aim is to show how debates on migration and distributive justice have been marred by methodological nationalist assumptions and how a more adequate account can be constructed by incorporating insights from transnational and global studies.

The first section explains how methodological nationalism distorts research on migration in the social sciences. The second section shows that prominent positions on migration and political theory emerge from a methodological nationalist perspective. I discuss the impact of methodological nationalism on normative work on citizenship, membership, and culture and argue that methodological nationalist assumptions have also structured accounts of migration and distributive justice. The third section draws on transnational and world systems perspectives

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<sup>1</sup> I'd like to thank Andrew Valls for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

from the migration literature to show the descriptive and explanatory inadequacy of methodological nationalism. In the fourth section, I demonstrate how insights from global and transnational approaches to migration better inform normative discussions of migration and distributive justice.

### **1. Methodological Naturalism**

Methodological nationalism refers to the claim that the social sciences unreflectively presuppose the nation-state, uncritically treat it as the natural form of social organization, and/or reify it (Chernilo 2007, Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). The nation-state is assumed to completely control geographical space and is treated as synonymous with society. Since social and economic statistics are typically collected at the level of the state, social scientists' analyses reinforce state boundaries and discourage theorists from considering alternate perspectives and taxonomies (Smith 1983: 26, Beck 2000a). Methodological nationalism leads to a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of social reality by failing to recognize transnational, sub- and supra-state organizations and by not taking into account how transnational and global forces affect nations.

The terminology of "methodological nationalism" is somewhat unfortunate as it generally does not denote *nations*, understood as a group of people sharing a common language, public culture, mythology, religion, attachment to a particular territory, and other characteristics. Instead, critics of methodological nationalism mainly have the state in mind. In many cases social scientists view state boundaries as encompassing a single, national culture. In fact, the diagnosis of methodological nationalism arguably has its origins in attempts to develop theoretical tools for understanding the nature and role of nations independently of how states have defined them. Anthony Smith showed that nationalism had been traditionally neglected in

sociology in part due to the methodological challenges of definition, classification, and explanation, but also because the classical sociological theory largely treated the nation as a sociology “given” (Smith 1983: 26). Classical sociologists embedded the nation within the study of society without distinguishing it as a separate subject.

Cosmopolitanism theories are not necessarily immune from methodological nationalist prejudice. Utilitarian cosmopolitans who see moral responsibility as entirely a matter of individual well-being and economic cosmopolitans who seek to destroy barriers to trade and migration to maximize global welfare both fail to address or properly understand how assumptions about the state affect their theories (Bhagwati 2004, Singer 1972). Social theorists who see the world as entering a stage in which the national sovereignty is obliterated by global economic and social forces may also fail to understand the role of the nation-state in modernity and thus ironically incorporate the theoretical blind-spots of methodological nationalism into post-national theory (Beck 2000b, Chernilo 2006).

The charge of methodological naturalism should not be confused with the claim that the nation-state is in decline or in the process of being supplanted by global or transnational forces. The supersession of methodological nationalism as a conceptual scheme is compatible with the view that the nation-state is and will remain the dominant institution in the international sphere and the most important subject for analyzing migration flows. Far from denying the continued importance and relevance of the state, critics of methodological nationalism invite us to consider its role more carefully.

Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller extend the charge of methodological nationalism to migration studies, defining methodological nationalism as “the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world.” (Wimmer

and Glick Schiller 2002: 302) They identify three mutually reinforcing variants of methodological nationalism in migration studies: ignorance, naturalization, and territorial limitation (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002: 308). *Ignorance* occurs when nation-state serves as an “invisible background” (304) unnoticed or ignored by theorists: the nation-state is presupposed but theorists are unaware of how its presupposition affects their theorizing. A second variant of methodological naturalism *naturalizes* the nation-state: theorists acknowledge the nation-state, but consider it as a natural, unproblematic topic of study. Finally, *territorial limitation* occurs when social scientists operate solely within take the boundaries of the state and “thus remove trans-border connections and processes from the picture.” (307)

These variants of methodological nationalism manifest in a set of assumptions that guide theorists of migration. First, theorists ignore how their ideas and categories such as citizen, immigrant, temporary migrant, and tourist are shaped by nationalist background assumptions. This allows for comparisons of immigrant and native born populations without reflecting on the internal heterogeneity of these groups or the usefulness of these categories. Also, methodological individualist explanations of migration often reinforce methodological nationalism by attempting to explain migration using individual preferences with state boundaries reduced to market inefficiencies. Despite the absence the nation in these economic models, the nationalist assumptions play an implicit role by defining high and low wage regions.

Second, the nation-state is often naturalized to play a central role that has not been seriously questioned or argued for. In the social sciences the flows of goods, capital, and people is typically seen with in an *international* framework. The world is divided into separate, sovereign nation-states and little consideration is given to why the nation-state enjoys its hegemonic status (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002: 304). Nation-building projects are

legitimized, often at the price of exaggerating internal cultural homogeneity. Other actors, insofar as they are recognized, are subordinated to the state. Questions such as the economic effects of migration on native workers presuppose a naturalized nation-state that defines membership (Borjas 2001, Card 2005). Similarly, writings on the effects of skilled migration and the fear that this causes “brain drain” derive their legitimacy from their acceptance of nation-state’s self-definitions (Kapur and McHale 2005).

Finally, territorial limitation occurs when theorists focus only on immigration without considering the role of sending countries or investigating transnational ties. Demographic and economic data collected by states reinforce state definitions of boundaries and membership. Immigration is studied without attention to emigration and circular migration is invisible to official statistics. Territorial limitations allows studies of multiculturalism to take place solely within the context of receiving societies and for immigrants to be unreflectively categorized as more or less integrated or assimilated to dominant groups defined by nation-building projects.

## **2. Political Theory and Methodological Nationalism**

Political theorists have inherited the assumptions of methodological nationalism from the social sciences and from policy discussions at the state and international level. Despite their theoretical differences, political theorists of migration are largely committed to a social ontology that presupposes the nation-state as the basic agent and unit of analysis. The theoretical literature in the political theory of migration usually assumes an international system of sovereign states with limited consideration of other structures and actors. People belong to only one state and are classified either as natives or foreigners. States are the primary actors requiring moral scrutiny and their regulation of people seeking to move across their borders is the primary topic of investigation. States are seen as independently formed, bounded containers of opportunities.

Their role in shaping migration flows is limited to border enforcement with limited attention to economic policies, political forays abroad, or recruitment strategies.

Migration for economic opportunities, cultural choice, or family reasons goes unremarked if it takes place within the borders of the state, but immediately raises moral questions when it involves crossing an international border. The container view of the nation-state leads political theorists to ignore the perhaps 740 million internal migrants and to automatically problematize the presence of 214 million international migrants (UN Development Programme 2009: 21, King, Skeldon, and Vullnetari 2008). Theorists distinguish the 26.8 million internally displaced people in 2011 driven to flee to another region by violence, persecution, or natural disasters from the 10.4 million refugees who have crossed an international border for similar reasons (Lister 2012).

Methodological naturalism affects normative debates on migration along many dimensions. I concentrate on two topics. First, membership (including normative justifications for membership) follows national lines so that multiple citizenship and transnational membership are ignored or problematized and the definition of culture follows nation-building projects. Second, discussions of distributive justice treat nations as discrete and autonomous containers where sedentariness is the default position.

#### **a. Membership and Culture**

Methodological nationalism underlies a set of assumptions about membership and culture that mirror and legitimize nation-building projects. First, many political theorists uncritically structure their theories using a model in which each person belongs exclusively to a single society or state (Rawls 1999a, 1999b). Citizenship as a legal status has often gone unquestioned even by theorists who are highly sensitive to how the identities of women, ethnic and religious

minorities, members of LGBT communities and others are excluded from dominant conceptions of national citizenship (Kymlicka and Norman 1994). This one-person one-state model has no place for dual and multiple citizenships and ignores external voting rights and transnational political activity. Not until recently has work on the scope of the *demos* have alerted political theorists to challenges of multiple and transnational memberships and the need for a normative account to ground a right to membership and the rights it entails (Bauböck 2006).

Second, despite progress in work on citizenship, many theorists continue to ground their theories in problematic assumptions about membership. Christopher Heath Wellman has argued that that legitimate states have a right to political self-determination which is partly constituted by a principle of freedom of association (Cole and Wellman 2011). Freedom of association includes the right to not associate with some people and this right outweighs any claims that migrants have to entry. Critics of Wellman's position have questioned the cogency of his analysis of freedom of association (Fine 2010, Blake 2012), but have largely neglected the question of whether the relevant social and political communities are in fact contained within the boundaries of the nation-state.

Third, debates about integration, assimilation, and culture that frequently presuppose a unified, background culture and immigrants are frequently understood to pose unique economic, cultural, and security risks. Political theory also mirrors the empirical literature in seeing migrants as foreign, in need of integration or assimilation (Carens 2005, Miller 2008). Cultural claims are implicit in fears that immigrants undermine social trust. This occurs not only in Peter Brimelow and Samuel Huntington's jeremiads against Hispanic immigration in the US (Brimelow 1995, Huntington 2004) and Christopher Caldwell's consternation at the rise of Islam in Europe (Caldwell 2010), but in the work of many political theorists who see culture as a



central consideration for migration policy and minority-rights. Michael Walzer holds that border controls are essential to preserve territorial bounded “communities of character” (Walzer 1983: 38), whereas David Miller argues for the need to control the volume of immigration to allow for cultural continuity (Miller 2005). Will Kymlicka sees migration restrictions as necessary to protect “societal cultures” (Kymlicka 2001) and even Joseph Carens, a pioneering proponent of open borders, suggests that relatively homogenous cultures such as Japan may exclude people for the sake of cultural preservation (Carens 1992). Few political theorists have recognized how attention to the transnational dimensions of culture may on the contrary generate claims to membership (Lenard 2010).

Finally, the state-centered model of methodological nationalism plays a role in the work of political theorists who ask about the permissibility of denying temporary migrants rights enjoyed by citizens (Carens 2008, Bell and Piper 2006). Much of this debate asks whether temporary membership and the resulting exploitation is compatible with liberal norms of equal respect or whether guest workers must be guaranteed a path to full membership (Attas 2000, Lenard and Straehle 2011). Little consideration is given to the possibility that the permanent/temporary dichotomy is in fact misleading and that migrants may simultaneously belong to more than one community.

#### **b. Distributive Justice**

The effects of methodological nationalism on conceptions of migration and distributive justice are less evident. Political theorists commonly frame the moral dilemmas of migration policy with the observation that place of birth has a major but morally arbitrary influence on people’s opportunities and life chances. In these debates, global inequality and the role of coercive exclusion of much of the world’s population from regions with better opportunities and higher

wages are central considerations in determining the justice of migration policy. Theorists differ widely on the implications of global inequalities for migration, but they have largely shared methodological nationalist assumptions that states are isolated containers that generate opportunities independent of cross-border or global forces and individuals are essentially sedentary.

This gives rise to four prominent views in political theory. First, political theorists of migration assume a container-theory of distributive justice in which people are seen as moving between independent nation-states. Second, since methodological nationalism sees migration as an anomaly (if it recognizes it at all), theorists argue that people who enjoy adequate opportunities at home forfeit any claim to migrate. Third, methodological nationalism supports compatriot priority arguments for restricting migration. Fourth, debates about the normative implications of brain drain derive their salience from methodological nationalism's privileging of the national community and from its assumptions that people belong to particular societies.

First, methodological nationalism affects political theory on migration by framing distributive justice in an international framework where each state is an autonomous monad. Opportunities are seen to be located in isolated containers defined by the geographical boundaries of the nation state. Little attention is given to how opportunities are constituted through relationships between territories (e.g., due to trade or capital flows) or to classifications of opportunities cutting across national lines (e.g., based on social class or gender). Let me provide four recent examples.

This container view of society enables Lea Ypi to treat borders as the *explanans* of spatially-differentiated opportunities and to take for granted the idea that each nation-state bounds a coherent, moral community or society (Ypi 2008). She argues that considerations of

“justice in immigration” (addressing the members of proposed host societies) and considerations of “justice in emigration” (addressing the members of sending societies) are fundamentally in conflict.

Operating with similar theoretical assumptions, Eric Cavallero sees the fact that opportunities are distributed differently across national borders as problematic. States are responsible for remediating these inequalities, either by accepting migrants or paying equivalent compensation through development aid. Cavallero treats migration in terms of calculating aggregate demand for entry to states. In his view, states with “positive immigration pressure” (i.e., more people want to immigrate than emigrate) have to choose between admitting more foreigners and compensating other states with developmental aid (Cavallero 2006: 98).

In another variation of the container theory of the nation-state, Ayelet Shachar’s contention that birthright citizenship preserves global inequalities also presupposes bounded societies, as does her proposal for a “birthright privilege levy” to redistribute the gains from birthright citizenship across borders (Shachar 2009). This diagnosis and solution assumes a world in which citizenship is invariably passed down from generation to generation along national lines and opportunities have overwhelming domestic origins. Though this may seem like a straightforward empirical generalization, it overstates the rigidity of borders and the role of the isolated state generating opportunities.

Finally, Ryan Pevnick argues that publically provided goods created by bounded political communities act as magnets pulling people from abroad (Pevnick 2011: 56). Rather than seeing this as grounds for more open borders, he holds that citizens’ contributions to maintaining state institutions provide them with claim to ownership. This claim endows citizens with a right to self-determination over their collective property that entails a right to exclude foreigners who

enjoy adequate opportunities. Pevnick's methodological nationalism contributes to his assumption that citizens' efforts produce public goods without any substantial contribution from outside forces.

Second, methodological nationalism allows political theorists to treat international migration as an anomaly. Political theorists tend to see migration as a response to abnormal, adverse circumstances such as poverty or persecution and to insist that it would largely disappear as a serious moral subject if these circumstances were addressed (Rawls 1999b: 9, Walzer 1983: 38). The assumption of sedentariness underlies the common claim that people who lack adequate opportunities within their states to live decent lives have a right to migrate, but those who can access adequate bundles of goods within their national borders forfeit this right (Miller 2005: 196, Pevnick 2011: 84, c.f. Hidalgo 2012). This assumption also contributes to the view that there is a trade-off between migration and development (Pogge 2006) or that development aid can be offer in lieu of visas (Cavallero 2006, c.f. Cole and Wellman 2011: 130-32, Kymlicka 2001: 271).

Third, methodological nationalism supports arguments in favor of restricting migration on the grounds of compatriot priority. According to these arguments, we have special obligations toward needy compatriots that allow us to override obligations we may have toward needy foreigners (Macedo 2007, Miller 2010: 53). Compatriot priority presupposes that only members of communities located inside the boundaries of the state are related in ways that entail special obligations. Transnationalists would question the correspondence of communities with state-boundaries.

Finally, the normative literature on brain drain is incomprehensible without the assumption that people belong uniquely to one nation-state and that the distribution of goods and

opportunities is defined by that nation-state's institutions (Oberman 2013, Offe 2011, Ypi 2008). Claims that nation-states can impose emigration restrictions or demand compensation from receiving countries are firmly embedded in a world-view inexorably defined by nation-states. Political theorists have argued about the cogency of using the (allegedly) harmful effects of skilled migration as grounds for curtailing migration, but they have not considered the legitimacy of invoking national communities as the correct bearers of rights and responsibilities.

### **3. Global Systems and Transnational Networks**

So far I have provided evidence that many of the debates in political theory take place within a framework of methodological nationalism. Even if I have shown that this is the case, it does not follow that these theories are flawed. To demonstrate that methodological nationalism has a pernicious effect on political theories of migration, it is necessary to demonstrate how social scientists have rightly begun to move beyond methodological nationalism and to explain why this is important for political theory. Since political theorists on migration usually rely on assumptions about the causes of migration, the characteristics of migrants, and the structure of international systems, some normative claims can be refuted if it is shown that they present a false or distorted view of migration.

The purpose of this section is to explain why methodological nationalism is an inadequate theoretical stance for social scientific theories because it excludes transnational membership and activity, overlooks how states function within regional and global systems, and prevents the development of plausible theories of migration. In the next section, I will argue that the methodological nationalism in migration studies distorts our normative theories by excluding or misrepresenting morally relevant actors, causal factors, and transnational and global structures.

The charge that a theory is constrained by methodological nationalism does not automatically entail that it is flawed. The phrase “methodological nationalism” is pejorative in cases where the unreflective use of nationalist frameworks and categories undermines the explanatory and predictive power of our theories. We should remain open to the possibility that a methodological nationalist stance may be an appropriate for some topics. Just as methodological individualism is useful for inquiry in some domains, there are cases where theorists might self-consciously situate their studies within the parameters of the nation-state. The naturalization of the nation-state may be justifiable in domains where it is indeed the primary institution for social explanation.

Though this is true, in the case of migration studies, methodological nationalism leads social scientists astray. Theorists of globalization and transnationalism have shown how ontological shifts in the global economy, politics, culture, and society require the rethinking of basic categories, especially the nation-state. Space-time compression has led to the creation of transnational spaces that overlap, undermine, and transform sovereign states. A plausible explanation of migration needs to take into account global economic and cultural shifts (including international law), transnational networks sustaining migration flows, long term cultural and economic ties maintained by migrants, and the role of sub-state actors such as corporations and NGOs.

There are two prongs to my criticism of theories constrained by the presuppositions of methodological nationalism. First, there is a descriptive task of identifying transnational phenomena such as migrants’ transnational identities and activities. These observations are hard to explain within a framework of methodological nationalism and encourage us to develop new theoretical assumptions. Second, I turn to work on theories of migration to show how the need

for mechanisms at the transnational, regional, global, and sub-national to explain migration flows.

The extent and persistence of transnational activity and complex forms of membership poses a challenge for theories mired in methodological nationalism. Relatively inexpensive international travel and telecommunication have allowed migrants and communities abroad to more easily maintain connections. Migration brings together people from sending and receiving countries in economic, cultural, religious, and other networks (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2006). First, migrants send remittances to family members abroad. The World Bank estimates \$410 billion US in officially recorded remittances sent to developing countries in 2012 with unrecorded remittances generally thought to be at least \$1025 billion. Migrants from China, India, and the Philippines sent back approximately \$69, \$60, and \$24 billion in officially recorded remittances in 2011. Remittances made up shares of 47% and 31% of GDP for Tajikistan and Liberia. Over 20% of the GDP of countries such as Haiti, Samoa, Nepal, Moldova, Lesotho, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Liberia came from remittances. Families often use migration is often a strategy to supplement income, maintaining long term transnational ties to members abroad (Stark 1991). Migrants sending remittances often do not fit into categories of sojourners away from home for a short period or permanent residents who have severed ties from their countries of origin.

Migrants may also be engaged in transnational entrepreneurship in financial services, raw materials, goods, and cultural products (Zhou 2004: 1054-60) Migrants develop human, social, and cultural capital which they transmit to their countries of origin. Ethnic networks enable them to build technological bridges and to serve as intermediaries linking businesses around the globe.

Migrants' contributions to their countries of origin are not limited to the economic domain and encompass cultural exchange and values, norms, and ideas.

Second, people's identities and sense of community often spans two or more states. States have become increasingly tolerant of people retaining the citizenship from other countries and many people hold dual or multiple citizenships (Bauböck 2006, 2011). Migrants also engage in political activity, including voting from abroad (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2005) and political activism and community development from abroad.

It is not enough for social theories to enumerate transnational phenomena. We want to know why transnationalism occurs and what it tells us about social reality. Political theorists who are concerned about institutional structure and about assigning responsibility and blame must consider questions of causality and social ontology. To do this, they must engage migration theory (Sager 2012a).

The causes of international migration are complex and addressed by multiple, sometimes complementary, sometimes diverging theoretical perspectives. My focus here is on macro and meso level explanations for migration flows with little attention to individual agency. Macro level explanations of how states and international economic and legal institutions structure migration flows and meso level explanations that address the importance of families, communities, and migration networks are central for the questions of institutional design. What is often lacking in political theories of migration is a clear notion of the structures which shape people's individual choices. I limit myself to two considerations that relevant for theories of distributive justice. First, migration takes place within a global capitalist system. Second, the distribution of goods is determined for a significant part of the world's population by transnational networks.



State-level policies and networks are situated within a global capitalist system. What we need to determine is the nature of the global economy and its effect on migration. One view of the global economy and migration comes from mainstream neo-classical economics. Neo-classical models of migration predict migration based on agents' rational calculations of its costs and benefits. People would move to destinations where they receive a higher net return until the system achieves equilibrium. Labor is simply a factor of production and coercive border controls are market distortions that prevent the achievement of Pareto efficient distributions. Open borders, just like free trade, follow as a policy recommendation as both are expected to lead to enormous monetary gains (and thus utility).

Since many theorists of migration and distributive justice employ or presuppose neo-classical models of migration (Chang 2007), we should consider how these models sustain methodological nationalism and fail as theories of migration. First, neoclassical theorists choose not include institutions such as the nation-state because they are committed to the methodological individualism: migration flows are explained in terms of aggregated individual decisions. Methodological individualism promotes methodological naturalism in theory and in practice. In theory, neo-classical explanations commit the error of ignorance by omitting the nation-state from their theories. In practice, they naturalize nation-states by treating them as isolated containers of opportunities without attention to how opportunities are only available to segments of the world's population and how they are often produced by transnational market forces (e.g., long-term temporary worker programs).

Second, neo-classical theories of migration fail empirically. Though the basic observation that many people are motivated by economic considerations to migrate is true, it is so general that it does not offer much insight about particular migrations. In particular, neo-classical models

are unable to explain why so many people don't migrate, why people tend to migrate from and to particular regions, and why *some* people from a region migrate while other similarly situated people from the same region remain.

The impact of global capitalism helps explain some migration flows. A basic feature of capitalist economies is creative destruction where innovation, often originating from other parts of the world, transforms economies. One reason people migrate is that their regions have become incorporated into the global market (Sassen 1988). Urbanization and the destruction of peasant economies drive internal migration to urban areas, often as a preliminary step toward relocating abroad. Migration flows follow foreign investment, resource extraction, and the presence of multinational firms engaged in producing goods for exportation. These activities trigger the rise of transnational networks.

Global capitalism allows for an international division of labor which includes persistent migration flows. Some migration theorists have developed theories within the framework of world systems theory in seeing the international division of labor in terms of uneven development within a global capitalist system divided between core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral countries with the periphery supplying a global, exploitable work force (Wallerstein 2000). Though world systems theory has been criticized for its continued reliance on the bounded state and for its neglect of transnationalism (Robinson 2011), the observation that the division of labor is structured in networks spanning geographical regions with actors wielding asymmetrical power is surely correct as is the insight that migration flows often accompany capital flows.

The identification of causes of specific migration flows requires moving away from macro-level explanations of capitalism as a global system and trying to understand how

migration functions in specific geographical sites. We need to understand how linkages around the world have been made possible by advances in technologically reconfigured space and, as a consequence, reshaped economic, social, and political institutions. People migrate to places where other people from their community have already established themselves. They make use of migration networks that provide them with resources (e.g., a place to stay and work upon arrival) and information. Migration theorists see networks as a meso-level influenced by and influencing but not subsumed by macro-level causal factors. Migration networks often have their origins in past migrations and in government policies (e.g., labor recruitment programs) that attract a significant number of people from sending areas. Over time, these networks attract recruiters, lawyers, smugglers, and others that profit from and sustain migration flows. They also interact with national and international development policies. Policies allowing for family reunification contribute to chain migration, furthering the distributive effects of networks.

Networks provide the basis for explicitly transnational strategies in which individuals and families make use of cross-border connections to redress spatially-distributed inequalities. Saskia Sassen sees these connections as “survival circuits” where migration remittances serve as a survival strategy for individuals and households battered in the world economy. National boundaries are not so much as barriers to the circulation of labor, but rather that their role is to create a division of labor, in part by categorizing people in ways that make them systematically vulnerable in the market (Sassen 1988).

Global cities need migrants due to structural economic changes which have created markets for high-skilled and well-paid workers and for low-wage workers (e.g., domestic workers) often drawn from abroad (Sassen 2002). Domestic economies are bifurcated with primary sectors providing permanent, relatively high wage jobs and a secondary sector

characterized by precarious, dirty, dangerous, and demeaning jobs filled by migrants (Piore 1980). This bifurcation can only be understood against a background of a readily accessible, transnational labor force where foreign workers are “wanted but not welcome” (Zolberg 1987). Methodological nationalism has led theorists to see migration in terms of domestic “push” factors (poverty, instability, limited opportunities) and “pull” factors (high wages, rule of law, democracy, etc.). A transnational perspective shows how these factors mutually inform and even cause each other.

#### **4. How Methodological Nationalism Misleads Political Theorists**

Methodological nationalism is not only a problem for social theorists attempting to understand migration and its effects. It also misleads political theorists working on migration. My goal in this section is to begin to imagine what a political theory of migration would look like without methodological nationalism. In my view, transnational, sub- and supra-state actors should receive more attention and nation-states should be seen as actors in global and regional contexts. The abandonment of methodological nationalism permits a more nuanced understanding of the causes of migration and of the need to establish just institutions regulating migration and its distributional effects.

Before turning to a transnational and global political theory of migration, two important objections must be addressed. So far I have suggested that 1) political theorists have largely operated within a framework of methodological nationalism and 2) that work in the social sciences has shown that methodological nationalism imposes stumbling blocks for the social scientific study of migration. Even if we agree that social scientists should avoid treating the nation-state as a natural or pre-reflective posit and that political theorists have largely accepted this identification, how does this affect political theory?

The first objection comes from an approach to political theory that seeks to clarify normative principles and concepts independently of facts (Cohen 2008). From this perspective, the role of normative theorists on migration is to articulate the rights relevant to migration controls, analyze principles of justice and their scope, and justify the weight that should be given to the interests of different people and corporate bodies. The political theory of migration has largely developed independently of the social sciences and many political theorists accept the view that they can make substantial progress in their theories without engaging the social sciences. Why people move from one country to another and what effects this has has little impact on normative analysis. For example, Christopher Wellman and Phillip Cole explicitly reject the need to “[furnish] detailed arguments about economic facts and possible consequences” because “the argument is about rights, the state’s right to control membership versus the individual right of freedom of international movement (Cole and Wellman 2011: 7-8).”

Wellman and Cole underestimate the importance of economic and other facts for arguments about rights. Facts derive their status from theories and theories help us identify relevant agents, assign responsibility, and trace causes. The analysis and criticism of institutions for their causal effects on individuals and groups is a central task of political theory. Institutions causally promote and restrict people’s freedom and well-being through coercion and facilitate the distribution of goods. The way that the social sciences frame issues and social scientists’ conclusions about the causal impact of policies and practices matter for political theory.

The following questions can only be answered by normative theorists who are prepared to engage the social scientific literature:

- 1) Who are the relevant agents and victims (keeping in mind that agents and victims may be collectives)? What is the place in political theory for agents such as corporations, NGOs, and transnational communities that operate in multiple legal jurisdictions?
- 2) What are the correct levels of analysis? For example, is macro-level political economy the right level for understanding migration or do we need to turn to meso-level reflection on networks or families and/or micro-level reflection on individuals and families (or all three)?
- 3) What are the causes of migration? Who causes what and how? How do agents causing migration flows exercise power and when do power relations promote domination or exploitation?
- 4) How is migration structured by gender, race, and social class and other categories?
- 5) What time frame is relevant for analysis? Can theories of migration explain migration flows without incorporating history? Can we talk about spatially-distributed opportunities without understanding how past causal chains led to their current distribution?

Our answers to these questions will affect our conclusions about rights and obligations and about the correct principles of distribution and the scope of justice. For example, Wellman's conviction that freedom of association grounds a broad right to exclude foreigners cannot be assessed until we have determined what the relevant associations are. The structure of a right to freedom of association – its claims, liberties, powers, and immunities – depends on the type of association, its organization, and its purposes. Morally relevant associations may not cluster within the border of a state.

In Cole's case, if we admit that freedom of movement can sometimes be curtailed, we need to know when people have the power to limit liberties to travel or to override claims that

restrict entrance. Movement is facilitated and prohibited by multiple agents. Since Cole believes that free movement is the default position, much of his case rests on his refuting arguments that attempt to justify restrictions to migration. An understanding of the nature and purposes of agents that claim to have a right to curtail migration is necessary to vindicate his position.

Similar points apply when we try to determine what a fair distribution across borders would look like. For example, consider Ryan Pevnick's argument that collective property rights can be mobilized to restrict immigration. An entitlement to property and the cluster of rights that determine how it can be acquired, distributed, and used depend on many facts, such as how the goods and services are generated, the function of property rights in sustaining them, and how laws and policies correct market failures, boost efficiency, and correct inequities. Property regimes are social constructions realized through the rise of institutions including coercive states and legal regimes. Normative criticism demands an adequate empirical analysis. I am not claiming that there is a straightforward path from empirical theories about property regimes and their causes to a normative theory – there is not. But until we understand how agents and structures exercise power over or shape people's mobility and how this, along with other factors (e.g., capital flows, domestic policies), influences opportunities, we are not in a position to declare what property rights are relevant to the regulation of migration.

Attention to the social sciences not only clarifies our normative theories; they may also help reveal how dominant suppositions about migration controls, including those defended by political theorists, embody an ideology that legitimates oppressive power structures. If migration controls play a role in maintaining exploitative transnational divisions of labor, enforcing gender or racial hierarchies or asymmetrically distributing goods and opportunities, then political theorists should investigate how we might move toward more equitable institutions. The

criticism of methodological nationalism becomes a plank in a critical theory which aims to reveal how theoretical presuppositions can be grounded in forms of domination, oppression, and exploitation.

A second objection to the claim that political theories of migration are tainted by methodological nationalism admits the potential relevance of research in the social sciences, but denies that the focus on states and borders is tainted by methodological nationalism (understood pejoratively). There are cosmopolitan and state (or nation) centered responses of this sort. Cosmopolitans will deny that they do presuppose the nation-state. State-centered theorists contend that states with their ability to exercise coercion at their borders continue to be the most important agents for moral consideration. Moreover, the assumption that distributions should be treated as an issue within and between states is a morally justified one. In short, political theorists are not guilty of ignoring or naturalizing states; rather, their considered views show that the state is the appropriate “container” for analyzing distributive justice.

Proponents of open borders (or more open borders) might deny the charge of methodological nationalism on the grounds that they challenge the legitimacy of coercive border controls. Unlike liberal nationalists who see nation-building projects as legitimate, insofar as they protect liberal rights and entitlements, theorists of open borders see themselves as recognizing the arbitrariness of state’s use of violence to prevent migration. This retort overlooks the extent to which proponents of open borders presuppose the nation-state as the target of their objections without carefully considering its nature or effect. Joseph Carens’ liberal egalitarian arguments for open borders operate against a background of fixed nation states (Carens 1989, 1992), as does Veit Bader’s contextualized plea for fairly open borders (Bader 2005) and Gillian Brock’s attempt to prescribe win-win migration policies from a cosmopolitan perspective (Brock



2009). Philip Cole's idealized rights-based approach neglects the role of the nation-state in the rise of liberalism and its role in securing rights (Cole 2000). Even Arash Abizadeh's radical challenge to unilateral border controls on the grounds that the demos is in principle unbounded maintains a sharp dichotomy between natives who are members of the community and foreigners who deserve to have coercive border controls justified to them (Abizadeh 2008). Though Abizadeh anticipates one path toward a normative theory of transnationalism, he has not developed his arguments in this direction.

The failure to theorize the nation-state or to challenge its cogency as the principal institution for normative theories of migration has contributed to too much attention to contentious arguments about open versus closed border and not enough attention to more fruitful questions about the nature and effects of borders and their moral justification. Nonetheless, the charge of methodological nationalism does not necessarily cast doubt on theories of open borders. To see why, it is helpful to turn to theorists who have argued for the continued moral relevance of the nation-state as the dominant political institutions. Political theorists such as Michael Blake and David Miller have developed sophisticated arguments that justify privileging national communities or citizens over foreigners (Blake 2001, 2013, Miller 2005, 2007). Blake and Miller may naturalize the nation-state, but they do so on the grounds that state boundaries have moral salience for political theory, including the political theories of migration.

Miller's focus is on the nation, not the state, and his arguments rest on a conception of the nation composed of people who share a common identity and public culture, view their nation as intrinsically valuable, recognize special responsibilities to co-nationals, and aspire to some degree of self-determination (Miller 2007: 124-6). Blake in contrast sees states as territorial bounded legal communities with special moral status due to the coercive nature of these legal

institutions. In particular, the members of a state can exclude some would-be immigrants because their admission would impose obligations on the current inhabitants that they can rightly reject (Blake 2013).

Miller and Blake's arguments that national communities and states enjoy special status for the purposes of the distributive justice contribute to a substantial literature on the scope of distributive justice. My approach will not be to directly challenge their rationales for the granting nations or states special status, but to show how their approaches rely on problematic assumptions about the state firmly grounded in the methodological nationalist paradigm. Both Miller and Blake's arguments are contingent on empirical claims about the nature of nations and states. There is nothing about Miller's definition of the nation or Blake's conception of a juridical community that necessarily coincides with the boundaries of the nation-state. If people begin to draw their common identity from supranational groups or if effectively coercion legal institutions transcend the boundaries of the nation-state, then Miller and Blake must shift the boundaries of justice. Their focus on territorial bounded communities comes from their belief that in today's world, most communities that have the properties they deem morally salient in fact reside inside nation-states.

I focus on US-Mexican migration flows to illustrate the value of a transnational perspective situated within the context of global capitalism. US-Mexican migration needs to be understood through a transnational perspective. According to the 2010 US Census, 31.8 million Hispanics of Mexican origin live in the United States with 11.7 million of these people born in Mexico (approximately 10% of Mexico's population). In 2010, the Pew Research Center estimated approximately 11.2 million unauthorized Mexicans in the US and the World Bank reported approximately \$22 billion US in remittances from Mexico to the US. Many people of

Mexican origin retain connections with families and communities in Mexico and regularly cross between the two countries. Substantial transnational communities straddle the border.

We need to identify agents, levels of analysis, structures, causal relations, and historical trajectories relevant to a moral analysis of US-Mexican migration. Methodological nationalists – and most pundits in the US media – see the US and Mexico as separate containers with Mexican migration an exogenous force or an “invasion” of poor Mexicans responding to limited opportunities at home and comparatively lucrative jobs in the US. A more fruitful approach is to analyze migration from Mexico to the US as a migration system (Massey, Durand, Malone 2002). In terms of agents, the US and Mexican federal governments and their policies are important, but their role shouldn’t lead us to ignore how migration is influenced at the macro-level by NAFTA and at the meso-level by transnational corporations, subnational communities, and NGOs.

How does the US-Mexican border “constitute a visible expression of a profoundly unequal distribution of spatially-differentiated opportunities”? (Ypi 2008: 395) The difference between Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora can be attributed to better institutions in Arizona and the border patrol enforcing laws that maintain the spatial-differentiation of opportunities (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012), but this explanation is at best incomplete. National institutions do not arise and are not sustained in a vacuum, but rather develop as components within and encompassing global, transnational, and national macro, meso, and micro systems.

At the macro-level, NAFTA plays a major role in drawing together the United States and Mexico. NAFTA is related to shifts in global capitalism that have opened markets to capital flows, deregulation, privatization, and the elimination of publically provided social services. These changes have predictably uprooted large segments of the Mexican population unable to

compete with mechanized agriculture and the importation of subsidized US crops. The maquiladoras in Northern Mexico, rather than spurring regional development, are largely independent of the larger Mexican economy and are better understood as directly linked to American firms seeking a reliable, cheap workforce. The role of border controls in maintaining cheap labor in Mexico and disciplining workers of Mexican origin in the United States is not coincidental, but rather serves to reinforce asymmetrical wages and opportunities (Delgado Wise and Marquez Covarrubias 2008).

Methodological naturalism encourages the homogenization of country populations, drawing on nation-building projects' myth of the equal citizenship. It is uncomprehending of internal differences of class, gender, and ethnicity that decisively affect people's lives and interests. The fact that people are of Mexican origin does not explain their opportunities or wealth, but at most gestures at a broad correlation that does not sustain finer grained analysis. The US-Mexican border is a minor inconvenience for Jorge Castañeda and Carlos Slim and a potentially mortal obstacle for workers unable to secure legal documents to cross. Mexicans in the US include undocumented workers, family-class immigrants, women and men with management positions for large corporations, and the children of Mexican elites. Many of these are transnational migrants who shape distributions back in Mexico. The US immigration law's encouragement of family immigration opens a legal path to residence for millions of Mexicans. Within Mexico, individuals' position within migration networks plays a major role in their opportunities. Towns with a large number of people in the US sending back money have advantages other towns do not, reinforced by government policies that encourage investment of remittances.

Categories such as class, race, and gender structure policies, the nature of networks, and the distribution of goods and opportunities. Selective border enforcement and temporary migration patterns reinforces relationships of domination and subordination. Migrants are affected by their position in Mexico's class hierarchies and their place in transnational networks. Gender roles are also significant since decisions often take place within patriarchal families and economic sectors in both countries allocate care work predominately to women. Within the United States, racialized hierarchies based on (presumed) national origin segregate large parts of the Hispanic population in marginal sectors. Class, gender, and racial structures affect not only individual experiences where people are pressured to conform to subordinate roles, but also infect policies the shape migration along these lines.

Finally, migration from Mexico has a long, historical trajectory. We should not forget that much of the US was once Mexican territory and its acquisition after the Mexican-American War also meant the acquisition of a new population. This history includes the importation of Mexican labor in response to restrictions of Asian migration to construct the railways and later for often highly exploitative work in agriculture (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). In the mid-twentieth century the Bracero program formalized labor recruitment, leaving a structural legacy between the US and Mexican economies that endures to the present day. Mexico has been subjected to a subordinate relationship with the United States since the mid-nineteenth century and labor migration has been a facet of this relationship. Cheap labor has been systematically exploited through recruitment and human beings have been disciplined in the US market by harsh and arbitrary migration policies, including mass deportation. The idea that Mexico and the US are separate atoms or isolated containers does not sustain reflection.

My contention is that the explanation of migration from Mexico to the US casts doubt on the usefulness of analyzing migration from a nation or state-based perspective. Methodological nationalism occludes what is important in arriving at a thoughtful moral analysis of Mexican-US migration. Mexico and the US constitute a transnational economic and social system. Borders do not separate the two countries, but rather serve to enforce international and internal divisions of labor through *maquiladoras* producing exports and undocumented workers performing labor in peripheral sectors. Coercion at the border does not simply serve to exclude people, but also upholds and shapes institutions in both countries. Cosmopolitan approaches are impoverished insofar as their analysis is limited to the question of border controls and not to more complex questions of how migration policy structures opportunity sets for distinct populations that cut across national borders.

What are the implications for political theorists attempting to make sense of migration between Mexico and the United States? The current enforcement regime of deportation, detention, and border militarization needs to be contextualized in its broader context. By no means does this imply that the individual rights of members of minority communities and unauthorized migrants are unimportant, but we should not limit our analysis to questions about the justice of domestic authorities (the nation-state) using coercion against minorities and foreigners.

First, the methodological nationalist paradigm ignores how the actions of nation-states are restrained by their role in global and regional economic systems. Even the United States is not capable of closing its borders in part because of its adherence to international legal norms but also because of its inability to stop transnational trade. Migration networks have followed structural changes in the world economy to sustain flows through sophisticated smuggling

operations, a migration industry, corporate lobbyists, and political activists. Remittances have a major part of economic globalization, serving as an explicitly transnational strategy for individuals and as an excuse for the Mexican government to neglect the reform of domestic institutions.

Second, the domestic labor market cannot be analyzed independently of dependable labor flows that fill the secondary sector. Mexico workers in the US are not a puzzling anomaly that the US has failed to regulate, but rather a matter of over a century of state recruitment and state sanctioned structural dependence. The film *A Day without Mexicans* illustrates how Mexicans and Mexican Americans, many with ongoing transnational ties, are a major part of the country's community and economy. To conceive of the American economy without transnational migratory ties to Mexico is to imagine a very different world.

The Mexican case cannot be generalized to migration flows around the world without further arguments, but I believe that it provides vital insights for political theorists. Political theorists need to expand the set of relevant agents when thinking about distributions. Migration networks lead to unequal distributions that cannot be understood solely through a methodological nationalist paradigm. The nation-state, of course, has a role in mediating these inequalities, but it is not a monolithic explanatory role and it is by no means clear that the right level of addressing injustice is the state.

Questions of justice in migration cannot be answered by solely focusing on either receiving or sending states. We need to look at both sending and receiving (and transit) states simultaneously and expand our moral taxonomies. Political theorists should ask how the practices of border enforcement in one region harm families and communities around the world and to what extent these deported migrants are reacting to changes in their opportunity sets

inflicted by actors (including supranational actors) outside of their region. They should inquire into how migration systems are sustained and revive class-based analyses of transnational divisions of labor (Sager 2012b). They must acknowledge how migration and development are closely, unavoidably intertwined and how development invariably causes migration (and thus abandon naive trade-offs between more open borders and development aid). They should ask how corporations are implicated in initiating migration and sustaining migration flows (in part by influencing political processes).

More generally, political theorists should turn to questions of power, causality, and responsibility. Insofar as the effects of migration are morally problematic or undesirable, what triggers them? How are the environments of sending and receiving areas structured and who is morally responsible for these structures? The answer will often include multiple agents, many of whom are located in far off geographical regions, but nonetheless able to promote their interests from abroad. How political theorists will answer these questions once they have abandoned methodological nationalism is unclear. My conviction is that they will discover that border controls have a deeply objectionable role not only in limiting people's opportunities but in upholding oppressive class, gender, and political relationships. Whatever the result, the move beyond methodological nationalism promises a more nuanced understanding of migration and its moral implications.



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