

***WORKSHOP WITH ALEX SAGER:  
POLITICAL THEORY AND METHODOLOGICAL NATIONALISM***

13-14 May 2024, University of Geneva  
*Organized by Dr. Esma Baycan Herzog, Lecturer, University of Geneva*

Methodological nationalism is a central debate in political theory of migration. It investigates how political theorists should grapple with the criticism that their theories are beholden to what social scientists call “methodological nationalism”, in which theories illegitimately adopt state-centered categories and assumptions. While discussions of methodological nationalism have been prevalent in the social sciences for over two decades, political theorists have just begun to explore its implications. First, political theorists have raised questions about its analytic rigor: social scientists have presented different and possibly conflicting definitions of methodological nationalism. Can these definitions be reconciled? Second, the normative contribution the critique of methodological nationalism makes remains unclear. A burgeoning literature around questions of migration and justice has begun to fill this lacuna, but discussions are very much in their infancy. Alex Sager (Portland State University) has authored some of the most important contributions to this debate and continues to advance the field in his recent work. This pre-read hybrid workshop includes contributions from six early career researchers working in the field of political theory, or in the field of social sciences with a particular interest in methodological nationalism to meet and receive feedback from Prof. Alex Sager (Portland State University) on their ongoing research work.

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**WORKSHOP PROGRAM**

**13 May 2024**

**Session 1: (UniMail Room: 4276)**

12:15 – 13:45 “*Methodological Nationalism as a Form of Ideology Critique?*”  
Esma Baycan-Herzog (Université de Genève) and Alex Sager (Portland State University)  
Discussion: Matteo Gianni  
(GECOPOL/STAFF Joint Session)

**Session 2: (Unimail Room: 5393)**

14:15 – 15:00 Juliette Monvoisin (Univ. Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne), “*Why the State?*”

\*\*\*15:00 – 15:15 Break\*\*\*

15:15 – 16:00 Anna Milioni (King’s College London), “*Methodological Nationalism, Discrimination, and Citizenship*”

\*\*\*16:00 – 16:15 Break\*\*\*

16:15 – 17:00 Leonardo Menezes (University of Minho),

\*\*\*18:00- 19:15 Apéro, *Lucha Libre* offered by the Society of Women in Philosophy (SWIP) Switzerland\*\*\*

**14 May 2024, (Uni-Pignon, Room: P\_S06)**

14:15 – 15:00 Dario Mazzola (Université de Genève), “*Politics, Theory and Method*”

\*\*\*15:00 – 15:15 Break\*\*\*

15:15 – 16:00 Anna Marino (Université de Neuchâtel), “*Making a Case for a Multi-Perspectival Study of the Border Context*”

\*\*\*16:00 – 16:15 Break\*\*\*

16:15 – 17:00 Stefan Manser-Egli (Université de Neuchâtel), “*Aggressive Integrationism and Precarious Liberalism: Against Shared Values as an Integration Requirement*”,

\*\*\*18:00 Workshop Dinner (TBD) \*\*\*

## ABSTRACTS

### “Methodological Nationalism as a Form of Ideology Critique”

Esma Baycan-Herzog and Alex Sager

In recent years, political theorists have turned their attention to how criticisms of methodological nationalism from the social sciences bear on normative theory, especially around questions of migration and justice. Attention to methodological nationalism has been fruitful, revealing ways in which state-centered thinking has shaped central questions in the political theory of migration and buttressed questionable assumptions about membership, culture, economic distribution, and political power. It has led to a welcome reflection on the moral issues raised by transnational migration and internal migration and encouraged normative reflection on how cities, regional and global organizations, and private corporations shape migration. Furthermore, it has encouraged political theorists to reflect on the role of Eurocentrism in their theorizing and to take seriously the legacies of colonialism and empire.

Despite these welcome developments, what the critique of methodological nationalism involves and how it impacts political theory has not been fully clarified or resolved. Since the critique of methodological nationalism emerged from various disciplines in the social sciences, there are multiple often overlapping, but sometimes competing accounts of what methodological nationalism is. Analytic and conceptual work is still needed to construct a complete, coherent account.

We propose bringing the literature of ideology critique together with the literature on methodological nationalism to help construct a more coherent and complete picture of methodological nationalism. Methodological nationalism is fruitfully considered as a crucial part of broader ideology critique of nation-statism. This allows us to draw on conceptual tools in ideology analysis, including its orientation toward practical action: theorists engaged in ideology critique seek to understand and evaluate the structure of ideas, but they also see their critique as a crucial step in changing the world. Analyzing methodological nationalism as an ideology thus helps buttress criticisms of how nation-statism has contributed to migration injustice.

### Why the State?

Juliette Monvoisin

During the last few years, normative migration theory has become the main target of criticism leveled at methodological nationalism, with the idea that taking the nation-state as the unit of analysis of the social world (including migration phenomena), constitutes a major cognitive bias in normative theories, and leads to serious misinterpretations (Sager, 2016; 2017). To my knowledge, no proponent of a normative philosophy of migration really took the time and space to provide a developed and convincing response to this criticism.

The aim of this chapter is to remedy this absence. Such an ambition demands that we take critical arguments seriously, especially those proclaiming the dissolution of national sovereignty to higher scales (global organizations, supranational economic powers, transnational social networks) (Sassen, 1990; 2001; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Brown, 2010) and

lower ones (urban citizenships, local solidarities, regional policies of integration or, on the contrary, exclusion, etc.) (Bauböck, 2003; Varsanyi, 2006; 2010). This is why the first two sections of the chapter are devoted to a re- historicization of the national scale, as opposed to essentializing and ahistorical approaches to the state. The second section particularly focuses on arguments in favor of urban citizenship, or “citadinship”, that defend the interest of the sub-national or local scale for thinking about migration justice.

While this move does lead us to abandon the concept of absolute, homogeneous sovereignty, it does not call the stato-national scale into question. Indeed, it shows that the phenomena usually regarded by critical theorists as evidence of a dissolution of national sovereignty are in fact due to the relatively recent redefinition of sovereignty, no longer conceived as a type of power (territorial control), but as a specific and irreducible function: the monopoly of the legitimate definition of the national (Spire, 2005). And it is precisely this function that should be subject to the obligations of migration justice. The last section of the chapter is devoted to justifying such a redefinition, which explains how sovereignty (as a function) can be articulated to apparently heterogeneous and dispersed powers.

### **Methodological Nationalism, Discrimination, and Citizenship**

Anna Milioni

A powerful argument against the exclusion of migrants from citizenship rights suggests that this exclusion leads to the formation of a political underclass that undermines equality within the state. In response to this critique, it is often argued that citizenship is permissibly exclusionary. Political communities, the argument goes, have a right to determine who gets access to citizenship, at least within certain limits: while it is generally considered impermissible to exclude people on the basis of their racial identity, ethnic origin, or social class, access to citizenship can permissibly be conditional upon the fulfillment of other requirements, such as a minimum period of residence or a citizenship test. This paper argues that the plausibility of this argument relies on methodologically nationalist assumptions of sedentariness. Dropping these assumptions reveals that the dominant conditions for accessing citizenship are wrongfully discriminatory.

I begin by identifying three ways in which the assumption of sedentariness renders the dominant conditions for accessing citizenship exclusionary. Firstly, it is assumed that when people migrate, they settle permanently in their new state of residence. Under this construal, making access to citizenship conditional upon a minimum period of residence is considered permissible. This, however, overlooks the case of circular workers and other temporary migrants who are excluded from citizenship despite having strong long-term links with the state. Secondly, the connection of citizenship with an idea of permanent membership excludes those migrants who might fulfill the minimum period of residence requirement but do not have a clear intention of permanent settlement. Thirdly, citizenship tests require preparation. Even in cases when the state provides the necessary resources for this preparation, citizenship tests place on unequal grounds those migrants who migrate on renewable temporary visas and cannot plan ahead. After showing that the dominant conditions for accessing citizenship are exclusionary, I argue that these exclusions are discriminatory. Once we move beyond the methodologically nationalist assumption that the only relevant distinction in the citizenship debate is between citizens and

migrants, and we examine more closely the internal variety of the category of “migrants”, we see that the migrants who are excluded from equal access to citizenship tend to belong in specific racial and ethnic groups. This means that the dominant conditions for access to citizenship are wrongfully discriminatory against members of these groups. I conclude with some remarks on the implications of my analysis for citizenship regimes.

### **Towards an anti-anti Methodological Nationalism**

Leonardo Menezes

Political philosophers have only recently turned their attention to the epistemological effects of methodological nationalism on normative theory. This shift has led scholars to rethink the way they evaluate migration ethics. Sager (2016; 2021), Jaggar (2020), Reed-Sandoval (2021), Bertram (2018), among others, have questioned the assumptions that underpin normative arguments about migration. Critics of methodological nationalism (or, as I call them, ‘anti-methodological nationalists’) tend to emphasise that normative claims on migration ethics rest on methodological nationalist assumptions; thus, political theorists of migration should overcome this methodological nationalism by discarding the nation-state standpoint.

Anti-methodological nationalism has indeed developed alternative approaches, moving beyond standard dichotomies (e.g., between the national and the cosmopolitan) to counteract the erasure of those excluded from national narratives, as well as the ongoing legacy of empire and colonialism. In this sense, their efforts have shown how methodological nationalism renders some phenomena invisible and others pathological when it reinforces, naturalises and legitimises state institutions. However, anti-methodological nationalists (at least implicitly) have no less employed some of their opponents’ biases to sustain their view. To a lesser or greater extent, both sides tend to see in the nation-state that pasteurised, Westphalian entity we should either take it, or deny it.

The core idea of this paper is that we can use a Global South perspective to illuminate an ‘anti-anti methodological nationalist’ approach (of immigration justice) whose normative standards and ethical issues stem from ideals, values and institutions contextually embedded. Such approach brings a state-centred perspective back to the forefront as a way of avoiding problematic assumptions that both critics and advocates of methodological nationalism have implicitly or explicitly taken. For instance, it remains unquestioned the Western nation-state model as the sole blueprint for assessing the issue of feasibility in the construction of political agency. In this sense, co-ethnicity lies at the heart of my framework, showing how nationals’ motivation to act is not confined to their relationship with fellows within the bounded limits of their political community, and how this makes us reframe the questions Western thinkers often raise on immigration ethics.

My goal in this paper is to fill a gap left by both advocates and critics of methodological nationalism. Initially, I will outline the main variants of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002; Chernilo, 2011). With such literature, we are better equipped to confront the manner in which our perceptions have been shaped by the mainstream nation-state model. Finally, this methodological layout will then help us reframe the debate on fact-(in)dependency revolving around immigration ethics. I show why both the methodological and normative implications of a fact-dependent, contextualist account should be analysed from a Southern standpoint.

## **Post-National Nationalism? Politics, Theory and Method**

Dario Mazzola

In Political Theory, and the theory of migration especially, it is commonplace to denounce the unthought assumptions of nationalism. While some authors have advanced a philosophical argument in favor of the nation-state, many others assume that the nation-state is a relic of the modern era, and ultimately incompatible with the core principles of universality, liberty, and equality, that characterize democratic theory.

In this paper, I would turn these claims upside down.

I will rely on political science to question whether the nation-state remains the significant unit of politics, at least in the Western geopolitical block. And from political theories of nationalism, I will show how accounts of nationalism are, in reality, themselves post-nationalist.

I will conclude this analysis with its implication: that neither nationalism nor the critique of nationalism are the core problem for a political theory (of migration), but rather the rethinking of a post-national polity.

### **Making a Case for a Multi-Perspectival Study of the Border Context**

Anna Marino

The scholarly debate has developed a critique of methodological nationalism in border studies, contesting the visibility and consensus of borders and advancing the argument that borders cannot be seen and studied solely in relation to nation-states and their governments and that need to be understood as societal and ubiquitous (Balibar, 2012; Sibley, 1995). Methodological nationalism approaches and investigates borders as simple mechanisms of division and considers them as recognized as divisionary by all: a multi-perspectival study of borders puts into question this approach, considering borders as social and cultural encounters. Through this presentation, I will reflect on several assumptions surrounding the understanding of borders, making a case for a multi-perspectival study of the concept and drawing on my dissertation as an example. While my dissertation's chosen case studies are to be found within the Italian and Spanish national borders, my approach underlines the existence of borders not only and strictly linked to national sovereignty and state security, highlighting the role of diverse actors in the making, shaping, and erasing of borders. Moreover, I argue that when looking at borders and migration, we need to recognize and analyze new forms of bordering and remote control of borders that might not always be visible and physical. Non-physical bordering might take place by silencing, referring to the social marginalization and lack of audible voice of migrants; by collectivization, consisting of overgeneralization of migrants' social positions and experiences under the umbrella term "migrant"; and by de-contextualization, referring to the non-consideration of the historical and political context in which migrations take place (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). Thus, I underline the need to investigate the different types of borders that have emerged and played a role in societies. These emerging borders are not solely the ones we witness when "seeing like a state" (Rumford, 2012) and challenge the core assumptions that borders require consensus to exist and must be visible to function.

## **Aggressive Integrationism and Precarious Liberalism: Against Shared Values as an Integration Requirement**

Stefan Manser-Egli

Can liberal democracies require their subjects to have shared constitutional values? This paper discusses the integration requirement to respect the values of the constitution from a normative perspective. Taking a contextual approach and employing grounded normative theory, the paper uses Switzerland as a promising case study. First, it shows how the bureaucratic practices of the value requirement, which involve culturalization and state access to inner convictions, are at odds with liberal democratic principles. Second, it discusses whether the adoption of constitutional values can be justified as an integration requirement that targets non-citizens only. Finally, it examines whether shared values can be legitimately required from citizens and society as a whole. The paper argues that the value requirement not only unjustifiably discriminates between citizens and non-citizens but is also incompatible with liberal democratic principles. Integrationism is neither a paradox of nor an exception to liberalism but a fundamental contradiction in terms. Why, then, are aggressive integrationism and muscular liberalism more prevalent than ever in liberal democracies? The paper suggests that the increasing popularity of shared values as an integration requirement is an expression of precarious liberalism. Through the exclusion in the name of shared values, integrationism forecloses politics as an agonistic contestation of these values in liberal democracy.