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# Social Theory's Methodological Nationalism

## Myth and Reality

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### Abstract

The equation between the concept of society and the nation-state in modernity is known as methodological nationalism in scholarly debates. In agreement with the thesis that methodological nationalism must be rejected and transcended, this article argues that we still lack an understanding of what methodological nationalism actually is and, because of that, we remain unable to answer the substantive problem methodological nationalism poses to social theory: how to understand the history, main features and legacy of the nation-state in modernity. The first section of the article reconstructs the origins of the critique of methodological nationalism in the 1970s and differentiates between its logical and historical versions. It then critically reviews the most salient critique of methodological nationalism in contemporary social theory, that of Ulrich Beck. The final part of the article assesses the thesis of social theory's immanent methodological nationalism by demonstrating how social theory's equivocations towards the nation-state only mirror the nation-state's own ambivalence within modernity. It is shown that social theory's ambivalent attempts at conceptualizing the nation-state reflect the actual ambivalence of the position of the nation-state in modernity: its historical opacity, its sociological uncertainty and its normative ambiguity.

### Key words

■ cosmopolitanism ■ globalization ■ methodological nationalism ■ modernity ■ nation-state ■ social theory

The question of the history, main features and legacy of the nation-state in modernity is central to understanding those social processes commonly grouped under the name of 'globalization'. By far the most common argument on how the tradition of social theory has accounted for the position of the nation-state is that of an alleged equation between the concept of 'society' and the nation-state in modernity. Methodological nationalism can be defined as the all-pervasive

assumption that the nation-state is the natural and necessary form of society in modernity; the nation-state is taken as the organizing principle of modernity.

Starting in the 1970s, the debate on methodological nationalism has become more of an issue in scholarly debates only in the past few years. We do not seem to have reached a clear understanding of what methodological nationalism actually is, however, nor have we systematic enquiries into social theory's – alleged as well as real – methodological nationalism. The aim of this article is to contribute to the clarification of both these questions. No doubt, methodological nationalism must be rejected but, as I shall try to demonstrate here, the way in which commentators currently do this is proving unsuccessful to move effectively *beyond* methodological nationalism. My argument is that current discussions on methodological nationalism have prevented us from clearly facing the *substantive* problem that a 'social theory of the nation-state' must tackle: understanding the position and legacy of the nation-state in modernity. As long as the canon of social theory *as such* remains seen as methodologically nationalistic, we will surely keep rejecting methodological nationalism but will not be able to actually *transcend* it.

In terms of structure, the article first reconstructs the origins of the critique of methodological nationalism in the 1970s and differentiates between its logical and historical versions. It then reviews Ulrich Beck's current critique of methodological nationalism and argues that Beck's thesis on social theory's immanent methodological nationalism is badly overstated because it lacks a conceptualization of the nation-state which is distinct from methodological nationalism itself. It is then concluded that social theory's ambivalent attempts at conceptualizing the nation-state reflect the actual ambivalence of the position of the nation-state in modernity: its historical opacity, its sociological uncertainty and its normative ambiguity.

## The Rise of the Critique of Methodological Nationalism

The first systematic arguments about the links between the concept of society and the historical formation of the nation-state in social theory were developed in the early 1970s. One central feature of what has been referred to as the 'second crisis of modernity' was precisely a more reflexive and indeed critical approach towards the history of the relationships between social theory, society and the nation-state (Wagner, 1994: 30–1). In fact, a number of commentators started to reflect upon the implications of the equation between society and the nation-state in sociology at that time and a brief reconstruction of their main theses will help us clarify some of the issues currently at stake. For instance, towards the end of his volume on the class structure of the advanced societies, Anthony Giddens made the following claim:

The primary unit of sociological analysis, the sociologist's 'society' – in relation to the industrialised world at least – has always been, and must continue to be, the administratively bounded nation-state. But 'society' in this sense, has *never* been the isolated,

the 'internally developing' system which has normally been implied in social theory. One of the most important weaknesses of sociological conceptions of development, from Marx onwards, has been the persistent tendency to think of development as the 'unfolding' of endogenous influences within a given society (or, more often, a 'type' of society). 'External' factors are treated as an 'environment' to which the society has to 'adapt' and therefore merely conditional in the progression of social change . . . In fact, any adequate understanding of the development of the advanced societies presupposes the recognition that factors making for 'endogenous' evolution always combine with influences from 'the outside' in determining the transformations to which a society is subject. (1973: 265)

Similar views were being expressed in British sociology at the time and Herminio Martins coined the term 'methodological nationalism' to describe, on a critical note, what they saw as crucial developments in sociology. According to Martins:

[I]n the last three decades or so the principle of immanent change has largely coincided with a general presumption – supported by a great variety of scholars in the entire spectrum of sociological opinion – that the 'total' or 'inclusive society', in effect the nation-state, be deemed to be the standard, optimal or even maximal 'isolate' for sociological analysis . . . In general, macro-sociological work has largely submitted to national pre-definitions of social realities: a kind of *methodological nationalism* – which does not necessarily go together with political nationalism on the part of the researcher – imposes itself in practice with national community as the terminal unit and boundary condition for the demarcation of problems and phenomena for social science. (1974: 276, emphasis added)

In his discussion of Martins' definition of methodological nationalism, Anthony D. Smith gave it a slightly different emphasis. His argument was that 'the principle of 'methodological nationalism' operates at every level in the sociology, politics, economics and history of mankind in the modern era', hence:

[T]he study of 'society' today is, almost without question, equated with the analysis of nation-states . . . *There are very good reasons for proceeding this way*, but the theoretical underpinning derives much of its force from acceptance of nationalist conceptions, and goes a long way to reinforce those conceptions. In this way, the world nation-state system has become an enduring and stable component of our whole cognitive outlook, quite apart from the psychological satisfactions it confers. (1979: 191; emphasis added)

The first aspect to highlight here is that the thesis of sociology's methodological nationalism was meant then to convey a certain *critique* of what these authors regarded as well-established trends and practices of that time. To have 'discovered' this methodological nationalism, to have opened a discussion about it, was seen as a crucial critical insight into the strengthening and development of the social sciences. These authors challenged methodological nationalism so that it did not continue to exercise its unnoticed influence. They understand methodological nationalism as an unintended result of certain intellectual trends (Martins) and institutional practices (Smith) and hold the Parsonian mainstream mainly responsible for it.<sup>1</sup> Above all, then, their arguments on methodological nationalism were

supposed to contribute to the reconstruction of social theory from within social theory itself.

Methodological nationalism remains an ill-defined term so further analysis of these different arguments may help us arrive at a clearer conception of what is actually meant by it. All these claims accept, from different standpoints as we shall see, the view that sociology's central concept, society, has been equated with one of modernity's major socio-political references, the nation-state. They also agree on the fact that this equation between society and the nation-state takes an endogenous or internalist explanation of social change for granted and ask for a thorough revision of the self-sufficient image of society. Interestingly, then, these writers have no intrinsic problem in equating the nation-state with the concept of society as long as the internalist focus is discarded. Their problem was, above all, with the self-contained image of the nation-state. Finally, they also share the claim that the nation-state has become the 'normal' form of society in modernity – with the interesting but underdeveloped proviso that this applies best to the Western world. Methodological nationalism would arise then when sociology's intellectual outlook is based on an equation of society and the nation-state, on the one hand, and the substantive explanation of social change cohered on this internalist and self-sufficient conception of the nation-state, on the other.

If these arguments share those features I have just discussed they, however, disagree on the identification of the sources of methodological nationalism. I think that we can use this difference to explore definitional questions further and hopefully arrive at a more abstract standpoint from which to attempt the move beyond methodological nationalism. H. Martins' argument, on the one hand, was posed in relation to logical presuppositions and conceptual definitions; the rise of methodological nationalism was for him the result of a thirty-year-long process based upon a number of assumptions which cohered around a self-sufficient image of society. As long as social theory presupposed that social change was 'internally driven', the discipline would always conceive of its object of study as self-contained; the link between society and the nation-state being made on the basis of the national structure of sociological categories. Martins' argument works specifically at the level of the *disciplinary development* of sociological categories so I shall call his position the *logical* version of the argument of methodological nationalism. A.D. Smith, on the other hand, concentrated on the fact that states themselves are interested in reinforcing their image of solidity and self-sufficiency, and also on the rise of an 'international system of nation-states' which reinforced the relevance of the nation-state at all levels: social, intellectual and political. Smith claims that there is a somewhat natural 'psychological satisfaction' of state bureaucrats and state intellectuals from small countries in seeing their own flags alongside those of bigger, 'historical', more powerful nation-states. Smith understands the rise of methodological nationalism as yet another consequence of the importance of state nationalism during the twentieth century. In his view, then, methodological nationalism arises from inadequacies in the *substantive conceptualization* of the historical development of the nation-state. This second argument can thus be called the *historical* version of methodological nationalism.

Indeed, when these views on methodological nationalism first arose in the 1970s, the historical argument (the nation-state as a political project) could be regarded as less contentious than the logical argument – the internalist emphasis of the equation between society and the nation-state. This critique of methodological nationalism takes at face value the claim that during a few decades of the post-war period some very few nation-states could be regarded or had regarded themselves as the embodiment of the project of modernity. The problem we now face, however, is that the historical argument is at least as contentious and consequential as the logical one: the nation-state can no longer be regarded as though it is the final representation of society in modernity.

It is crucial, then, to keep in mind that the logical and the historical versions of the argument of methodological nationalism are *different* and that although they *reinforce* one another they do not *require* each other. The more the difference between the two versions of methodological nationalism goes unnoticed, the more it helps create the illusion, as we shall see, that the nation-state is the natural and necessary organizing principle of modernity. The explosive mixture of a logical critique of social scientific concepts with a substantive conception of the nation-state as self-sufficient prevents us from capturing the troubled history of the nation-state in modernity and the ways in which these ambiguities are reflected in social theory's attempts to study the nation-state. This is a problem that needs to be pursued on the logical and historical planes at the same time so we must now explore the extent to which current literature succeeds or fails in advancing propositions that can transcend methodological nationalism at both levels.

### **Social Theory's New Orthodoxy on Globalization and its Critique of Methodological Nationalism: The Case of Ulrich Beck**

We can only start this reconstruction of current criticisms of methodological nationalism with the work of Ulrich Beck. It is no other than Beck (2000a: 21–4) himself who brought methodological nationalism back into current debates and references to it are becoming more prominent in his recent publications (Beck, 2002b, 2003, 2004).<sup>2</sup> His argument is that the current change in historical circumstances challenges social theory to its core because it would be precisely the nationally bounded structure of social theory that allegedly incapacitates it to make sense of a world which is no longer organized around the nation-state. Yet, in what follows I shall argue that Beck fails to differentiate between the two versions of methodological nationalism I just introduced so that his framing of the problem hinders rather than helps us move beyond methodological nationalism. His analysis, I think, is contaminated with a certain lack of conceptual precision; oversimplification of normative concerns; weaknesses in the historical representation of the past vis-à-vis a cult of the new for its own sake.<sup>3</sup>

Beck's phenomenological starting point is interesting: people start to experience rapid social transformations at everyday level and it is this perception of an

*epochal change* that puts heavy demands on the social sciences. In ‘world risk society’:

Social science must be re-established as a transnational science of the reality of de-nationalization, transnationalization and ‘re-ethnification’ in a global age – and this on the levels of concepts, theories and methodologies as well as organizationally. This entails that the fundamental concepts of ‘modern society’ must be re-examined. *Household, family, class, social inequality, democracy, power, state, commerce, public, community, justice, law, history, politics* must be released from the fetters of methodological nationalism and must be reconceptualised and empirically established within the framework of a cosmopolitan social and political science. (Beck, 2002b: 53–4)

The claim is that methodological nationalism is prevalent throughout the social sciences but it is more acute in sociology because “[m]odern” sociology is defined in its typical textbooks as the “modern” science of “modern” society. This both conceals and helps to gain acceptance for a classificatory schema that we might call the *container theory of society*’ (Beck, 2000a: 23). The conclusion is that the concept of society can no longer convey a strong theoretical meaning. He argues that ‘society’ became indistinguishable from the conditions which allegedly characterized nation-states throughout modernity, so the weaker the nation-states, the more unnecessary a concept of society. The argument is that social theory’s research-agenda and conceptual tools must change so that they can match the ways in which the social world itself is being transformed. Social theory would be at a definite crossroad: if it fails to change, change will simply make it redundant:

*Methodological nationalism* takes the following ideal premises for granted: it equates societies with nation-state societies, and sees states and their governments as the cornerstones of a social sciences analysis. It assumes that humanity is naturally divided into a limited number of nations, which on the inside, organize themselves as nation-states and, on the outside, set boundaries to distinguish themselves from other nation-states. It goes even further: this outer delimitation, as well as the competition between nation-states, represents the most fundamental category of political organization . . . Indeed, the social science stance is rooted in the concept of nation-state. It is a nation-state outlook on society and politics, law, justice and history, which governs the sociological imagination. (Beck, 2002b: 51–2)

Beck’s definition of methodological nationalism has in one critical sense departed from Martins’ and Smith’s original formulations – he naturalized an argument that started with a critical intention. I have shown that the thesis of methodological nationalism arose as a critical insight into the ways in which the nation-state was seen as though it was an autonomous and self-contained unit. Martins and Smith expected to re-orient social theory’s study of the nation-state from within the intellectual tradition of the social sciences – theirs was above all a self-critical effort. Against these first formulations, Beck’s current critique of methodological nationalism refuses to establish his own position within the intellectual tradition of the social sciences. He not only disregards the reflexive spirit of the first critique of methodological nationalism but more importantly he hypostatizes the theory of reflexive modernization for social theory as such.

The original project of a theory of reflexive modernization was to be developed *within* the tradition of social theory; it included the rather grandiose aim of mapping the new epoch but it expected to contribute to the remedy of some of the problems in previous research. Via the thesis of social theory's immanent methodological nationalism, Beck's argument has now changed. Instead of a research agenda that put itself to work within the traditions of social theory, what we now have is an allegedly autonomous research programme that bullies previous social sciences and declares them obsolete. He places the question equally at the level of epochal diagnosis – the current radicalization of the experience of modernity – and of theory building – theoretical frameworks of the past will not help us understand the present and shape the future. On both grounds, social theory would be on the verge of becoming the 'antiquary's shop specializing in industrial society' (Beck, 1997: 18) as it now focuses mainly on 'zombie categories' (Beck, 2002b: 53):

The association between sociology and nation-state was so extensive that the image of 'modern', organized individual societies – which became definitive with the national model of political organization – itself became an absolutely necessary concept in and through the founding work of classical social scientists. Beyond all their differences, such theorists as Émile Durkheim, Max Weber and even Karl Marx shared a territorial definition of modern society, and thus a model of society centred on the national-state, which has today been shaken by globality and globalization. (Beck, 2000a: 24)

Therefore, a new 'methodological cosmopolitanism' is needed, one that is able to tackle 'what had previously been *analytically* excluded as a sort of silent cartel of divided fundamental convictions' (Beck, 2002b: 52). Throughout the last decade or so, Beck has proposed a number of conceptual pairs which, although they do not exactly fit with one another, all point in the same direction. His sociological reasoning operates through dichotomies so that he contrasts simple *versus* reflexive modernization; linear knowledge *versus* side effects (Beck, 1997); nation-state society *versus* world risk society (Beck, 1998); simple globalization *versus* reflexive cosmopolitanism (Beck, 2000a); work society *versus* political society (Beck, 2000b); the first age of modernity *versus* the second age of modernity (Beck, 2000c); national state *versus* cosmopolitan state (Beck, 2002a). In all cases, the second term stands in opposition and comes to replace – analytically and historically – the first. The crucial paradigmatic shift from methodological nationalism to methodological cosmopolitanism is not only the latest of these dichotomies but it comes to crown Beck's long-lasting attempt at setting up a new agenda for the social sciences as a whole (Beck, 2004).

Yet, we can clearly question the advantages of *opposing* methodological cosmopolitanism to methodological nationalism. One may ask whether, or at the very least to what extent, a methodologically nationalistic social science was able to provide an accurate account of the nation-state even during the first age of modernity. If we argue, as I do, that this is not the case, it is then difficult to understand how and why a methodologically cosmopolitan social science can now succeed in doing so for the second age of modernity. Instead of trying to



gain reflexivity and complexity in the analysis by distinguishing modes or versions of social theory's methodological nationalism – and thus saving what can be saved and disregarding what cannot – Beck throws everything into an undifferentiated whole: social theory's worthless methodological nationalism versus brand-new-world-risk-society methodological cosmopolitanism.

At the core of Beck's problematic portrayal is a rather mythical view of the nation-state as a harmonious socio-political form:

[i]nternal homogeneity is essentially a creation of state control. All kinds of social practices – production, culture, language, labour market, capital, education – are stamped and standardized, defined and rationalized, by the national state, but at least are labelled as national economy, national language, literature public life, history, and so on. (Beck, 2000a: 23)

On the one hand, the argument is that '[t]he critique of methodological nationalism should not be mistaken for the thesis of the end of the nation-state'. And yet, on the other, Beck (2002b: 51–2) argues that

*national organization as a structuring principle of societal and political action can no longer serve as a premise for the social science observer perspective.* In this sense, social science can only react to the challenge of globalization adequately if it manages to overcome methodological nationalism, and if it manages to raise empirically and theoretically fundamental questions within specialized fields of research and thus elaborate the foundations of a *cosmopolitan* social and political science.

This image of the nation-state is, at best, only partly true. Nation-states have equally been theorized as conflictive and unstable forms of socio-political organization and if we now tend to see them otherwise it is because of *our own* circumstances. Beck's critique of methodological nationalism mirrors the object of its critique. The arguments on the current dissolution of nation-states are backed up by exaggerating the alleged solidity of the nation-state's recent past, so that we end up with the worst of both worlds: the more solid the image of the past of the nation-state, the more spectacular its path towards extinction. Beck's critique of methodological nationalism has misrepresented the 'historicity of the nation-state' and thus it contributes to the reinforcement of a methodologically nationalistic view of nation-states. He cannot grasp, for instance, what M. Archer (2005) has nicely captured as the 'hard won' but 'cosy' feature of the nation-state's post-war internal settlements. Beck equally misses the fact that nations arose, symbolically as well as materially, conjoined with classes so that the harmonious view of the nation-state's past is just a myth (Fine and Chernilo, 2003). Beck ends up equating all previous social theory with methodological nationalism and thus has no option but to understand the nation-state from a methodologically nationalistic standpoint. In a rather paradoxical fashion, Beck creates a renovated version of social theory's most famous dualism: he has his own versions of the dichotomy between *Gemeinschaft* – now the nation-state – and *Gesellschaft* – world risk society (Fine and Chernilo, 2004: 36–7).

Indeed, we must overcome methodological nationalism; such an aim is no doubt the purpose of all of us who contribute to this debate. The problem lies

in the ways in which that task can be fulfilled and it seems to me that Beck's arguments hold together only if one accepts his methodologically nationalistic view of the nation-state. In the language I introduced in the previous section, the problems in Beck's analysis of methodological nationalism are due to the fact that he does not distinguish between its logical and historical versions. His misrepresentation of the canon of social theory is matched, I believe, by his confusion about the historical development and major characteristics of the nation-state. He rejects methodological nationalism because the nation-state is no longer the organizing principle of modernity but, in so doing, he does not question the extent to which the nation-state was ever so. In naturalizing the idea of methodological nationalism, Beck is missing a theory of the nation-state beyond methodological nationalism; his critique equates social theory with methodological nationalism and thus reinforces the equivocations of the methodological nationalism he criticizes.

### Transcending Methodological Nationalism: The Historical Opacity, Sociological Uncertainty and Normative Ambivalence of the Nation-State

We welcome the contemporary re-emergence of the critique of methodological nationalism. Current attempts to 'de-nature' the nation-state seem now increasingly conclusive – contemporary social theory is explicitly against methodological nationalism maybe for the first time. However, if the major contribution of current critics of methodological nationalism has been to uncover the historical contingency of the nation-state as the organizing principle of modernity, the limitation of this challenge is revealed in its adoption of the terms of reference of what it criticizes. The current critique of methodological nationalism rightly

denies that the nation state is a *natural* form of socio-political organisation, but it accepts that it is (or was) the natural form of socio-political organisation *in the modern age* – i.e. that it is *the* organising principle of political modernity. (Fine, 2003: 460)<sup>4</sup>

It is, however, pointless to deny the fact that social theory has been at least partly instrumental in unfolding a rather mythical image of the nation-state as the final and necessary form of social and political organization in modernity.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Beck's argument on this is only a radicalization of the most widely accepted claim in the literature, namely, that 'grand social theory' has thoroughly neglected the nation-state and thus has done little else than reproduce and reinforce all the myths that surround the nation-state.<sup>6</sup> The search for a remedy against methodological nationalism is no doubt at the core of Beck's project but some question marks have been raised over the extent to which he succeeds in doing so: Beck's critique of methodological nationalism reintroduces a *methodologically nationalistic conceptualization of the nation-state* in spite of itself, as it were. Despite all other merits, his contribution to the debate of transcending methodological nationalism in the social sciences has – unintentionally, I believe – weakened our understanding of the position and main features of the nation-state in modernity.

Due to the absence of the distinction between the logical and the historical versions of methodological nationalism, Beck's solutions to the problems raised by methodological nationalism did not deliver the answers we require. We are in need of a stronger antidote against any form of methodological nationalism, so the task for us now consists in signposting a new route within which we can understand the nation-state beyond methodological nationalism.

Without agreeing with the thesis of social theory's immanent methodological nationalism, I still believe that we must address it seriously. At least, there is a point to be taken in the argument that a version of the history of social theory can indeed be narrated from the viewpoint of methodological nationalism. The history of social theory can certainly be narrated as though the nation-state is a solid, stable and ultimately the necessary form of social and political organization in modernity. If we concede that the history of social theory may mirror the history of modernity in that both seem to cohere around the idea of the nation-state, we would also, however, need to remember that *imperialism* – for the period of classical social theory (Connell, 1997) – *totalitarianism* – for the period of modernist social theory (Bauman, 1991) – and *globalization* or *cosmopolitanism* – for current social theory (Beck, 2003) – are all concepts from which reconstructions of the history of both modernity and social theory have also been attempted. In all these cases, the argument is that social theory has immanent connections with these 'others of the nation-state'. The most striking consequence of this turn would be that instead of social theory's immanent methodological nationalism we would now have social theory's immanent *methodological imperialism*, *methodological totalitarianism* and indeed *methodological globalism* or *cosmopolitanism*! The central problem for all those who see things this way is that they are trapped in the type of illusionary portrayals that modern forms of social and political organization constantly create. Indeed, a central feature of all these '-isms' is that one-sided accounts are taken as the whole – or at least the core – of the story.

At this point, with regard to the reconstruction of the canon of social theory vis-à-vis the challenge of trying to make sense of the nation-state's position in modernity, we face two alternative options. On the one hand, we can put any of these forms of methodological '-ism' against any other so that we have opposite accounts of the relationship between social theory and modernity in each: 'modernity is the West's thrust for colonization', 'modernity is the Holocaust', 'modernity is the nation-state', 'modernity is globalization'. Despite substantive differences, we find in all these positions the thesis that social theory has a tendency not only towards methodological reductionism such as methodological nationalism but also towards *conceptual fetishism*.<sup>7</sup> The nation-state is a fetish when its history and main features are made to coincide with the history and main features of modernity itself. The nation-state is a fetish when it is conceptualized as the self-sufficient, solid and well-integrated representation of the modern society – when it is thought of as *the natural organizing principle of modernity*.

The move beyond methodological nationalism being attempted here tries to demonstrate that social theory has not portrayed the nation-state as the necessary

final stage of modernity but rather has struggled throughout with trying to grasp the ambivalent history, main features and legacy of the nation-state in modernity. My central proposition for this last section of the article is then that we thoroughly revise the thesis of social theory's immanent methodological nationalism because, in so doing, we may be able to improve our substantive conceptualization of the nation-state. I believe that the canon of social theory may help us account for the ambivalent position and legacy of the nation-state in modernity. The challenge, which ultimately cannot be undertaken in full here, is to produce a re-interpretation of the canon of social theory within which a renovated understanding of the nation-state starts to emerge. Even if only the contours of this 'social theory of the nation-state' can now be given, this nonetheless illustrates that, in modernity, the nation-state has been *historically opaque*, *sociologically uncertain*, and *normatively ambivalent*. I expect this outline to work as the first steps in the direction of a social theory of the nation-state *beyond* methodological nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

First, *historically*, the question of a concise periodization of the development of the nation-state has remained elusive. The history of the nation-state has proved difficult to break into periods for the social sciences. The nation-state has been declared born and dead far too many times and I propose that the canon of social theory reveals a certain *historical opacity* of the nation-state. We find a permanent ambivalence between a structural or teleological understanding of the processes of nation-state expansion throughout the world in which the generalization of the nation-state form is seen as a result of impersonal social forces, on the one hand, and a fully subjective or contingent account of those same processes of proliferation in which the success of any project of nation-state formation depends mostly on the resilience of the actors' will, on the other. As an antidote against methodological nationalism, social theory's reflections on the nation-state show that it is a modern form of socio-political organization but it is not the necessary product of modernity. This thesis can be found, for instance, when Karl Marx (1978) conceived of the nation-state as a transitory political form in capitalism and that, because 'all that is solid melts into air' nation-states 'become antiquated before they can ossify' (Marx and Engels, 1976). Similarly, Hannah Arendt (1958) understood that the beginning of the Age of Imperialism similarly marked the beginning of the decline of the nation-state; Talcott Parsons (1993a, 1993b) was worried by the potential return of totalitarianism in Germany as well as in the USA after the end of World War II; and more recently Manuel Castells (1997) has declared that the nation-state is being dramatically reshaped by the rise of network states.

Second, *sociologically*, there is permanently an important level of *uncertainty* with regard to the nation-state's capacity to deal with its permanent crises. The question of the nation-state's ability to sort out these crises creates, for those living traumatic events in the present, a level of anxiety that is then lost when the crises are normalized as just minor episodes of the national history and the nation-state's solidity and stability become transparent and self-evident once again. The canon of social theory may help us transcend methodological nationalism at this sociological plane as long as we recognize the ambivalence between solidity and

instability in the nation-state's self-presentation. On the one hand, a constitutive part of the rhetoric of the nation-state is that of its strength and stability – its capacity to impose order and provide welfare. Yet, on the other, the nation-state is in a state of permanent crisis that threatens to divide the nation and weaken the state. The nation-state is an unfinished project that paradoxically presents itself as an already established form of socio-political organization. Max Weber (1970) was clearly aware of the fact that nations and states hardly ever coincide in historical reality and also that they co-existed with alternative forms of modern socio-political organization. Charles Tilly (1975) pointed out long ago that candidate nations for building a nation-state were greater than those which eventually achieved it, so nation-building can never be taken for granted and more recently he has made the point of the nation-state's internal diversity along ethnic lines (Tilly, 1992). Michael Mann (1993) reminds us that during the nineteenth century the state was in permanent struggle to 'cage' the nation and also that class and nation were created as part of the same modernization processes. More recently, as we have just seen, Beck (2000c) sees emergent global risks, multiculturalism and economic globalization as the nation-state's newest challenge.

Third, *normatively*, there is no clear-cut solution to the question of the autonomy and self-determination of the nation-state, on the one hand, and its position within the wider world or global context, on the other. The illusion of methodological nationalism is here that of a nation-state which successfully manages its own affairs internally while at the same time it unproblematically finds its place in a neatly divided world composed only of formally equivalent nation-states. Nationalism and cosmopolitanism need to be reconstructed as co-original and in co-evolution, rather than two opposing forces that threaten to split modernity apart, they co-emerge and co-evolve (Fine, 2003; Delanty, 2006). Rather than reproducing this two-sided methodologically nationalistic image of the nation-state, the canon of social theory seems here well placed to account for the ambivalence between *internal* and *external* sources of legitimacy of the nation-state. From within the nation-state, national democracy (Bendix, 1964), national economic interest (Castells, 1997), social welfare (Marshall, 1950) and indeed ethnic cleansing (Wimmer, 2002; Mann, 2005) are all claims being made for the legitimization of the nation-state from the inside. Conversely, Anthony Giddens (1985) argued that the nation-state has found legitimization on the basis of its membership of the international system of states and Emile Durkheim (1992) legitimized the social and political form of the nation-state only in so far as the moral foundation of its internal solidarity was based on a 'world patriotism' that would complement rather than oppose 'national patriotism'. Indeed, Jürgen Habermas (2001) now argues that allegiance to democratic constitutional principles is Europe's best answer to the political challenges of globalization.

## Conclusion

This article has reviewed the rise of the critique of methodological nationalism and explained how it operates as much at the disciplinary level of the reconstruction of the canon of social theory as it does at the substantive level of the conceptualization of the nation-state. As discussed, the distinction between these two levels can only be achieved when we separate the historical and the logical versions of methodological nationalism introduced at the beginning of this article. The section on the work of Ulrich Beck demonstrates that the current mainstream on globalization misses this distinction and, in so doing, it remains unable to advance propositions that can transcend methodological nationalism at either plane. At the substantive level, Beck lacks a theorization of the nation-state beyond methodological nationalism and, at the disciplinary level, he regards the canon of social theory as immanently infected with methodological nationalism. Beck and social theory's new orthodoxy are confounded by the 'intellectual opacity' of the nation-state – what I call its ambivalent position in modernity. Instead of using social theory's problems and ambiguities to account for the troubled history of the nation-state, current critics dismiss the legacy of social theory as *inadequate* – the logical argument – and *obsolete* – the historical argument. Methodological nationalism becomes particularly difficult to deal with and disentangle if and when its two versions are not clearly separated. The thesis of social theory's immanent methodological nationalism must be opposed because of its pernicious misrepresentation of the canon of social theory which decreases our chances of contributing to the understanding of the challenges and changes currently faced by the nation-state.

Surely, classical social theory did not adequately deal with questions of ethnicity, imperialism and the relationship between state centralization and nationalizing politics. Similarly, many twentieth-century commentators placed so much hope on the nation-state's undoubted modernizing qualities and welfare achievements that they ended up assuming that the nation-state was in fact the natural form of organizations of society in modernity. Now, some commentators overstate the newness of globalization and prematurely declare that the nation-state is an appropriate object of study for the historian and no longer for the analyst of the present. To me, rather than an insurmountable tendency to fall into methodological nationalism, these conceptual equivocations reflect substantive ambivalences in the history of the nation-state itself. In modernity, arguably, only the nation-state has had such a troubled history, has been conceptually so opaque and has left such an ambivalent normative legacy. Rather than methodological nationalism, my claim is that social theory has systematically considered these questions, confronted these problems and battled – with different degrees of success – to come to terms with these ambiguities. The reasons why social theory has been only partly successful in understanding the nation-state are to be found within the nation-state's own ambivalent history, features and legacy. The nation-state and social theory mirror each other in that they have tried to 'square the

circle' of the project of modernity; they both have faced – and are a result of – the progressive and conservative forces that pull modernity apart (Habermas, 1969). Social theory's ambivalence between its descriptive and normative dimensions can help us understand and reflect on the nation-state, the most ambivalent of modern themes.

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## Notes

- 1 See Dahrendorf (1958), Giddens (1977) and Poggi (1965).
- 2 For further discussion, see the report of the workshop on methodological nationalism prepared by Centre for the Study of Global Governance (2002) at the London School of Economics and Political Science.
- 3 Beck's views are discussed at some length here because they are taken as broadly compatible with those of other important contributors to the debate – what R. Fine and myself have called theory's 'new orthodoxy' on globalization (Fine and Chernilo, 2004). Within mainstream social science, Martin Albrow (1996) refers to a 'global age' in which the decline of the nation-state marks also the end of modernity; Manuel Castells (1996, 1997) centres his massive empirical analyses on the idea of the 'network society' in which the nation-state fades away among the millions of nodes on which social relations are nowadays organized; John Urry (2000) rejects the possibility of attaching any relevant meaning to society *because of* the decline of nation-states and Jan Aart Scholte (2000) expands the argument to the extent that the rise of globalization gives a 'farewell' to the 'methodological territorialism' of all social sciences. In linking the alleged decline of the nation-state with the obsolescence of society as one of sociology's key concept this literature has been described as the belated *sociological* expression of the post-modern critique (Shaw, 2000: 2–14, Wagner, 2001: 75). See Outhwaite (2006), however, for a renovated account of the contemporary relevance of society for contemporary social theory.
- 4 Thus for instance R. Brubaker's (2004: 119) assessment of recent discussions on methodological nationalism:

if the methodological critique is coupled – as it often is – with the empirical claim about the diminishing relevance of the nation-state, and if it serves therefore to channel attention away from state-level processes and structures, there is a risk that academic fashion will lead us to neglect what remains, for better or worst, a fundamental level of organization and fundamental locus of power.



On some of the problems methodological nationalism poses to empirical social research, see Aksoy and Robins (2003), Berndt (2003), Gore (1996), Levy and Sznaider (2002), Lythman (2003) and Stone (2004).

- 5 See Calhoun (1999: 218–21), Luhmann (1997: 24–5), and Smelser (1997: 52).
- 6 See, for instance, Smith (1983), Wimmer and Schiller (2002). There are, however, alternative assessments of the canon of social theory in relation to the nation-state: Bryan Turner (1990), Roland Robertson (2000: 15–24) and Graham Crow (1997: 9–23) have all claimed that the agenda of classical sociology focused equally on the national *and* the global arenas.
- 7 According to Yack (1997), social theory's analytical tools are turned into a fetish when there is a conflation between their substantive and temporal dimensions. A concept – he thinks of modernity but the argument works quite as well for the nation-state – becomes a 'social myth' as soon as it 'unifies many-sided social processes and phenomena into a single grand object' and he accounts for 'the persistent tendency of many contemporary intellectuals . . . to treat the human condition in recent centuries as a coherent and integrated whole' (Yack, 1997: 6).
- 8 A more detailed version of these three arguments can be found in Chernilo (2006). For a full version of this 'social theory of the nation-state beyond methodological nationalism', see Chernilo (forthcoming).

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