

Is Rawls' Theory of Justice Biased by Methodological Nationalism?

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Methodological nationalism assumes that, to understand a phenomenon, nation-states are the relevant units of analysis. This assumption has been recognized as a source of bias in most of the social sciences. Does it bias Rawls' understanding of justice, too? This paper argues that it does for at least two reasons. Firstly, what Rawls thinks justice requires on a global scale falls short of what states and international organisations actually do. Secondly, framing the difference principle in national terms, as Rawls did, is a way to increase the "citizenship rent", or the revenue a person receives just by being citizen of a rich country. The paper argues that methodological nationalism biases Rawls' understanding of justice by affecting both the plausibility and the coherence of his theory.

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This paper evaluates the impact of methodological nationalism on Rawls' theory of justice. Methodological nationalism assumes that, to understand a phenomenon, nation-states are the relevant units of analysis. But since the 1970s, when it was first identified in sociology, methodological nationalism has been recognised as a source of bias in most of the social sciences.

To grasp how methodological nationalism can bias our understanding, imagine you have discovered a large collection of correspondence in an old attic. You want to understand what the huge pile of envelopes is all about. But you might be inclined to first categorise the letters by the country of their postage stamps and then read them in some country-based order. Can such a method help you to understand what the correspondence pertains to? The letters may conceal any type of relationship (personal, commercial, political, or professional) between any kind of senders and receivers (people, families, groups, firms, institutions). It seems that, except for a few cases, the categorisation of letters by nation will make it difficult, if not impossible, to even grasp the meaning of correspondence.