

# Focusing on migration's 'good' or 'bad' influences on your country alone can be a harmful oversimplification.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/01/13/focusing-on-migrations-good-or-bad-influences-on-your-country-alone-can-be-a-harmful-ove](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/01/13/focusing-on-migrations-good-or-bad-influences-on-your-country-alone-can-be-a-harmful-ove)

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*Debates about immigration played a large part in both the 2016 election in the US and the UK's referendum on membership of the European Union. During these debates, many politicians and commentators expressed the view that immigration should benefit those who are already part of the national community. **Alex Sager** writes that this argument stems from the idea of 'methodological nationalism', a view which focuses on the nation to the exclusion of transnational and subnational processes. He warns that methodological nationalism can shape how politicians and researchers think about integration, development, and the economy, and allows them to draw artificial boundaries which do not stand up to reality.*



In a recent [Op-Ed](#), Republican Senator Tom Cotton called for restricting immigration on the grounds that immigrants willing to work for low wages benefits businesses and professionals, but harms ordinary Americans (including recent immigrants) by reducing their wages and job security. Across the pond, Labour MP Andy Burnham has [taken](#) an almost identical stance.

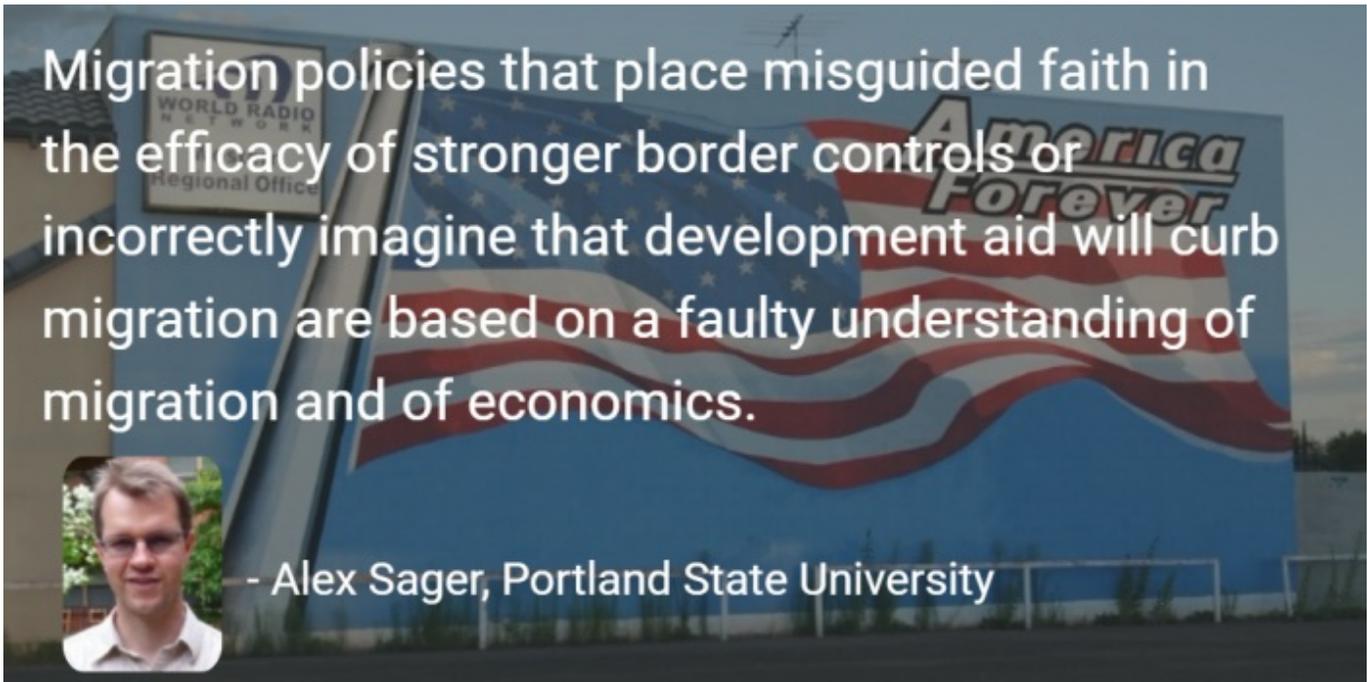
One way of responding to their claim is to point out that it is at odds with [most](#) economic [research](#) on immigration. Immigration is not a [zero-sum game](#) in which jobs for immigrants mean unemployment for native workers. Immigrants are consumers and [entrepreneurs](#), creating jobs and demand for public services. Immigrants often work in different sectors so that they [complement](#) rather than compete with native workers.

Though it is important to rebut misleading claims about the economics of immigration, my interest as a political theorist is in the categories and assumptions that shape how we think about migration. Senator Cotton and MP Burnham express an ethical view: migration policy should serve the interests of people who are already part of the national community. This ethical view is strongly influenced by the cognitive bias of methodological nationalism.

Methodological nationalism equates society with the nation-state and takes it as its unit of analysis. During the twentieth century, it emerged from and simultaneously fostered nation-building, giving rise to a world view in which nation-states appear inevitable and inescapable. In their [writing](#), Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller point to three modes of methodological nationalism: ignorance, naturalization, and territorial limitation. Under the mode of ignorance, the nation-state vanishes altogether as an object of investigation or as a source of explanation. Naturalization takes nation-states for granted, uncritically relying on statistics and other information produced by their governments. Territorial limitation fixes the nation-state within sharp borders. Together, these biases prevent researchers from properly accounting for or even from noticing supra-national, transnational, and sub-national processes.

Two clarifications are in order. First, to criticize methodological nationalism as a cognitive bias is not to deny the continued importance of the nation-state as a political and economic actor. Though some social scientists have argued we are entering a world in which the nation-states are in decline, rejecting methodological nationalism does not entail moving beyond the idea of the nation-state for a [network society](#), [risk society](#), or [liquid modernity](#). Second, researchers befuddled by methodological nationalism may reject nationalism as a political ideology.

Methodological nationalism affects how we [think ethically about migration](#). Since how we understand the world guides our thinking about how the world ought to be, flawed social science leads to flawed ethical analysis.



We see the influence of methodological nationalism in economic debates about migration. Senator Cotton and MP Burnham situate the debate about the effects of immigration on wages within nation territories and assume a sharp distinction between natives and foreigners. As a result, their moral calculus discounts without argument the substantial economic benefits for immigrants.

Methodological nationalism also shapes how researchers and politicians think about development. Development is conceptualized in terms of countries, not of individuals. As [Michael Clemens and Lant Pritchett](#) point out, when people leave their countries for much higher wages, this is not considered development. Instead, it is often framed and widely [decried](#) as “[brain drain](#)” (the emigration of skilled workers from lower-wage to higher-wage regions) that is seen as a loss even when more people are better off.

Moving away from economics, methodological nationalism underlies discussions of integration and helps explain the rise of [citizenship tests](#). It leads to amnesia about the connection between nation-building and the construction of [whiteness](#). It also supports [facile](#) assertions that immigrants have different, incompatible values and allows for a [double-standard](#) in which objectionable or criminal behavior by immigrants is [attributed to culture](#), whereas similar behavior by co-nationals is dismissed as individual pathology.

The most fundamental problem with methodological nationalism is that migration is by definition transnational and cannot be understood from the perspective of the nation-state. Methodological nationalism has contributed to the neglect of colonialism and imperialism, so that [Europeans](#) pretend that migration and refugee flows are unrelated to their past or present foreign policy and American politicians conveniently forget hundreds of years of [US-Mexican history](#).

We cannot explain migration without examining migration systems that span multiple states but are not reducible to them. Migration policies that place [misguided](#) faith in the efficacy of stronger border controls or [incorrectly](#) imagine that development aid will curb migration are based on a faulty understanding of migration and of economics. They are also morally deficient, driving the construction of [border walls](#) and the use of [offshore detention](#) that create great human suffering. These policies, by failing to understand migration and its root causes, are inefficient, harmful, and at odds with a world that resists the simplifications of methodological nationalism.

When social science interacts with policy, the effort to understand society simultaneously becomes an exercise in constructing society. For this reason, it comes with moral obligations. Methodological nationalism allows us to

ignore and naturalize the nation-state and to artificially draw boundaries, eliminating or distorting transnational and supranational processes such as migration. This affects our ability to understand the world and to think ethically about migration.

*This article is based on the paper, 'Methodological Nationalism, Migration, and Political Theory' in Political Studies.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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