

125 Can we transcend the nation-state ontology in global higher education?

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This conceptual essay provides a metaphysical critique of the inherent logic of “internationalization” by unpacking the nation-state ontology pervading global higher education (HE) policy and practices. “Internationalization” signifies the “in-between” of multiple nation-states and continues to perpetuate an anthropocentric ‘worldsense’ marked by national containers. It begins with a genealogy of the word “international,” its inherent assumptions, and why it’s important to interrogate the role of “nation-state” worldsense in the global HE field. It next unpacks the ways in which the nation-state as a category (and an entity) comes to being and informs globally facing HE policies (“internationalization” policies) and practices (i.e. engaging with “international” students). The paper argues that the nation-state worldview provides the onto-epistemic grammar in global HE to demarcate boundaries between what is internal and external to an entity, to help make sense of particular objects (e.g. groups, institutions, entities) and processes, and impacts *ways of being*.

Full paper

In this conceptual essay, I offer a metaphysical critique of the inherent logic of “internationalization” by unpacking the nation-state ontology pervading global higher education (HE) policy and practices. “Internationalization” signifies the “in-between” of multiple nation-states and continues to perpetuate an anthropocentric ‘worldsense’ marked by national containers. While many have debated the role of nation-state or national scale as a unit of analysis in global HE research, practice, and policy (Marginson, 2022; Shahjahan & Kezar, 2023), the nation-state onto-epistemic grammar remains unpacked and challenged in the global HE field. Drawing on the interdisciplinary literature on nation-state formation, internationalization of HE, and HE policy documents, I unpack how the nation-state as a category (and an entity) comes to being and informs globally facing HE policies (“internationalization” policies) and practices (i.e. engaging with “international” students). I will argue that the nation-state worldsense provides the onto-epistemic grammar in global HE to demarcate boundaries between what is internal and external to an entity, to help make sense of particular objects (groups, institutions, entities and/or destinations) and processes, and has consequences for ways of being.

When one explores the actual genealogy of the word “international”, we discover that it is less than 300 years old. The “international” was an adjective coined by Jeremy Bentham in 1780 to help capture the kinds of laws that would govern the relations between sovereign states (1780) (Suganami, 1978). “International”, as originally conceived, was thus a means to articulate a phenomenon that happened between two separate self-contained entities (i.e. sovereign states). This coinage presumes the planet can be divided spatially as self-contained geographic entities. In short, the “international” denotes planetary space in particular ways (i.e. a world divided by sovereign states). But, where does this ontology of space as sovereign states come from? A brief history of the “nation-state” construct reveals that it comes from Europe and Spanish Colonies in Latin America in the 17th and 18th centuries. Furthermore, subsequent European historical epochs witnessed the weakening of the medieval worldview, Latin as a sacred language, the dynastic monarchies, the emergence of printing press, to name a few (Anderson, 2006). This nation-state ontology of space became the norm of the international order through decolonization movements in the 1950s, and throughout the 1970s when sovereign states replaced empires worldwide. Overall, these transitions helped produce nation-states as “imagined communities” bounded within borders—in which members feel commonality with others, even though they may not know them (Anderson, 2006). Furthermore, as the nation-state emerged as the legitimate “unit” of the global system, it normalized “the belief that this has been the normal way of doing things since 1648” (Vergerio, 2021, p. 8). In summary, the nation-state becomes a (or the) way of being on this planet. But more importantly, as an anthropocentric category, it led to

disrupting, and reconnecting, us in particular ways not with simply other human-beings, but also other than human beings.

The nation-state worldview manifests in global higher education practices in so many ways, thus reinforcing the pernicious nature of this worldview. For instance, it helps signify identities and entities in global HE. Many social groups such as students, faculty, and institutions, are signified by their specific nation-state signifier, and more importantly, use the term “international” to signify that object that is outside of one’s nation- container referent. The nation-state worldview pervades the labor market as ‘international degree’ or ‘international qualification’ (not to mention international experience), rather than domestic degrees, is sought by employers, thus driving student and faculty mobility (Brooks & Waters, 2022). The nation-state worldview also manifests in national or institutional HE policies, both domestically or globally facing (Shahjahan & Grimm, 2023). For instance, Japan’s “The Global 30 Project” policy (MEXT, 2023) reproduces the nation-state ontology in several ways. First, it helps to designate a kind of action (e.g., “internationalization”, “internationalize”) rooted from “outside” the national referent (or border or community), to be applied to something internal to the “national” referent (i.e. Japanese universities, academic systems or campuses). Relatedly, the language of “Japanese” is used to differentiate borders and markers of separating knowledge or people from one geography or the other.

In summary, my analysis raises some ontological questions: how are nation-states and associated actors (e.g. HEIs, identities) constantly ontologised (i.e. becoming)? How do we center relationships to the cosmos, land, ancestors, other-than-human beings, other ontological perspectives? Finally, how can we expand our fences of what we perceive to be knowledge (e.g. space and time), relationality, and affect, beyond the nation-state worldview, in global HE (Shahjahan & Grimm, 2023)?

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