I will make my position clear from the outset. I am all in favour of ‘liberating social sciences from their national confines’, as advocated by Beck and Sznaider; and having been intellectually formed within Sociological Institutionalism of Stanford School that has been for long time pushing such an agenda, I have my own biases how to pursue this. My reaction is thus an insider and outsider at once.

Let me underline the patent import of ‘Unpacking Cosmopolitanism’ (2010 [2006]). Despite the expansive grasp of terms like globalization, cosmopolitanism, trans- or post-national in social scientific language, sociology is still grappling to incorporate such paradigms into its professional identity. The Global/Transnational Section of the American Sociological Association was launched only in 2008. The European Sociological Association has a Research Network on Globalization, but still not as established as other research areas. The British Sociological Association does not yet have a Study Group on the topic. Ulrich Beck and his associates’, vigorous drive over the years to move away from ‘methodological nationalism’ and create a ‘cosmopolitan’ sociology and research practice, is thus most commendable. And this special issue of the BJS on cosmopolitanism proves the importance of their persistent intervention.

One of the most appealing aspects of Beck and Sznaider’s introduction is their concern to ‘unpack’ Methodological Cosmopolitanism for its empirical-analytical value and not just engage its normative-philosophical promise, which they clearly see as part of the agenda as well. Even though cosmopolitanism has not made equal innings in US sociology, since the late 1970s other established research programmes of US-origin have contributed considerably to the social scientific study of the global processes. Particularly the Stanford school of Institutionalism (‘world polity’ approach of John Meyer and his associates, as Beck and Sznaider refer to in their introduction), and the
long-standing research programme of Saskia Sassen on globalization are serious contenders. Here, setting my comments with reference to the Institutionalist theoretical and research programme, I raise four questions and friendly objections, to the premises and promises of Cosmopolitan sociology.

1. The question of timing

The starting point for Beck and Snaider is the distinction between cosmopolitanism as a normative and analytical project versus the ‘unintended and lived’ cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan sociology as such is charged with developing a new conceptual, methodological, and normative stance to capture and appraise the new conditions of global interconnectedness, multi-locality and ‘multi-perspectivality’. This raises the question whether we are indeed facing new social and political discontinuities, and whether we need an analytical methodology that does not privilege the national site only at this juncture in history. This is not clearly spelled-out.

Here the findings and assertions of Sociological Institutionalism offer a different exegesis to the question of timing, without attributing ‘newness’ extra purchase but keeping global view all along integral to the research agenda. Insisting on a longitudinal perspective as a research strategy, ‘world polity’ Institutionalism locates the nation-state, and national society, within its broader transnational environment from its inception. The research programme provides data collection and analysis that goes back to the end of the nineteenth century, which help to see the trajectory of the nation-state and its embeddedness within, and interactions with, the broader economic, political and cultural environment. Empirical studies of national constitutions, women’s movement, citizenship rights, and educational systems, just to give a few examples, map interconnections among nation-states, and non-state actors of sorts (profit and non-profit organizations, professionals and activists), revealing the dynamics of change that undermine and transform the assumed national constellations.

Clearly the density of the transnational environment, and the exchanges within, becomes increasingly more pervasive after the Second World War, but seeking ‘cosmopolitan research strategy’ as a response to the ruptures and uncertainty that the ‘world-risk society’ unravels maybe too limiting. There is of course nothing inherent in the cosmopolitan strategy that would require this, but we need a clearer statement on the broader pertinence of the methodology.

2. The ‘nature of the social’ question

One of the major concerns for Methodological Cosmopolitanism is bringing the ‘subject’ back into the social sciences, which Beck and Snaider see greatly
missing in the current practices of much of the social sciences. At the risk of simplifying, their offering is a Weberian image of society, in which processes and means are generated through interplay among actors at different scales. This is contrasted with a Durkheimian one, to which Sociological Institutionalism subscribes, whereby collective principles, rituals and conventions established at the ‘systemic’ level shape individual and collective behaviour, independent of their purposeful intentions, and oftentimes beyond their volitional cognizance (Meyer et al. 1997).

How does the ‘social’ work then? Despite the professed choice of Weberian worldview over Durkheimian, the analytical specification of the social process may not be too different between these two schools of research. According to Beck and Sznaider, cosmopolitanization on the one hand is bound with micro-level processes. Irrespective of their convictions of cosmopolitan merits, the more individuals engage with cosmopolitan moral frameworks (through movements against global inequality and human rights violations, for example), the more likely is the ‘actually existing’ cosmopolitanism, which might or not lead to institutionalized cosmopolitanism (cosmopolitan norms and agreements). On the other hand, global norms and forms also emerge as side effects of unintended economic and political actions, and through ‘coerced choices’ and ‘socializing effect’ of the world risk-society. Such assertions find resonance in the analytical framework exercised by Sociological Institutionalists.

Indeed, much of the explanatory power of Sociological Institutionalism lies in their theorization of the generation and diffusion of norms, organizational forms, and social practices globally. The diffusion mechanisms specified by the Institutionalist frame assume actors’ understandings of themselves and others, implicating reflexivity (Strang and Meyer 1993). Extensive empirical studies elaborate how ‘normative’, ‘coercive’ and ‘mimetic’ pressures create common principles and practices in diverse settings. Such processes take place at organizational/institutional levels, as enacted by scientists, professional experts, NGOs, activists, social movements, but also at the interpersonal level, through social expectations, learning, and sense-making. Beck and Sznaider’s criticism about ‘subject-less’ social science does not completely hold here.

There is, nevertheless, a difference of emphasis between these two perspectives. The empirical research programme of Sociological Institutionalism predominantly highlights the isomorphic tendencies (convergences and similarities), and the hegemonic cultural frames that enable such tendencies. These very same hegemonic cultural frames are also implicated in fabricating conflict and forging change. The inconsistencies integral to the world-level normative frameworks (‘equality versus liberty’, ‘progress versus justice’), and the conflicting claims (by different actors, individuals, states, interest groups, and international organizations) such inconsistencies produce,
constitute the main dynamics of societal and political change for Sociological Institutionalism.

For Beck and Sznaider the ‘multi-perspectivalism’ of social and political agents – the heterogeneity of actor orientations and the contexts afforded by *plurality of modernities* (as expressed in politics, economy and culture) – is an underlying principle in Methodological Cosmopolitanism. This heterogeneity seems to bear on conflict and change in two ways. At once, change emanates from global risks and threats, and their ‘cultural manufacturing’ in multiplicity of cultural contexts, which lead to struggles over definitions and jurisdictions. At the same time, Beck and Sznaider highlight the dilemmas inherent in cosmopolitan (procedural) norms like the ‘universalist–pluralist’ or ‘tolerance–violence’ dilemma that, not unlike the Institutionalist perspective, locate the sources of conflict, hence change, internally to the cosmopolitan project.

This point about the externality and internality of conflict requires further exploit to clarify the explanatory mechanisms behind formation, maintenance and change of cosmopolitan and institutional arrangements.

3. The question of the level of analysis

The core of Beck and Sznaider’s critique of methodological nationalism engages the very question of the unit of analysis, unsettling the assumption and practice of equating society with national society. This, they suggest, would mean the study of any social phenomenon should not be spatially fixed to one (national) location, but should be analysed at multiple locations and levels. The variations among actors, their locations, and perspectives are what make both the subject matter and also the method of Cosmopolitanism. They object to ‘world-polity’ Institutionalism, among others, because of the basic dualism implied by this approach between the national and international. Beck and Sznaider do not elaborate their criticism, so it is difficult to discern their train of thought, however this is a slightly misconstrued picture.

There is indeed an artificial dualism built into the empirical models produced by John Meyer and his associates. This is partly to do with the limitations of the current data collection practices and statistical categories produced by national statistics offices and international organizations (World Bank, UNESCO, etc), as also noted by Beck and Sznaider. Still much of the social and political data are observed, and thus most variables of interest are measured at the national level. But it is also partly to do with the long-running research concern of Stanford Institutionalists with the impact of ‘world culture’ on national organizations and practices.

However, such duality is not something necessarily intrinsic to their theoretical framework. Indeed, the dialectical relationship that runs through
different scales (local, regional, national, global) motivates the analytical imagination of recent studies conducted within this paradigm. One strategy has been to focus on actors who are not the conventional subject of analysis, and identify the institutional resources and discourses they mobilize, constitutively at multiple levels and not always with intended consequences. Boli and Thomas (1999) for example provide detailed systematic evidence elucidating the specific processes by which the (international and national) NGO and social movement sectors link local issues with global public stages by effectively exploiting transnational agendas. Soysal (2002, 2009) emphasizes the role played by national and transnational actors in advancing models of ‘good society’ and ‘good citizen’, and their realization in educational spheres, and how in the process European normative frameworks and national citizenship institutions have been recast and legitimated in relation to each other. These analyses discover a less commanding and self-directed actorhood than customarily attributed to the nation-state. They also give ground to Beck and Sznaider’s perceptive idiom ‘transnationality inside nation-states’, as the transnational factors into the nationally defined spaces and institutions, and the local and national are re-articulated within the transnational.

Such processes are forcefully theorized and empirically evidenced by the long-term research programme of Saskia Sassen as well. In her work globalization refers to multiple scaling, as she rejects the ‘nested hierarchies’ of local, regional, the national and international. In that, multiple and specific ‘structurations’ of the global manifest themselves within what has historically been constituted as national, and ‘transboundary networks and formations’ globally link local and national processes and actors–as exemplified in the cross-border networks of activists carrying out local struggles for human rights and the environment; the deployment of international instruments like human rights in national courts; and the adoption and implementation of economic policies essential for the functioning of global markets at the national scale (Sassen 2003).

Recent sociological studies are much more methodologically alert to multi-layered, multi-actor, multi-referential research design and operationalization than Beck and Sznaider postulate. This is probably where the awareness they seek has been most accomplished.

4. The question of the normative

What strikes one about Beck and Sznaider’s intervention is its bold plea not only for ‘re-conceptualizing social sciences for a cosmopolitan turn’ but also re-defining cosmopolitanism for this purpose. Thus, the venerable task is both demarcating the analytical-empirical cosmopolitanism from the normative-political one, and also committing the analytical-empirical project to the realization of cosmopolitan ideals as concrete social realities.
The distinctive call for intentional blurring of the distinction between ‘the actor perspective of society and politics and the observer perspective of the social sciences’ now reverberates with the arguments for ‘public sociology’ in the USA (particularly of Michael Burawoy, to whom the authors refer in their introduction). However much of US sociology still maintains a conception of the scholar as objective and value-neutral, and the normative and empirical apart, and the students of global/transnational processes are not excepted (bar Saskia Sassen’s critically informed sociology).

The ‘decoupling’ between normative frameworks and observable practices is central to the research programme of Sociological Institutionalist. Their research calls attention, for example, to the tension between human rights commitments of the nation-states and sovereignty legitimated immigration controls, which transforms the existing citizenship categories and authorizes new forms of inclusions and exclusions. However, theirs is not necessarily an attempt to commit sociology normatively. When we are thrown to the uncertainties and injustices of world affairs, Sociological Institutionism has not much to offer.

Ulrich Beck’s cosmopolitanism emerges as a non-philosophical commentary on a temporally situated institutional order that cannot be confined to the national, a shared conviction with Sociological Institutionism, but also as an acute responsibility to implicate this order by exercising cosmopolitan ethics. The ‘surplus value’ of cosmopolitan turn is not so much in its guidance in practicing research. The propositions, redefining the unit of analysis, the scales, and the points at which we collect data, are crucial for doing justice to social phenomena; and at this juncture, we need accumulation of empirical research to affirm how such analytical practices expedite informed social research. Thus, it is imperative to keep various agendas that take global/transnational processes seriously talking to each other, and not as much searching for their own languages and own guidelines.

The real surplus value of cosmopolitanism offered in Beck and Sznaider’s intervention is in its transformative ramifications. Here, in the dilemmas of the universal and particular, moral and the empirical, the authors aspire to render intelligible, and confront, social injustices and fault lines, historical injuries and contemporary predicaments, towards a politics rife with transformative possibilities. This is a call for renewal of European critical theory tradition, from which the US scholarship shies away. And it is even more exigent when Europe seems to be loosing its energy for justice and egalitarian aspirations, and when liberal democratic regimes are increasingly ‘hollowed’ out of their competencies to affect the social question (Sassen 2006).

I welcome the return of critical theory with a cosmopolitan intent.

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1. In the USA, Cosmopolitanism finds a prominent place in the normative political science of Seyla Benhabib and in the philosophy of Kwame Anthony Appiah.

**Bibliography**


