For a reparatory social science

Article  (Published Version)

Bhambra, Gurminder K (2022) For a reparatory social science. Global Social Challenges Journal, 1 (1). pp. 8-20. ISSN 2752-3349

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

For a reparatory social science

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The continuing coronavirus pandemic has combined with other global crises to highlight some of the fundamental challenges of inequality that currently face us. They are global both in their current configuration and their historical constitution. Similarly, any solutions to the challenges represented will be global. The continuing relevance of the social sciences will rest on their ability adequately to conceptualise the global processes involved. It is only by acknowledging the significance of the ‘colonial global’ that it will be possible to understand and address the necessarily postcolonial present that is the context for issues of inequality in the present. Thisarticle argues for the need to consider our colonial past as the basis for thinking about contemporary configurations of the global. This is followed by an address of the implications of these arguments for how we understand citizenship and belonging in the present. What is needed is a ‘reparatory social science’ committed to undoing the inadequacies that have become lodged in our disciplines and working towards a project of repair and transformation for a world that works for all of us.

Key words reparations • nation • empire • citizenship • inequality

Key messages
• The article sets out the limitations of taking the nation as the standard unit of analysis within the social sciences.
• It argues that cross-national comparisons of inequality fail to acknowledge the wider colonial histories of appropriation and transfer of resources.
• The article addresses implications of the ‘colonial global’ for understanding citizenship and belonging in the present.
• The article argues for a reparatory social science that accounts for our colonial histories.

To cite this article: Bhambra, G.K. (2022) For a reparatory social science, Global Social Challenges Journal, 1: 8–20, DOI: 10.1332/HIEO9991

The continuing coronavirus pandemic has combined with other global crises to highlight some of the fundamental challenges of social inequality that currently face us. These include the differing consequences of the pandemic within countries as well
as the disparities in vaccine roll-out between countries; politically organised hostility towards migrants and minorities and the escalation of the violence and instability that produces refugees; and the elite capture of an ever-increasing share of global wealth alongside a global increase in poverty and destitution. To these can be added the interconnections between growth and depletion that are at the heart of environmental degradation and climate catastrophe, both imminent and historical. The inequalities that are inscribed in these different examples are not specific to countries or particular situations but transcend borders and limits. They are global both in their current configuration and their historical constitution. Similarly, any solutions to the challenges represented will be global. The continuing relevance of the social sciences will rest on their ability adequately to conceptualise the global processes involved.

Considerations of ‘the global’ within the social sciences tend to be developed from understandings of ‘the modern’ and the two terms are often seen as interchangeable. Within such understandings, the global is seen as the space into which modern social and political developments have expanded. That is, it is understood as constituted through the political relations between modern nation states, or as coming into being through the global dissemination of capitalist developments out from national economies. Empire, and colonial relationships more generally, disappear from such accounts, reappearing, if at all, as contingent phenomena that are deemed to lie in a receding past. In contrast, I argue for the need to address the political relations of extraction that bound colonies to national metropoles and which, in the process, defined colonial global economies that serviced national projects in the West (see Bhambra, 2022). We need to move beyond understandings of the nation state, or the global economy, that fail to account for the colonial and imperial projects that are the basis for their emergence and continue to shape present relationships.

It is only by acknowledging the significance of the ‘colonial global’ that it will be possible to understand and address the necessarily postcolonial present that is the context for the issues of inequality already set out. Recognition of the historical role of colonialism, slavery and indenture in the making of the modern world enables us to examine how these world-historical processes have constructed our conceptions of the global in terms of racialised hierarchies embedded both in institutions and in the development of social scientific concepts and categories. To the extent that the global is approached only as a phenomenon of recent salience, as in Beck (2000; 2006), the reconstruction of the social sciences that many scholars call for in the turn to the global is only to be applied to future endeavours. The adequacy of past interpretations and conceptual understandings is maintained. In contrast, I argue for the need to rethink the histories upon which the social sciences themselves are constituted as well as an opening up of future possibilities on the basis of such rethinking. The lens of coloniality acknowledges the significance of a specific kind of hierarchical ordering that has, for the most part, been implicit to our disciplines and remains largely unacknowledged. What is needed is a ‘reparatory social science’ committed to undoing the inadequacies that have become lodged in our disciplines and working towards a project of repair and transformation for a world that works for all of us.

This article is purposefully programmatic. The empirical arguments and detailed analyses of sources is provided elsewhere (see, Bhambra, 2007; 2014; Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021). My intention here is to set out a claim and indicate its scope and to do so in the context of the themes of this inaugural collection of the Global Social
Challenges journal. As such, I first set out the limitations of taking the nation as the
standard unit of analysis and argue for the need to consider our colonial past as the
basis for thinking about contemporary configurations of the global. This is followed
by a section addressing the implications of these arguments for how we understand
citizenship and belonging in the present. Taken together, these moves enable us
to more adequately contextualise events and processes that are often presented as
separate and to understand them within a connected frame of reference. I conclude
by arguing for a reparatory social science based on a broader understanding of the
colonial histories that have produced our shared global present and its challenges.

The nation rethought

The nation state is a primary unit of analysis across the social sciences. It is understood
to organise the formal international division of the world as well as social relations
domestically. Within social structural sciences, like sociology, the emergence of the
nation state is associated with modernity and, in the process, it is seen to displace
empires, which are associated with earlier historical periods (Eisenstadt, 1963). This
standard account presents nations and empires as distinct political units (Clemens,
2016; Kumar, 2021). While scholars often accept that a number of European states
extended their powers beyond national boundaries through colonial activities – that
is, by establishing empires – recognition of this coextensive and overlapping activity
rarely calls into question their categorisation as analytically distinct. This has serious
implications for the study of global inequality among other topics (see Bhambra and
McClure, forthcoming).

Scholars of global inequality, such as Branko Milanovic (2012; 2016) and Thomas
Piketty (2020), tend to organise their analyses in terms of inequality within nations
and see global inequality as being the sum of all national inequalities. Yet, the
political entities they discuss were rarely nations over the long durée. Rather, they
were imperial formations constituted by a colonising state and colonial territories
and populations that were asymmetrically incorporated. This asymmetry involved
the extraction of wealth – labour, resources and taxation – from the colonies
which was appropriated by the colonising state and used to its benefit. As such,

it makes little sense to compare the economies of Britain and India over the past
two centuries – which both authors do – when for two hundred years prior to
1947 the wealth of India was largely siphoned off to the benefit of the British
economy and social institutions more generally, and to the detriment of the
Indian population (Naoroji, 1901; Mukherjee, 2010; Patnaik, 2017). What was
true of Britain was also true of other European colonial powers as scholars such
as Eduardo Galeano (1973), Walter Rodney (1972), Samir Amin (1976), among
many others, have set out. The key issue here is the extent to which the failure
to acknowledge the colonial relations from which nations subsequently emerged
distorts analyses of global inequalities.

Neither Milanovic nor Piketty is unaware of Europe’s long history of colonisation,
it is just that colonial processes are not regarded as significant to the shaping of global
inequalities. This is in part because, as with many social scientists, they posit a novel
‘postcolonial state’ – perceived as fragile and at risk of failing – contrasted to the
modern (European) nation state without addressing the processes of colonisation that
were themselves part of state formation for both colony and coloniser. If colonisation
was taken seriously, then the modern nation state would only be seen to emerge in the period of decolonisation, as previous states would be more appropriately understood as imperial or colonial states (see Wilder, 2015). The concepts and categories that are central to social science involve particular histories of the nation state and related ideas of modernity and membership. If those histories do not adequately account for our wider shared pasts, however, then those concepts and categories will reproduce the very inequalities that we otherwise seek to resolve.

In their conceptualisation, Milanovic and Piketty follow a standard understanding of the emergence of the nation state which associates it with the system of sovereign states that came into being in Europe in 1648 with the Treaty of Westphalia. This representation of the process suggests that after Westphalia the modern nation state was initially shaped by the North American and French Revolutions of the late 18th century. Within Europe, two routes to modern statehood followed. The first was the evolution of nation states within the boundaries of existing territorial states, as was the case for most North and Western European countries. The second route established a nation and then a state, as exemplified by the ethno-national projects of Germany and Italy in the late 19th century. These initial formations were followed by the establishment of ‘postcolonial’ states in the period of mass decolonisation in the mid- to late 20th century. While such an account is standard across the social sciences, it is an odd elision that posits a ‘postcolonial state’ without addressing processes of colonisation as part of the process of state formation (see Bhabhara, 2018 for a fuller discussion).

The period that is seen to give rise to the modern nation state is precisely a period of colonial expansion that saw some European states consolidate their domination over other parts of the world. Yet, what is seen as ‘external’ domination is rarely theorised as a constitutive aspect of the ‘modern state’. From at least 1648 onwards, for example, we see the dominance of Spain and Portugal primarily in the southern half of the Americas and of Britain, France, Belgium and the Netherlands (among other European countries) of conquest and domination in the Americas and across Africa and Asia. The forms of domination were varied; from actual conquest followed by settlement (in the Americas, Southern Africa, New Zealand and Australia among others) to the establishment of colonial and dependency status elsewhere, for example in India and across Africa and Asia. For my purposes here, the issue is less about the different forms of domination (though these are important in their own terms), but rather with the wholesale erasure of that (external) domination from the theorisation of the modern state in the West. A more adequate conceptual understanding would take seriously the colonial histories that were constitutive of their formation.

One of the substantial critiques that has been made of the Westphalian thesis is by Antony Anghie (2006). He argues that, within this model, sovereignty is seen to be the primary concept in terms of determining the fact of being a modern nation state. While this model is based on the historical examples of European states, it ignores the exercise of power of those states over other societies. This is deemed not to be a problem for the theoretical framework as those other societies and states are not regarded as being sovereign. As such, they can be unproblematically incorporated into the ambit of the modern nation states (through imperial conquest) and not contest the claim to nationhood that is otherwise being made (they are simply subjugated and elided territories of no empirical or ideological consequence). However, as Anghie
asks, it is unclear how it was ‘decided that non-European states were not sovereign in the first place?’ (2006: 741).

As Mike Savage argues in his recent book, *The Return of Inequality*, we need to ‘avoid comparing nations as if they were analytically equivalent units’ and to take seriously broader geopolitical considerations (2021: 166). Building on this, I further argue that we need to examine the very concept of the nation as the primary political unit for understanding, and then addressing, inequality, both nationally and globally. This is because what we tend to understand as nations were not nationally bounded polities but were globally constituted through processes of colonialism and the establishment of empires at a distance. As such, empires were the dominant modes of political organisation at the time that such inequalities were being established. Focusing our analyses on the nation state elides the historical processes that actually produced and reproduced those inequalities, and it distorts our understandings of them.

The way in which the state is defined – in terms of its contemporary boundaries and historical constitution – is central to the shaping of politics in the present, including the shaping of global politics. Among other things, it defines who belongs and, perhaps more importantly, who has the right to belong. Correlatively, it also defines who has the right to move and the right to move with rights – an increasingly important political question that confronts us in a variety of locations globally (Mongia, 1999; Benson, 2021). The analytical distinction that is made between nation and empire mitigates against us being able to understand the past in connected terms. Further, the dominant social science narrative of modernity, associated with the expansion of citizenship, fails to understand that the consolidation of a nation out of an imperial past involves divided membership and the removal of some from membership of the polity at the same time as establishing citizenship for others.

The argument that we should move from using the nation as the unit of analysis to working with a broader approach that takes seriously colonial histories has implications for the way in which we understand political issues in the present. In the following section, I discuss the emergence of citizenship and associated ideas of equality in France. I set out the ways in which citizenship has been treated within the social sciences as an exemplary case for the emergence of the modern nation and then discuss how acknowledging the colonial histories of France would require us to reconsider the politics of citizenship in the present.

**Citizenship rethought**

Most discussions of modern citizenship have been framed in terms of political inclusion within, or exclusion from, nation states (Turner, 1993; Sassen, 2006; Jayal, 2013). Such discussions rarely acknowledge the significance of colonial relations (although, see Mongia, 2018). Rogers Brubaker’s (1989; 1990) classic account of the constructions of citizenship, for example, revolves around a consideration of its emergence in France and Germany. France is presented as the originary modern nation state, where conceptions of nationhood and citizenship cohere around political unity, rather than shared culture, and continue to bear the mark of their origin in the 1789 Revolution. The unification of Germany a century later in 1871 is seen to give rise to a form of political unity that is understood as derivative of ethnic and cultural unity. These are the two routes to modern statehood discussed in the previous section.
In each case, empire is missing from the discussion of the relevant political community. In Germany’s case, perhaps, this is because the German empire was a relatively brief and ultimately failed project, defeated in the two World Wars (Steinmetz, 2007). However, it was a definitive moment for the development of sociological understandings of the state, not least because it formed the context of Weber’s discussions on the topic (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021). In the case of France, empire is elided because of the apparent universalism of the republican claim undergirding conceptions of citizenship (Stovall, 2006). This is despite the existence of legal codes such as the Code Noir which was established in the late 17th century and regulated the lives of the enslaved in the French Caribbean. It subsequently also covered the conditions governing the lives of those who migrated from the colonies to the French national state.

In what follows, I will discuss the French case. The rise of fascism (itself not unrelated to issues of colonialism) ultimately gives rise to Germany’s representation as one of the pathological forms of a multiple modernity (Eisenstadt, 2000; 2001). Here, I am interested in the absence of a consideration of colonialism and empire in the discussion of citizenship with regard to modernity’s ‘exemplar’, France. Exemplary modernity involves the innovation and consolidation of equal citizenship which is expressed through the French Revolution. This sets in motion the idea of universal citizenship as a process of extension and inclusion integral to democracy and the modern nation state. However, as I have set out, the majority of European states were not nation states at the point at which understandings of citizenship were forged – rather, they were colonial states and often included colonial subjects in their definitions of membership. As such, the issue is less about inclusion than about addressing the hierarchies of domination that were established at this time and continue to structure our concepts and our understandings.

The Code Noir, as Tyler Stovall (2006) argues, was one of the first major examples of the conflict between political and legal equality, on the one hand, and racial discrimination and domination, on the other, within the French state; with the French state here now being understood to include its colonial territories. Beyond the Code Noir, there were also many debates during the revolutionary period in France over whether Black men could be citizens or whether colour, itself, was a radical obstacle to civic and political equality. Ultimately, the failure to transcend racial categories had White French citizens deny the claim for participation and representation being made by Black appellants. This suggests that ideas of equality, political participation and membership, in their dominant French articulation, were, and are, limited by race. This is different from how the exclusions of gender and class are resolved in the extension of the suffrage precisely because of the colonial construction of racial exclusion. The Code Noir constructs full citizens as White and others as outside of citizenship. This finds its way unreflectively into contemporary scholarship such that the struggle against domination comes to be represented as inconsistent with the form of modern citizenship (and, in that way, racial struggles are presented differently from those of class or gender, which are governed by the overarching principle of equality working its way against ‘premodern’ conventions). Worse, ‘racial struggles’ come to be seen as a threat to the very idea of equality.

Pierre Rosanvallon (2013), for example, is not unusual among scholars in working with a conception of the French nation that sees its population, historically, as constituted solely in terms of its White citizens. In his book, Society of Equals (2013),
he argues that the revolutionary spirit of equality, expressed during the French Revolution, shaped particular understandings of citizenship organised around a commitment to shared values. However, he suggests that such understandings are no longer adequate to address the challenges we face in our contemporary era. What is needed, instead, is a revised understanding of equality that starts from an acknowledgement of the many ways in which we, as individuals, are different, rather than by way of what we might share. Indeed, one of the poisons of equality, for Rosanvallon, is separatism – group identity in all its varieties – which undercuts the commonality constituted by a democratic equality of individuals and, paradoxically, can also derive from a universalistic imaginary. This is the basis from which he argues that the solidarities of immigrant communities today are in breach of the foundational equality of citizenship within the French nation. This is notwithstanding that such a society was itself constituted through the exclusion of others on the basis of characteristics ascribed to them as members of groups.

Rosanvallon’s failure to locate the French nation within the broader colonial processes of the French state is what enables him to regard all ‘others’ as external to the nation and as impinging problematically upon the foundational equality of its citizenship. This is particularly surprising given that Rosanvallon’s choice of method – philosophical history – requires, in his own words, a ‘self-conscious immersion in the very questions investigated by the authors themselves’ (2001: 197). That is, for Rosanvallon, a philosophical history of concepts, such as those associated with equality and citizenship, could only be deemed to be adequate to the extent that it engaged with the questions that were of concern to those about whom the history is being written. As I have argued elsewhere, however, not only does Rosanvallon fail to engage with the French colony of Haiti, which was central to these debates, or of Algeria subsequently, but he also fails to examine the various debates on citizenship and equality that were taking place in Paris during the revolutionary period itself (Bhambra, 2016).

As David Geggus (1989) has argued, there were many debates during this period over whether Black men could be citizens or whether colour, itself, was a radical obstacle to civic and political equality. Many of these debates turned on the group characteristics ascribed to individuals. In 1791, for example, it was proposed that only ‘non-whites born of free parents, not freedmen’ should be accorded political equality (Geggus, 1989: 1303). This limited decree was passed in May of that year and overturned a couple of months later. Events in Saint Domingue (to become Haiti after its revolution) intensified over the summer as a consequence of this rollback and ‘the largest slave revolt in the history of the Americas’ ensued (Geggus, 1989: 1303). This put further pressure on ‘French legislators to concede full racial equality (1792) and eventually slave emancipation (1794)’ (Geggus, 1989: 1303). These tremendous achievements were not long-lasting, however. Slavery was re-established within the French empire by Napoleon in 1802 and citizenship reconfirmed as the preserve of White men (with property) (Dubois, 2000; Sala-Molins, 2006). Nonetheless, the contestations are significant and point to more complex histories of citizenship and equality than those presented by Rosanvallon (and others).

The failure to transcend racial categories (or their own group identity as White) is a long-standing feature of European scholarship. This is compounded by the insistence that ‘race’ only enters Europe and European debates in the post–Second World War period (Habermas, 2009). The repercussions of such understandings in the present
are profound (see, Vergès, 2010). By not addressing this initial exclusionary moment (or then subsequent ones in the context of Algeria and other colonies claimed by France), Rosanvallon cannot account for later demands made by those such as the Indigènes de la République (see Grewal, 2009). He constructs them as separatist claims that would undercut a society of equals established on the democratic equality of all citizens understood as individuals. This, despite the fact that some of the people who claimed citizenship, as individuals, would have been denied it on the basis of ascribed membership to groups by those very citizens who understood themselves as ‘equals’.

It is this contradiction that resonates in the present and the failure to acknowledge it is part of the current impasse of democratic politics in France (and elsewhere).

It is the failure to recognise the colonial relations that shaped the political possibilities of the French national project that enables scholars such as Rosanvallon to normalise the group identity of the nation, conceived in homogenous terms, and to pathologise the group identities of multicultural immigrants and diverse others. If the political community of France had been extended to include also the colonial possessions of France, then different understandings of equality and citizenship may have been possible. This is not a situation specific to France, but is the common condition of many European nations and the European project more broadly (see Hansen and Jonsson, 2014). Europe did not become ‘multicultural’ in the post–Second World War period. It was empirically multicultural from the time various European countries began the process of incorporating territories and populations into the ambit of their states and settling the territories of others with their own populations. To say that they were incorporated is precisely not to say that they were included, that is, treated as equals. Incorporation points to the hierarchical relations of domination that characterised colonisation and come to be reproduced within national polities that failed to account for their colonial histories. European societies have had no difficulty with multiculturalism within a hierarchy of domination; only with multicultural equality (Holmwood, 2020).

The shaping of modern citizenship in the French revolutionary period occurred in the context of discussions of equality and was resolved by refusing racial equality as integral. In this way, understandings of equality and citizenship as they developed from the French context cannot be understood as ‘universal’ or as embodying abstract ideals. They were shaped through an explicit refusal to countenance the equality of races and a commitment to processes of colonisation, slavery and indenture. As such, the inequalities represented by modern citizenship can be theorised, as Danielle Allen (2005) argues, in terms of ‘domination’ rather than of exclusion (see also Holmwood, 2013). Using the language of inclusion and exclusion suggests that those who were excluded were outside of the political domain when understandings of citizenship were being deliberated and enacted. Their exclusion is naturalised and effaced till the point that demands for inclusion open up the necessity of acknowledging their presence. By presenting their existence only at the point of demanding inclusion the prior exclusion is negated and presented as non-existent, rather than understanding it, more properly, as an instance of domination when these others were ‘made invisible’.

The end of colonialism and empire, then, did not bring an end to the legacies of its social structures. The patterns of inequality shaping the world are consequent to those legacies and need to be understood within a connected frame of reference. This leads me to my concluding thoughts on what a reparatory social science that is explicitly oriented to an address of these issues might look like.
For reparations and a reparatory social science

The question of reparations has gained increasing salience in recent years with Hilary Beckles (2013) and Shashi Tharoor (2017), among others, arguing variously for reparations for Caribbean slavery, the dispossession and elimination of indigenous populations, and colonial drain from the Indian subcontinent. They follow a number of scholars and activists who, understanding the relationship between colonialism and modernity, question the naturalisation, within the social sciences, of the poverty and inequality produced by European expansion. Walter Rodney’s (1972) classic text, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, or the earlier contributions by Dadabhai Naoroji (1901), *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, and Lala Lajpat Rai (1917), *England’s Debt to India*, demonstrate the connections between the wealth of Europe and poverty elsewhere as historically produced through colonial processes. These connections have been elided in standard social scientific accounts that have focused primarily on the nation and an understanding of social science predicated on the difference of, and between, nations.

Once we accept that the global interconnections that brought the world into being as a global entity were colonial then we need to understand modernity itself as colonial modernity (Lugones, 2007). This means that there is less an issue of ‘completing’ modernity than of decolonising it (Habermas, 1996; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). This would involve addressing the global inequalities established through colonialism, as well as rethinking how we understand those inequalities within social sciences disciplines. This would include examining the self-understanding of the social sciences especially in terms of issues of social justice and redistribution. As I have argued elsewhere, arguments about welfare entitlements in the present often revolve around questions of belonging and legitimacy (Bhambra, 2022). These tend to be framed in terms of the nation and of being able to demonstrate historical belonging to it. However, as European nations have histories that go beyond the national form then such questions need to rethought in terms of those broader connections. That is, the patrimony of European states has never been simply national; it has been established on the basis of their colonial histories. As such, distribution of that patrimony ought not to be limited by the nation. Rethinking the nation enables us to rethink citizenship, which, in turn, enables us to rethink how we might address the global challenges that face us.

A reparatory social science requires both the repair of the social sciences epistemologically as well as being invested in the collective address of the inequalities implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) legitimated by standard social science. It requires us to rethink our disciplines by taking modern empire as the unit of analysis rather than the modern nation. It further requires us to recognise that what we understand as the modern world is actually the colonial global world. Taken together, these would enable us more adequately to contextualise events and processes that are often presented as separate and to understand them within a connected frame of reference – one committed to repair and transformation. Recognising that the entities we understand as nations were actually implicated in a colonial global project, enables us to acknowledge different connections between histories and processes that we otherwise thought of as separate. It enables us to consider the relationship between wealth here and poverty over there and to address this inequality within the common frame of national and global redistribution, rather than the more usual considerations of aid or charity or development. Acknowledging our colonial connections historically
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opens up the possibility of a more expansive and generous policy regarding citizenship and membership within political communities (Mamdani, 2020). What is needed is a reconstructive postcolonial vision that acknowledges the connected histories that have produced the present and seeks to address those inequalities through a commitment to global redistributive justice. A postcolonial reparatory social science provides us with the tools to adequately think through the issues and come up with more effective solutions. It provides us with the tools for thinking anew about old problems and about new ones. Its purpose is not a scholastic one; that is, one that is simply oriented to the production of new knowledge. The new knowledge opens up possibilities of new and different actions. Recognition of the significance of modern empire and the colonial global leads to a more adequate understanding of the structures of inequality that disfigure the worlds we share in common. Situated within a commitment to repair the fractures that have been produced, it has the potential to transform our world.

A reparatory social science provides the space for us all to be invested in a project to make a world that works for all of us.

Note
1 The global tends to be understood in terms of the aggregation of national level processes (for example, Eisenstadt, 2000; Beck, 2006; Burawoy et al, 2010). This is the case even within those disciplines or fields specifically oriented to the international, or the global (Acharya and Buzan, 2019). The analytical social sciences, which define their subject in terms of individual behaviour, also take the nation as the frame of many of their applications.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References


