

State of Nationalism (SoN): Nationalism and Climate Change

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*Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'*

Bob Dylan, 'The Times They Are a-Changin', 1964

Climate change is probably the most serious threat to the continuity of life on Earth. The climate emergency is accompanied by a host of deeply interrelated crises, such as biodiversity loss, the acidification of oceans and at least six other identified variables whose crossing points have been identified as 'planetary boundaries' (PB).¹ Crossing any of these boundaries is likely to have immense humanitarian and environmental consequences and can influence the way in which other boundaries are affected – that is, crossing any one of them is reflected in all the other boundaries, cumulatively amplifying the vulnerability of life across the



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planet.² All these boundaries are being pushed without mercy, hammered with unprecedented force by mass human consumption.

In this article I first analyse the scientific background and the body of evidence available regarding some of the most crucial aspects of the climate crisis. I then proceed to analyse the possible multiple relationships between climate change and nationalism, emphasising core aspects of the broader relationship between the two. In the process, I identify a research trend that I consider as the new ‘climate turn’ which has descended and transmuted from the broader social sciences to nationalism studies. I argue that, generally, nationalism remains a key impediment to successful climate action, since a global calamity such as the climate emergency can only be comprehended and tackled on a world-wide basis and through synchronised global action.

Crossing vital boundaries

The critical threshold or PB for climate change was already superseded in the early 2010s, creating a cascade of interconnected crises.³ The maximum CO₂ threshold should not have exceeded 350 ppm (parts per million) globally, but by 2019 global CO₂ levels had reached *415 ppm*. These numbers have continued rising with no end in sight (except briefly during the Covid-19 lockdowns).

Furthermore, the prospect of a myriad forms of life being eradicated is increasingly considered at a variety of global institutional and non-institutional levels. The UN Secretary-General António Guterres has launched a heartfelt appeal to mobilise our best collective selves in an unprecedented effort to fight the most vital threat ever.⁴ Since the early 1990s, and more so in the 2000s, the progressive deterioration of multilateralism to the advantage of neo-liberal globalisation and ‘free

market' dogmas was accompanied by the emergence of narrow-minded nationalism. Globalisation and nationalism have long been treated as separate phenomena, yet they have simultaneously led to the climate emergency. In short, we are now faced with a situation of 'do or die'. The concern for our very existence has never been so high. Some go as far as predicting that without immediate and far-reaching action the planet will become inhabitable – and that this can happen much sooner than previously expected.⁵

Hidden from the media spotlight, the science confirming the climate emergency has already indicated several warnings,⁶ some of which have been taken up by social scientists, beginning with genocide scholars.⁷ In Holocaust and genocide studies, the term '*omnicide*' has emerged as the climate emergency pushes millions to the brink of mass starvation and is thus likely to affect the whole of humankind once specific 'tipping points' have been passed.⁸

Entire countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Eritrea, as well as parts of India, Syria, Ethiopia, and Kenya, are already paying the price of the developing and developed worlds' unbridled greed that has resulted in consumption of the Earth's finite resources while irreversibly polluting the atmosphere.⁹ Humanitarian non-governmental organisations are already overwhelmed by a crisis that has only just begun. Rich countries will not be spared and contemplation of some form of redemption or 'lifeboat ethics' is pointless: increasingly, climate change is affecting larger and larger regions of Asia, Oceania, the Americas and Europe. In the summer of 2022, Europe has been hit by a formidable heatwave, an early sign of a long line of increasing weather extremes to come. We are on the cusp of something so big and paradigm-shifting that we are still unable to even visualise or conceive it.

The biopolitics of climate change

The overpowering spread of neo-liberal globalisation, accompanied by the frail regulatory capacity of the nation-state, has contributed to devastating the environment to the extent that new zoonotic diseases are escaping from their natural environmental niches by crossing the inter-species barrier. Some social scientists may be surprised to learn that pandemics can be counted among the possible consequences of climate change, with microbiologists and virologists warning about the likely release of an unpredictable number of new viruses and other pathogens following the melting of the Siberian and Arctic permafrost ('permanent frost' or perennially frozen ground) and other ice-covered lands.¹⁰ The thawing of the permafrost mantle could result not only in the escape of unprecedented amounts of methane, but also in the release of these viruses and other pathogens that have been trapped for millennia under its crust.¹¹ In other words, human-made global heating risks releasing 'biological, chemical and radioactive materials that have been sequestered for tens to hundreds of thousands of years'.¹² The Arctic cryosphere is collapsing, while nation-states compete to grab defrosted land, completely unable to stop the trail of destruction. It is therefore unsurprising to learn that 'the COVID-19 pandemic is intricately linked to biodiversity loss and ecosystem health'.¹³ The spread and gravity of current pathogens is thus amplified by the effects of climate change.¹⁴

Why nationalism?

Why, then, at the moment in which human life is dependent on coordinated global action, does nationalism still persist and dominate the news? After Brexit, Trumpism, neo-fascism, Hindutva and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the rise of nationalism seems to exempt

only a few countries. Nationalism seems to have become an integral part of the broader drift towards 'collective suicide' at a moment when synchronicity and coordination is needed as never before.

In this specific context, nationalism reveals itself as acting and functioning as a set of largely irrational beliefs – in other words, as a political 'faith'.¹⁵ Walker Connor argued that, if not irrational, nationalism is certainly based on emotions that move 'beyond reason'.¹⁶ This cult-like emotional propensity precludes many nationalists from seeing the broader picture, often making them inept and nearly always unable to promptly grasp when the time has come to change tack.

It may be argued that, by emphasising the irrational and passionate aspects of nationalism, one risks downplaying its civic/liberal¹⁷ and cognitive¹⁸ dimensions – while banal nationalism lingers between the rational and non-rational in the form of subconscious automatisms and unmindful behaviours.¹⁹ Anatol Lieven goes as far as to argue that a new enlightened form of civic nationalism may help to combat climate change: only the nation-state can constrain the devastating effects of unbridled capitalism by inspiring public sacrifice in the name of loyalty to the nation.²⁰ But this remains largely hypothetical: since climate change can only be tackled by rapid international action, coordination and cooperation, the main problem remains the lack of a planetary jurisdictional framework capable of enshrining these forms of civic nationalism and helping to legally mobilise them. In other words, a new form of international law would need to be adopted to accompany civic nationalism and inspire the necessary sacrifices that the global emergency requires.²¹ This is so far missing, and nationalism is thus moving in an operational vacuum.

By definition, nationalists believe we exist in a world of finite nation-states and that this political order is the only conceivable one. In International Relations, a similar belief in the obtrusive endurance and

unavoidability of nation-states is often called ‘realism’.²² Nationalists thus remain largely unable to intuit or foresee the increasing impotence of the nation’s institutional container, the nation-state. Indeed, the most powerful institution of the modern age risks becoming a helpless spectator of unfolding tragedies, incapable of managing the flow of events that may soon escape the control of any single government.²³ Still standing in an age of uncertainty and well past the uncertain limits of the ‘risk society’,²⁴ we are moving into even more uncharted territory. We are rapidly entering what biologists call the *Age of Extinction* – ‘the most lethal one since the time of the dinosaurs’.²⁵

While nuclear war could annihilate human existence at a whim, climate change has taken several decades to build before reaching a point of no return. Even though the broader international time frame for irreversible climate change is normally set at 2050,²⁶ it is now becoming increasingly clear that several tipping points may be (or may already have been) reached much earlier.²⁷

Denial and nationalism

The reality of climate change has been widely known for decades among scientists who have, however, been dismally unsuccessful in sharing their core findings across disciplinary barriers.²⁸ In the meantime, an entire discipline, *science communication*, including *public understanding of science*, has explored the obstacles in the interactions between science and the broader public, with hundreds of articles and a few journals dedicated to this task. Furthermore, scientific efforts to raise awareness among the general public have been systematically thwarted by media conglomerates supported, it appears, by a formidable coalition of vested interests.²⁹ Some social scientists have admirably and bravely ventured to analyse and uncover the media’s sophisticated propaganda machine

and political networks.³⁰ These power coalitions and lobbies are influencing many, if not all, aspects of our future, and have thus been widely investigated across the social and political sciences,³¹ as well as by professional journalists.³² At Harvard university, Naomi Oreskes and colleagues have clearly located their origins in a group of semi-obscure agents, the *'merchants of doubt'*,³³ elsewhere identified as networks of well-paid professional defamers and deceivers linked to the fossil fuel and automotive industries with far-reaching links with the mainstream media of nearly every country, most notably the USA.³⁴ Such lobbyists have been key players, influencing government (in)action as well as shaping public opinion by raising doubts and questioning existing certainties.³⁵ These efforts have sometimes been described as systematic *'cover up'*, particularly in the USA.³⁶

It is commonly believed that climate change could have been stopped in its tracks a long time ago, with the 1980s and 1990s being decisive moments for change.³⁷ These decades signalled the forced entry of most nation-states into the iron cage of neo-liberal globalisation, whose unbending, doctrinaire ideology permeated nearly all institutions in democratic societies. The ascending force of huge corporations fomented their influence on public opinion by buying huge quotas of media broadcasting space as the latter were being liberally privatised – a possibility which implied that media conglomerates were now able to *'cover-up'* the climate crisis in unprecedented ways.³⁸ All the while, the *'market'* and the state, respectively, infused by the belief system of corporate neo-liberalism and animated by the ideology of nationalism, acted in different but overlapping spheres of public interest. In fact, while capitalism is generally blamed for climate change, nationalism is rarely found to be culpable. Yet, the vested interests of both multinational and state-owned corporations have prevailed over a willingness to act by playing in the style of political brinkmanship. The strategy of obfuscating climate science via a coordinated collision of

politics and corporate interests was first testified as early as 1985 by the astronomer Carl Sagan and again in the 1990s in the US Congress by the climatologist James Hansen.³⁹ The cover-up phenomenon was initially confined to the USA, but later affected other countries, including those that subsequently espoused denial in the name of ‘resource nationalism’– the theme of the next section.⁴⁰

The recalcitrant ideology: Nationalism, resources and inequality

Nationalism has taken many forms in relation to climate change and how to deal with its impact. One has been identified as ‘resource nationalism’.⁴¹ The USA, Russia and India, as well as smaller countries such as Poland, Kazakhstan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have consistently used resource nationalism.⁴² The notion of *petro-nationalism* may also be used to distinguish those forms of resource nationalism entirely focused on oil extraction and production,⁴³ while the term *petro-nation* can easily apply to the case of Vladimir Putin’s Russia.⁴⁴

An early example of resource and petro-nationalism was the oil embargo declared by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1973. Its five founding members (Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela) were far from being democracies. These governments couched their messages in the language of nationalism and anti-colonialism. OPEC was founded in Baghdad in 1960, and over the years its oil-producing countries have slowly paved the way for a nationalist U-turn by nationalising their oil assets. While many still remember the subsequent economic crisis, most have largely forgotten (or prefer to ignore) its key actors. The spokespersons of the oil embargo were autocrats, sheikhs, sultans and kings, most notably the Shah of Iran,

Reza Palavi. Yet, they spoke in the name of equality, justice and fairness: the Shah claimed that the West seized ‘our’ resources and resold them to ‘us’ at an inflated price.⁴⁵ Following OPEC’s 1973 meeting in Iran, the Shah invoked the ethic of resource nationalism : ‘It [was] only equitable and just that the oil producing countries had ended the era in which the industrial powers were able to buy oil at ridiculously low prices’.⁴⁶ Such rhetoric evokes how the ideology of nationalism can be conveyed through the language of *equality among nations, while upholding inequality within nations*. Post-colonial discourse, in general, largely replicates the colonial legacy and Westernising notions of nationhood: governments in the developing world often use the north–south divide as a pretext for furthering nationalism and concealing the gap between an emerging elite and the broader population. This has remained a skillful way for the upper classes of both developed and developing countries to fully represent the body of the nation as a homogeneous congruent whole,⁴⁷ while, at the same time, depriving it of a voice to articulate claims in a non-national way.⁴⁸ In contrast, the climate justice movement invokes universal standards of fairness as an alternative to nationalism.

Appeals to equality within nations have recurred since the French Revolution, but these have resulted in an emphasis on the nation’s interclass dimension as a kind of super-synthesis of all class inequalities and contradictions.⁴⁹ Nationalism and anti-colonialism emphasise equality in some contexts, while silencing it in others: for nationalists, the non-elite (i.e. the people) do not need, or do not deserve, a voice because they are already fully represented by the ruling elite in the name of the nationalist principle of political legitimacy.⁵⁰

Resource nationalism spans the ideological spectrum. Ahmed Ben Bella, the first president of Algeria, defined national control over oil as ‘the product of a collectivist mentality that had developed over a century of shared repression and resistance’.⁵¹ These developments occurred well

before climate change became an item on the international agenda. So far, most of the examples of resource nationalism I have chosen predate the ongoing climate emergency.

A more up-to-date example of resource nationalism can be found among the Russian oligarchs, who, under Vladimir Putin, have used nationalism as a unifying force to correct (or hide) the mounting gap between rich and poor. Gazprom's gas and other hydrocarbons have been sacralised as untouchable 'national' resources, so that the Russian elites enjoyed a free hand in capital accumulation while mobilising their citizens under nationalist agendas and Putin redefined Russia as an 'energy superpower'.⁵² The next section looks at the opposite perspective.

Nationalised contexts: Trailblazers, trend-setters and innovators

While I argue that civic nationalism offers no panacea to avert the climate crisis, a more prudent approach is to look at actual examples of nationally based sustainable political action. Current global problems are formulated differently according to the specific national context in which they are experienced: while in most countries climate change is seen as a vital priority, in others, such as Russia and Israel, it has long been perceived as a low priority rather than as an emergency.⁵³ Conversely, in small island states such as the Maldives, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Nauru, climate change is treated with great urgency, as sea level rise represents an immediate threat to the existence of their inhabitants, economies, cultures, fauna and vegetation. The Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Mottley, has said that a temperature rise of 2°C would represent a 'death sentence' for millions of people, particularly in island countries, and would be the inevitable consequence of current political inaction by the leaders of emitting countries.

At the time of writing, no existing nation-state can convincingly present itself as advocating sufficient lifestyle changes that would enable sustained climate change mitigation. Yet, some countries have progressed further than others towards an ecological and energy transition.⁵⁴ Occasionally, public opinion may indicate a perception of one own's country as a paradigm of environmental awareness. This is the case in Sweden, where, among other things, the innovative *flygskam* movement inspired by Greta Thunberg stresses the need to use railways instead of airplanes as intercity flights have been increasingly replaced by train travel.⁵⁵

An expanding network of local initiatives has also placed some countries, particularly European ones, at the forefront of the ecological transition: for example, various initiatives at both local and national level in Denmark, Finland, Switzerland, Norway and Germany have turned these countries into 'exemplary nations' in which patriotic pride is no longer based on the pursuit of economic growth and military strength, but on reaching sustainable goals and comprehensive sustainability.⁵⁶ These 'trailblazing' policies can be considered almost at the same level as those implemented by the pluri-national European Union, whose coordinated actions seem to be more far-reaching than the policies of any single member state. The motto 'unity is strength' has never been more true than when dealing with contemporary critical challenges.

The notion of 'green nationalism' has been used recently to address this growing trend.⁵⁷ Living in increasingly sustainable societies is undoubtedly a reason for satisfaction, happiness and pride for a large number of people, both locally and nationally.⁵⁸ However, 'competitive greening' or attempts to portray one's own country as 'greener than green', may not necessarily contribute to international coordination and transnational initiatives. Most importantly, such attempts can turn into mere 'greenwashing', the well-

known marketing practice of covering up environmental damage by portraying an image of operating sustainably.⁵⁹

Nationalism and climate change have been intrinsically entangled since at least the failure of the Kyoto protocol in 1997.⁶⁰ As we know, the signature of this historical treaty was hampered by the coordinated efforts of fossil fuel companies, in which several national governments were complicit.⁶¹ Without exception, the arguments used by these governments were nationally based, centred on hidebound parochial interests, even if not openly nationalist. In most cases, governments operated through forms of unordinary 'banal nationalism',⁶² while rallying around the flag in the exceptional, and far from banal, context of international meetings. Such a context demanded a broader vision than that usually contained within national boundaries.

Expelled from history: The Anthropocene

More importantly, nationalism studies seem to have been oblivious to the changed chronological timeframe. An expanding group of scientists across disciplines has convincingly shown that the Holocene may have terminated due to human action, as we enter into a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, determined by the global impact of human action, particularly mass consumption.⁶³ The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has observed that history has mutated so profoundly as to become unrecognisable.⁶⁴ Indeed, history is almost ending under our very eyes. It can be argued that, as history turns into geology, '*humans are being expelled from [it]*'.⁶⁵ For about a decade, historians have begun to reflect on the actual and imminent *end of history*: But this is not in the self-serving sense and with the hypocritical hubris that once announced the 'end of history' pontificated about by neo-liberal ideologues. Yet, it may well be the end of history as we know it.⁶⁶

The world historian Prasenjit Duara has convincingly argued that nationalism is part of the ‘epistemic engine’ of contemporary history which has characterised Western expansion and the obliteration of global cultural diversity well into the Anthropocene. This ‘epistemic engine’ has driven ‘the globally circulatory and doxic Enlightenment ideal of the conquest of nature and perpetual growth that sustains the runaway *technosphere*’.⁶⁷ Along similar lines, the anthropologist Thomas H. Eriksen has applied a Gellnerian perspective connecting the loss of cultural diversity to the loss of biodiversity – hence the global loss of flexibility – within this epistemological scenario: ‘the flattening of ecosystems and the growing power of corporations’ raises the question of the ability of the state to solve the dilemma, which relates ‘simultaneously to cultural and biological loss’ (Eriksen 2021, 2022 in press). *The idea of Westernisation of the world* reconnects here with the theory of *The Great Acceleration*, a historical concept which has informed much scholarly research across the social and natural sciences.⁶⁸

Nationalism studies: Contradictions of a discipline and its subject

As the reader may have become aware by now, it appears inexplicable that most nationalism scholars have not yet been able to identify and discuss issues which are inevitably (and relatively soon), going to affect all aspects of human life, including therefore nations and nationalism – thus deeply affecting their own field of study. This delay can be partly imputed to the lack of scientific knowledge which affects many, if not all, social sciences and humanities disciplines. However, it is difficult to understand why a burgeoning field does not do more interdisciplinary liaisons as the number of scientific findings rapidly expands, altering our global knowledge landscape.⁶⁹

In anthropology, Thomas H. Eriksen has written a watershed book, *Overheating*, in which nationalism is also mentioned as the quintessential modernist instance of scaling up, ‘enlarging something in order to gain some benefit or other’.⁷⁰ He rightly considers Gellner’s interpretation of nationalism as a form of upscaling in which ‘systemic boundaries of life-worlds expand through the effective incorporation of communities into nation-states’.⁷¹ Eriksen then compares this shift of scale to the globalisation-related expansion of big corporations which oust and destroy small businesses like shopkeepers and small agricultural producers – a process that is, in turn, intensely related to climate change and the Anthropocene crisis.

Why nationalism studies has for so long been untouched by a compelling exploration of the connection with climate change demands a deeper investigation. Despite previous – and ongoing – research on climate denial and the far right,⁷² neoconservatism,⁷³ and populism,⁷⁴ it is only since around 2020 that research on climate change has begun to involve nationalism studies, after an initial article threw down the gauntlet.⁷⁵ Nationalism studies will not be alone in engaging in this new direction: the impact of ongoing changes can be clearly discerned in most other disciplines.⁷⁶

The new ‘climate turn’ⁱ has led to an expanding wave of studies.⁷⁷ In one of the most forward-looking and innovative Ernest Gellner Lectures

ⁱ I had a scientific upbringing and have been writing about climate change and nationalism since the late 2000s. For instance, in 2010 I concluded an essay on genocide and nationalism by urging the need to look at the discernible impact of anthropogenic climate change because scientific advances were already clear about the unprecedented impact of mass consumption on the environment and the atmosphere. Environmental destruction was evolving so rapidly that ‘no area of the planet is expected to remain unaffected by the consequences of climate change’ as ‘corporate interests have largely adopted patterns of denial through media manipulation, supervision and censorship’. D. Conversi, ‘Cultural

given at the 2021 annual conference organised by ASEN (The Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism), Duara theorised⁷⁸ that 'nationalism is at the heart of all the crises in the modern world and becomes entangled in its effects. As the fundamental source of authority for all modes of governance in the world, we are beholden to its capacity to resolve these cascading crises'.ⁱⁱ As a symptom of healthy trans-disciplinary exchanges, some of these trends have been taken up in the natural sciences, as some climate scientists begin to consider the impact of nationalism.⁷⁹

Conclusion: Nationalism studies – where to?

The climate crisis is revealing as never before the hypocritical nexus and moral conundrum at the heart of nationalist ideology. According to several scholars, nationalism is an ideology which promises the continuity of nations across generations.⁸⁰ Yet, one of the most obvious consequences of the current predicament is the interruption of the intergenerational flow, the abrupt halting of any form of cultural and ethnic transmission – unless one considers nations as angels, demigods or divine entities detached from earthly conditions. The Anthropocene crisis does not have ethnic or national preferences and will not spare 'chosen peoples'. While the nation-state was able to address some of the

Homogenization, Ethnic Cleansing and Genocide', in *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, ed. by RA Denmark (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 734-735.

ⁱⁱ In fact, most contemporary crises are somewhat related to nationalism, if only because corporate and state elites have failed to avert them in time and assess their mutual interrelationships (such as war, climate change, pandemics and biodiversity loss). Through their executive and legislative power, state institutions embody the ultimate basis of authority, even when governments have abdicated it in the face of marketplace supremacy.

challenges of the nineteenth century, present challenges demand a 'downscaling' at the local level: Eriksen suggests that as the homogenising nation-state has so far proved to be inept and incapable of addressing the crisis, we are witnessing such downscaling towards community action and the safeguarding of both cultural diversity and biodiversity: 'Since the reduction of diversity is caused by governments and corporate interests, it is necessary to look elsewhere for resistance movements ... working to retain local autonomy and healthy ecosystems'.⁸¹ But the scalar gap between domestic policies and the global crisis is also reflected in the need to 'upscale' action and legislation at the global level.

I have argued that the relationship between climate change and nationalism can be studied through a variety of prisms and perspectives. As climate change relentlessly advances across the planet, we have to face a central question: is there a real risk that nationalism may become the default response, so that, instead of international collaboration, unprecedented acrimony and conflict becomes the automatic setting and response? Some early studies point to this disturbing, indeed terrifying, direction,⁸² while others reveal that the increase in asylum seekers is already correlated with global heating in countries of origin.⁸³ The weakening of multilateralism amplifies all these crises, as nationalism hampers the globally coordinated action needed to solve them. Nationalism and nativist retrenchments obstruct both international and domestic climate policies, shifting the blame on external 'others' in order to hide their impasse and conceal their reckless incapacity. While these inward-looking trends *appear* to occur independently of climate change, they reveal governmental escapism or, at the very least, impotence to take effective action. At any rate, the tragic consequences of the nationalist stalemate are immediate for both domestic and international arenas.

Finally, we have also to consider that climate change is now only one aspect of the problem and needs to be seen as part of a series of deeply interrelated existential crises that have announced the beginning of a new geological epoch, increasingly identified as the Anthropocene. Anthropocene scholars consider climate change as the driving force, but no longer the only problem.

As various documents and some research have indirectly implied,⁸⁴ the broader political goal to avoid total catastrophe can no longer be simply to reverse this trend, but to return to twentieth-century consumption patterns in the 1950s, or possibly even earlier.⁸⁵ But this needs to happen at a speed that the nation-state may be unable to tolerate or withstand insofar as nationalism stands in the way of change, adaptation and mitigation. This makes the persistence of nations wholly uncertain – which should be a matter of concern for all those who claim to defend them.

To conclude, I have shown that nationalism remains a major obstacle to effective climate policy, since the problem can only be understood on a global scale and dealt with through global coordination. On the other hand, the emergence of ‘green’ forms of nationalism infused with deep ecology may reveal themselves to be an essential requirement for defending the biosphere – that is, for the very survival of human, animal and plant life.

*This review is part of
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Endnotes

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