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How nationalism hinders global climate cooperation

A number of scholars today, including Professor Daniele Conversi of the University of Basque, Professor Mark Levene of the University of Southampton, and myself at Cardiff University, are growing sceptical about whether climate change can be addressed in the current framework of the international order where nationalism reigns supreme. 'Nationalism' as Professor Conversi writes, 'has proved to be a giant obstacle in the advancement of multilateral climate negotiations, as in the case of COP 15, the UN climate change negotiations held in Copenhagen in December 2009'. How does nationalism hinder climate cooperation? In three ways:

First, nationalism puts pressure on governments to engage in policies that would prioritise jobs at home over cooperation with other nations. Recent examples of such policies include Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, which 'authorised at least \$369 billion in subsidies for clean energy projects and products'. The EU's Net Zero Industry Act came to match the US plan with an EU-wide effort to maintain green jobs on the continent. Trapped in a nationalist framework, governments have no choice but to prioritise their own nationals. Consequently, neither economic or technological transfer was on the table in climate negotiations in Kyoto, nor the principle of differentiation could remain intact as emerging economies, such as China and India, saw their shares of global emissions increase. More recently, the 'loss and damage fund', the highlight of COP27, remains in the tens of billions, falling well below the required amount, estimated in a trillion dollars a year by the OECD. It should not be a surprise that rich countries are falling short in their climate pledges; for nationalism dictates that their priority is to remain competitive and offer jobs at home.

Second, nationalism calls for the closure of borders in the wake of climate disasters, impeding cooperation between communities. A good example here is the fate of Haitians in the wake of hurricane Dorian that devastated the Bahamas in 2019. As Mark Levene reports, 'an unelected but vocal "patriotic" group calling itself Operation Sovereign Bahamas, acted as goad to the Bahamian authorities to clear out Haitian shanty towns . . . and "repatriate" their inhabitants back to Haiti'. This example can be replicated, and only likely to be worsened in the future, as the numbers of climate migrants increase and nationalist leaders capitalise on public fear to ramp up xenophobic rhetoric in times of crisis.

Third, nationalism exacerbates conflict, particularly when the depletion of national resources has an uneven impact on communities. The reason for this is that the consequences of climate change interact with existing social, economic and political dynamics. In bringing sudden change to these dynamics, climate change disrupts the status quo. For instance, climate disasters, when distributed unevenly, can increase socio-economic inequalities between communities, thus causing resentment and raising tensions. Sudden and large flux of climigrants exacerbates nationalist rhetoric against those deemed as foreigners.

To understand the challenge of addressing the climate crisis, therefore, commentators need to move beyond specific policies by governments. The structural dynamics underlying government policies, in which these policies are situated and by which they are influenced, are equally, if not more, important to examine. The key structural factor impeding climate cooperation today is the framework of the international order where nationalism reigns supreme. There is nothing new in the idea that there is a contradiction between nationalism and peace in the international order, as historians of the 1930s will tell us. What is novel is the added layer that further complicates an already complex situation: the addition of climate change. Climate change today is situated in a nationalist framework that is already rendering peace in the international order fragile. It is this framework that renders climate cooperation the supreme challenge of our day. Unless we change this framework, individual policies on climate cooperation will remain limited in their success.