Nationalism, the Bane of the Modern Age

Editor's Pick. Written by Robert Higgs.

Everyone, it seems, has a hollow space in his makeup. Perhaps he has no faith, no hope, no charity; no sense that he is basically a lord or a priest or a peasant; no comfort in knowing his personal latitude and longitude in the great scheme of things; no ethical compass to give him his bearings and help him navigate between what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad.

As religion's hold on the Western man's mind has diminished during the past several centuries, replaced by a cold scientific sense that, at bottom, everything is just a lot of lifeless particles and electrical currents or, in many cases, replaced by nothing at all, this empty space has dilated. Into the vacuum of ethical emptiness and absent personal identity has rushed nationalism. More and more people answered the question, "What are you?" by saying "I am a Frenchmen," or a German, or an American, or whatever. State rulers, of course, actively strove to encourage such mass identification because it rendered the masses easier to exploit, plunder, and command. The culmination came in the world wars, when scores of millions submitted to kill and to die in the service of nationalism.

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