

Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront the National Question

Joan Cocks



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From Kosovo to Québec, Ireland to East Timor, nationalism has been a recurrent topic of intense debate. It has been condemned as a source of hatred and war, yet embraced for stimulating community feeling and collective freedom. Joan Cocks explores the power, danger, and allure of nationalism by examining its place in the thought of eight politically engaged intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the antagonist of capital, Karl Marx; the critics of imperialism Rosa Luxemburg, Hannah Arendt, and Frantz Fanon; the liberal pluralist Isaiah Berlin; the neonationalist Tom Nairn, and the post-colonial writers, V. S. Naipaul and Edward Said. Cocks not only sheds new light on the complexities of nationalism but also reveals the tensions that have inspired and troubled intellectuals who have sought to lead lives between detached criticism and political passion.

In lively, conversational prose, Cocks assesses their treatment of questions such as the mythology of national identity, the right to national self-determination, and the morality of nationalist violence. While ultimately critical of nationalism, she engages sympathetically even with its defenders. By illuminating the links that distinguished minds have drawn between thought and action on nationalism in politics, this stimulating work provides a rich foundation from which we ourselves might think or act more wisely when confronting a phenomenon that, in fundamental and perplexing ways, has shaped our world.

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