

Book Review: A World Divided: The Global Struggle for Human Rights in the Age of Nation-States by Eric Weitz

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Weitz, Eric. *A World Divided: The Global Struggle for Human Rights in the Age of Nation-States*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. vii+550. Softcover, \$22.95.

A World Divided: The Global Struggle for Human Rights is a fitting final book for acclaimed historian Eric D. Weitz. This wide ranging and ambitious work presents case studies from around the world, building towards a powerful argument that “human rights remain our best hope for the future” (429). This may feel a bit simplistic for a conclusion after four hundred pages of text highlighting the many ways human rights have been defined, protected, and abused over the past two centuries, but Weitz’s optimism feels like a beacon of hope in the midst of a global pandemic in which rights and liberties have been debated in new, and sometimes strange ways. Weitz argues that the growth of human rights is tied to the development of nation-states, but the very creation of a nation always constructs divisions between those who “belong” to the nation and those who do not. The nation-state protects those who belong but is also a powerful exclusionary force for those they do not accept as members. The growth of international agreements, such as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, is a step in the right direction, but Weitz demands more. For human rights to remain our “best hope for the future,” Weitz argues that we must decouple human rights from membership in a particular nation-state; they must become truly universal regardless of citizenship status.

Despite the optimistic conclusion Weitz draws, his work is clear eyed regarding the shortcomings of nations and international organizations in the growth of human rights. Human rights are our best hope for the future, but that does not mean that states or international organizations have been adept defenders of those rights. Each of the nine case studies Weitz uses highlight the dialectical nature of nationalism and the ways in which that dialectic has been used by political leaders to build national unity through exclusionary, sometimes genocidal politics.

Building nation-states is a messy, violent business, one that frequently prioritizes stability over idealized visions of human rights. Weitz is also careful to note how important the wider geopolitical context is for each of his case studies. For example, in his first study, Greece, the priorities of the Great Power countries, especially Britain, are just as important as those of the nascent Greek nationalists. The same is true in almost every chapter, international context always matters in the building of a single nation. For his earlier case studies, the needs of Great Powers are tantamount to the needs of individual states, while in the later examples, such as Palestine and Israel, the actions of superpowers and international organizations like the United Nations are prioritized, even in hyperlocal situations.

One of the interesting dilemmas presented by Weitz is that, read a certain way, *A World Divided* is a book about failure. Failure to stop the Rwandan genocide, failure to stop the removal of Native Americans from their land, failure to solve the Palestinian question. Despite this, Weitz's conclusion is about hope amid disaster. Nationalism may be built on exclusion but with the right tools, he believes that it can be used for good. For example, in his chapter on the Soviet Union he details their participation in international human rights agreements, which Soviet activists then used as a springboard to demand the protection of those rights at home. Activism alone will not be enough but combined with strong international support they can help build a better world, one with a strong foundation of human rights for all, regardless of citizenship status. It is not surprising that a book this broadly ambitious may be considered by some to be overly broad in its narrative and conclusions, but it is still a useful addition to the history of human rights and nation states. Although Weitz perhaps puts too much hope in the promise of international organizations, especially considering his masterful dissection of their failures in earlier chapters, the case studies

he presents would be useful to the general reader and student alike. It is a worthy final effort from an eminent historian.

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