**Eric D. Weitz. A World Divided: The Global Struggle for Human Rights in the Age of Nation-states.**

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**Published on** H-Nationalism (September, 2023)

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*A World Divided* is, as well-crafted histories are, an astute reflection of the issues of our collective present, more so than a mere retelling of the past.[1] Many nations today are in a moment of ideological crisis, their diverse constituents desiring utopias which are fundamentally at odds with each other: whole communities of people are cast out of a place, often on the basis of ethnicity (with all that term’s attendant cultural loci: religion, race, language, and so on); governments are dethroned violently by coup or peacefully by election, though it seems protests and riots abound from all sides. But the nation and its population are not the only stakeholders in these fractious conflicts; neighboring states and the world at large are intimately connected to what appear to be internal frictions. Indeed, that is one of Weitz’s primary points: “human rights advances emerge out of a confluence of popular struggles, state interests, and the workings of the international community” (p. 410).

Weitz is a well-respected voice in this discipline, and one who has contributed significantly to the scholarship on the history of human rights in specific contexts.[2] *A World Divided* is less about making an argument about or focusing on a specific case study, and more about exploring avenues of deeper inquiry. This book concentrates a career’s worth of knowledge, observations, and experience of human rights history into a cohesive, accessible, and—even at 550 pages—concise treatment of the subject, open to the question of what comes next. It is there that *A World Divided* makes its proposal: unification and consensus is possible through the evolution (possibly a painful one) of international human rights.

Without reservation and in expansive fashion, Weitz addresses the ambiguous intersection of global politics, national governments, and human rights. In doing so, Weitz forces the reader to consider at length the fluid definitions and functions of “human rights” in social and political domains, not as discrete, but as an ideology and a set of ethics and practices intertwined. Weitz’s argument is global, but he pinpoints specific moments of friction, when nations are in their infancy or undergoing significant change. It is in these moments that the question and rights of citizenship, inclusion or exclusion, the manifestation of ideology into tangible practices, need hashing out. The conflict invariably arises from differences of application and practice, even if the visions of stakeholders are the same (or similar).

The purpose of *A World Divided* is therefore threefold: while the text does guide the reader through a chronological unfolding of a global history of human rights—stemming from European roots in the eighteenth century and in the imperial
machinations of European states throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—it is also site for more open-ended (and inconclusive) discussion on the topic from a postcolonial and “culture of politics” perspective. It highlights the necessary nuance and cultural specificity such a discussion of human rights demands, this being made especially visible by Weitz’s organization of the book into national case studies. Therefore, *A World Divided* is itself divided into ten chapters, not including an introduction and conclusion, each one focused on a specific period of time and place, flowing from the modern imperial age in Greece and Turkey to the Cold War in Korea to postcolonial concerns in Burundi. This is a history of the past three centuries: eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth. Chapters also include the United States, Brazil, Namibia, the Soviet Union, Palestine, Israel, and Rwanda, but also address historical quasi-national ethnic minorities such as Armenians and Jews.

Given the global and chronological breadth of this work, what is its audience? *A World Divided* is a hefty read for any reader at 430 pages of content, exclusive of notes and index, but its language is accessible even as it addresses complicated and specific national cases, and Weitz’s prose flows, such that an enjoyable literary narrative emerges from dense historical contexts. An advanced reader in history will find it possible to dip into parts (or regions) of the book without having to read all the others in exact order (though, for a chronological trajectory, Weitz’s order is ideal), and to understand these specific regional discussions even if they are not experts in those geographies or eras. For the non-regional expert these chapters provide both a broad overview and a trove of detail, enough to serve as an in-depth introduction to that region and its political conceptual notions and applications of human rights. For regional or chronological experts, individual chapters offer an alternative perspective on histories they already are familiar with.

In terms of its use in the classroom, the book as a whole is unsuitable for an undergraduate or even graduate student audience. It is too large to assign; its size alone would terrify the most stalwart graduate student (let alone an undergraduate), but chapters may serve as excellent discussion pieces if assigned à la carte in graduate seminars or upper-level undergraduate courses. In short, this book is for us historians, and we should be glad for what it offers us: a site to examine tensions of ideology and practice, and reconsider our historical understandings of geopolitics, subjective (individual) and collective (state) ambitions, and their relation to the present culture of human rights.

Notes

[1]. I am not the only who thought so: the book was a finalist for the PROSE Award in World History, awarded by the Association of American Publishers.
