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Journal of Politics and Development

ISSN 2632-4911

Volume 11 ■ **Number 2** ■ **Summer 2021**

the rest: journal of politics and development

Previously published as Journal of Global analysis (JGA)

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BOOK REVIEW

Eric D. Weitz

A World Divided. The Global Struggle for Human Rights in the Age of Nation-States

(Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019, ISBN: 978-0-691-14544-0, 544 pp., £ 27)

There is nothing new under the sun. *A World Divided*, the last book by Eric D. Weitz, is a collection of histories and issues stemming from worldwide struggles for human rights. Here lies the strength of the volume: a ride through nationalism, regardless of geography, religion, ethnicity.

However, this work has a weak point: the leftist perspective, which fails to analyse and condemn criminal nationalism perpetrated in the name of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Weitz tries to explain the growing right-wing nationalism, attributing the contributing causes, in fact, to racial and ethnic discrimination, to “imperialist” policies, and economic exploitation. He has devoted his studies essentially to the history of the socialist Republic of Weimar and to civil rights and genocides, and with this work he remains coherent with his bibliography, drawing heavily on what he has already published.

Among the stories told in *A World Divided*: the exploitation of slaves in Brazil, the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, the Israeli-Palestinian question (in an anti-Zionist perspective), and Namibia, before the colony of the German Empire, later occupied by racist South Africa, until the country gained independence after a conflict supported by the Soviet Union, Cuba and Angola. It would be useful for potential readers, to frame the Namibian struggle within the confrontation of the two blocs through their proxies during the Cold War; it would help to understand the events from a historical perspective. Also, the story of the Greek rebels to gain independence from the Ottoman Empire, although part of the revolutionary wave in Europe that took place in Spain, Portugal, Italy, is presented in the context of the struggle against the absolutist and despotic state, although the Sublime Porte was anything but a nation-state, as much as a multinational entity like the Soviet Union.

Indeed, Weitz raises the Soviet Union and Communism as a bulwark of civil rights, forgetting the Red Terror during the Russian Civil War (1917-23) that began with the October Revolution (Trotzky, 1922) thus passing over the terrible crimes of Stalinism and the repression of the basic civil rights by the Soviet leadership – not to mention the military repression in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968) and the military intervention in Afghanistan (1979-89). While tackles the issue of human rights in divided Korea, Weitz skips the Cambodian genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge under the leadership of Communist Party general secretary Pol Pot (1975-79). Even Africa experimented the red terror: after taking control of the Derg, the military junta, in 1977, the new head of state, Mènghistu Hailè Mariàm, a Marxist-Leninist army officer, started a violent political campaign against members of the competing Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (Wiebel, 2017). But Weitz prefers to dwell on the Rwanda genocide of 1984. As for the inclusion of the Greek revolution, among those that occurred in that period, Waltz does not explain the reason for this choice.

The book puts emphasis on the human rights of peoples v. centralised state, but omits a fundamental analysis: often the population is nomadic and does not reside permanently within established boundaries (“stateless people”) (Fortes, M., Evans-Pritchard, 1995). A consideration that leads to the next step, namely the inclusion, in nation-states, of folks that have little or nothing to do with it due to ethnic, linguistic, religious and, more generally, cultural differences, and which is at the root-cause of the so-called “frozen conflicts” in the area of the former Soviet Union (Marsili, 2016). These are the underpinnings of the struggles that Weitz summarises in *A World Divided*. It is useful here to recall the famous sentence for which Mozambique's first president, Samora Machel, is

remembered for: “For the nation to live, the tribe must die”. The sentence effectively summarises the problem of the building of the nation-state in Africa, a continent in which Western powers had forced populations within drawn borders at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. In fact, the book places Western countries, *inter alia* the US as the 'leader of the free world', among those responsible for the oppression of peoples. To understand many of these conflicts it would be enough to refer to the 1993 classic by Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations*.

The massacres of Native Americans and their enslavement by the U.S. colonies disregards that the majority of Native American tribes did practise some form of slavery before the European introduction of African slavery into North America (Lauber, 1913). It would have been more correct to note that several socialist countries, including some African countries, although already independent, have only recently abolished this hateful practice. It passes over in silence also slavery still existing in practice in contemporary Africa (e.g., Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Sudan). Probably, this would not have benefited the globalist cause the book advocates openly.

Despite neglecting the historical role of the state and its characteristics, the book mainly draws on primary sources (UN, special tribunals and the main instruments on human, political and civil rights). While this is the strength of the volume, its weakness lies in having neglected to engage the discussion on a solid theoretical framework, for instance an in-depth overview of the differences between the basic concepts of nation-state and state-nation (Flint, 2016). Natural law and the law of nations provide the legal framework to uphold both the right to independence and the right to resistance – or to self-defence, according to the fathers of modern political philosophy and state theorists such as Hobbes, Lock and Vattel (Marsili, 2019). These cornerstone principles are interconnected and sometimes they are difficult to combine, that's exactly what Weitz tries to do in this book. It would have been wiser to choose to analyse only one face of the prism.

What remains, then, of this work? It is an attempt to summarise the history of the global struggle for human rights in the age of nation-states. From a scholar like Weitz we would have expected more, not so much from a quantitative point of view – the book is big enough – as regarding the

neutrality of the argument and the completeness of information. However, students of contemporary history, political philosophy, political science, and international law will find this publication useful, as it provides a digest of the struggles for human rights, selected by the author among dozens available, that have occurred in the last 100 years. What is missing, is partly hinted at in the book's conclusions, an unpretentious summary of its contents.

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