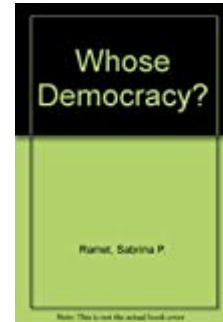


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Sabrina P. Ramet. *Whose Democracy?: Nationalism, Religion and the Doctrine of Collective Rights in Post-1989 Eastern Europe.* Lanham Inc.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. xii + 233 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-8324-6; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8323-9.



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Sabrina Ramet is certainly one of the most interesting and controversial scholars of eastern Europe. She has behind her a wide body of work which ranges from the solidly empirical[1] to the adventurously speculative[2]. She has taken on areas ranging from politics and social movements to gender relations and popular music. With such a wide scope, it is probably inevitable that her work has varied in quality—the exhaustively researched and carefully argued *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia*[1] can be safely described as a fundamental text for researchers setting out to understand the shape and direction of political conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, while her excursion into popular culture *Rocking the State*[3] demonstrated a dismaying inattention to detail and a tin ear for aesthetic issues.[4] Ramet’s work can range from dazzlingly detailed to unnervingly vague. But it is never dull.

Whose Democracy? will be recognized by readers familiar with Ramet’s work to date as very much within the tradition she has established for herself. Her preface declares the book to be “explicitly moral in purpose” (p. xi), as she sets herself the task of refuting the nationalist doctrine of “collective rights” based on an eclectic and unique political philosophy she develops out of the moral writings (principally) of Immanuel Kant, John Locke, and G.W.F. Hegel. So the rules of the game are set from the

beginning: contemporary political events are going to be evaluated from a philosophical perspective.

Ramet recognizes that her philosophical perspective is also, necessarily, a political one. As she sets it out, her political perspective is clear. She identifies it variously as “classical liberal” and “neo-Kantian” (p. 15), and here are its elements in practice: 1) a definition of the morality of states as derived from their legitimacy, 2) a concern with the suppression of the institutions of civil society by both communist and nationalist states, 3) a concern for processes of democratization and the recognition of the rights of individuals as the subjects of states, and 4) a rejection of claims of special rights on the part of groups to political or cultural autonomy. These political concerns come together in Ramet’s quite demonstrable claim: “it is often incomplete democratization—that is, inadequate respect for the rights of individuals—that kindles demands for territorial autonomy in the first place” (p. 7). It follows that responsible state craft would seek to address the causes rather than the consequences of conflicts over collective rights.

The grounds on which Ramet develops these political concerns, however, are likely to strike readers as a bit hermetic and overly theoretical. She develops two principles against which to measure political proposals: a doctrine of “Universal Reason” and a doctrine of “Nat-

ural Law” (caps hers). To spare readers of this review the details of her overview of (among others) Kant, Locke, and the *Federalist Papers*, the conclusion amounts to an argument that appeals to collective, ethnic, and national rights are contrary to “Universal Reason” because they privilege claims by one portion of a social collective over another, and tie individual rights to membership in a group instead of describing them as autonomous.

In principle, so far so good. For my own part, I have always been happy to argue that nationalist rhetoric does not describe a real situation and that nationalist projects are especially dangerous from the perspective of the rights of minorities and individuals. So politically, Ramet wins my heart; politically, I agree.

But theoretically, I do not. Ramet’s elaborate philosophical framework eludes an important point. Her condemnation of the doctrine of collective rights relies on attacking nationalism for what it is—not for what it does. Since Ramet makes reference to Hegel, the reader is tempted to recall Marx’s attack on the “left” Hegelians: “In order to abolish the *idea* of private property, the *idea* of communism is completely sufficient.”[5] And in order to address real manifestations of nationalist and ethnic collectivism, the *idea* of universal reason is probably not sufficient. However well Ramet derives her moral and philosophical argument, a theologically postulated “Universal Reason” is not likely to find much resonance among practical politicians.

The highlighting of “Universal Reason” threatens another potential contradiction to Ramet’s general posture of anti-nationalist liberalism. She identifies “Universal Reason” with canonically liberal precepts such as legitimacy, individual rights, and democracy. But the imperial pretensions of any position which makes claims to “universality” is eluded in her discussion. I have no intention of accusing Ramet of imperialism, Orientalism, or any of a number of other ideological sins. But the absence of a discussion regarding the tensions and conflicts surrounding claims to universal status, so prominent in contemporary political and sociological theory, leaves a wide range of questions unresolved.

Some of these theoretical difficulties become apparent in the first empirical chapter, where Ramet sets out to compare the failure of “transition” in eastern Europe after 1918 to the failure of “transition” after 1989. In brief, the legacies of old authoritarianism and the incompetence (or greed) of elites conspired in both cases to prevent the development of functioning democratic states, while the “national” foundation of states which had multinational

populations served to enhance rather than control ethnic tensions. On the one hand, this chapter shows Ramet at her best, empirically broad and theoretically solid, offering a wide range of interesting parallels and details. But the “Universal Reason” dilemma strikes at the center of the discussion: the problem with these states is that neither then nor now did they achieve a stable parliamentary democracy. This assumption gives a teleological cast to the term “transition,” and makes it reasonable to ask whether political actors ever in fact shared the goals which “Universal Reason” tells them they ought to.

The following chapter presents a wide-ranging analysis of conditions in “transition” countries from the perspective of privatization of economic institutions, restructuring of the state, freedom of the press, and a variety of social conflicts from ethnic hatred to crime. On the one hand, this chapter presents a useful and empirically rich overview. On the other hand, it is probably inevitable that in a brief chapter of very broad scope much information is lost. This problem is made worse by Ramet’s style of presentation. For example, freedom of the press and ethnic conflict are both summarized in tables of rankings, with the degree of press freedom or ethnic polarization indicated by asterisks (four asterisks and a cross indicate that Poland’s press is “mostly free, but with clerical influence” (p. 49). A greater or lesser number of asterisks does convey Ramet’s judgment economically, but it shows little about the sources of her judgment.

These measures are perhaps useful to the extent that one agrees with Ramet’s assessment, but there is a deeper problem with presenting interpretive material in the form of a table. First, it is difficult for readers to assess the factors which stand behind the graphic representation. Second, as Ramet’s discussion recognizes, such assessments are based on fluid situations which can be strongly affected by relatively minor changes (i.e., Serbia loses an asterisk for the independent television station Studio B losing its independence). Readers may or may not agree with the judgments represented in Ramet’s tables as they apply to the situation at the time she was writing the book—but they will certainly agree that the situation is far from stable. The fluidity of the situation is poorly represented by charts which picture ongoing processes as if they were fixed quantities.

In the next four chapters, the empirical heart of the book is presented. This is easily the most readable and persuasive part of the book, at least partly because Ramet is on territory in which she is expert—demographic and

political analysis. Chapter 3 discusses theories of rights generally by means of summaries of situations where collective rights are currently in conflict—the Hungarian minority in Romania, the Turks of Bulgaria, the Albanians of Macedonia, the Serbs of Croatia, and the entity Ramet calls “post-Dayton Bosnia.” This chapter presents a concise and spirited practical political argument equating an ethnically derived “autonomism” with the principle that “might makes right” (p. 94).

In the next three chapters, Ramet presents much more detailed narrative and analysis of political developments around the question of ethnocentrism and church domination in Poland, the manufacture of secessionist sentiment in Slovakia, and the conflict over autonomy and cultural rights in Kosovo. While specialists in any one of these areas might have objections to some of Ramet’s interpretations of events or to her undisguised political sympathies, each of the chapters stands on its own as an introduction to the problems of the states and regions under consideration. The analysis is clear and the documentation is strong, even where some conclusions are likely to be controversial. I would have no hesitation in assigning any one of these three chapters to undergraduates as a way of introducing them to the issues and places under discussion.

The strength of the empirical chapters is, in a sense, the weakness of the book. What makes them convincing is that Ramet demonstrates that the development and outcomes of the struggles over rights she describes depended on a balance of material and political factors, each of them relatively unique and each of them dependent on other developments in social relations, economic conditions, and international relations. That is to say that the situations she describes are well defined by almost any quantity *except* the conflict between “Universal Reason” and collectivist ideologies.

The conclusions offer a mixture of insights which are eminently, to borrow Ramet’s own standard, “reasonable”—together with proposals which are unnervingly over-schematic. She productively suggests, early in the conclusion, that an explanation for the emergence of violent conflict over collective rights in some and not other places can be tied to the legitimacy of states in which collective differences exist. (p. 164) From this point she takes off to develop a definition of legitimacy based on “six alternative moral orientations, five alternative political arrangements, and three alternative economic systems [...] which is to say, ninety theoretically

possible alternative social orders” (p. 166). The development of permutations makes for an interesting exercise, but it is as difficult to comprehend as it is to imagine what uses such an unwieldy typology might have in research.

The difficulties presented by Ramet’s text, however, ought not to stand in the way of recognizing that she has made an important intervention in the debate over national conflicts and national rights, especially with regard to the former Yugoslavia. Arguing against the too commonly accepted premise that “one is, in the first place, a Serb or a Croat or a Muslim, and only derivatively a human being enjoying certain rights” (p. 174), Ramet aims both to present a plausible alternative to the dominance of collectivist understandings and to spark a debate about other possible normative understandings of conflict. Whatever readers might make of her premises and conclusions, her intervention largely succeeds in those goals.

Whose Democracy? is classic Ramet. It is often impressive in its scope and ambition, and sometimes frustrating in its superficiality and dogmatism. But like it or not, this book is going to receive a lot of attention. And it is going to deserve it.

Notes:

[1]. Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia, 1962-1991* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

[2]. Sabrina P. Ramet, *Social Currents in Eastern Europe: Sources and Meanings of the Great Transformation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

[3]. Sabrina P. Ramet, ed., *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

[4]. See Anna Szemere, review of Sabrina Petra Ramet, ed., *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*, *Popular Music* 14, 2 (1995), pp. 273-275.

[5]. In Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), p. 99.

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