Book Reviews

Will Kymlicka and Eva Pföstl (eds.)


One of the pillars of a democratic State is the principle of equality that, in its substantive version, implies the right to be different. People must be treated equally, which means that there is sometimes a necessity of treating them differently because they have different requirements. From here stems the need to guarantee under-represented interests, like those of minority groups that have the right to express their own narrative identity—related to language, cultural or religious autonomy, political representation—even if it differs from the narration of the majority. A democratic State is by nature pluralistic and respectful of diversity among its citizens. That infers not only negative rights, entailing the warding off of interference from public authority, but also the need to open the door to the State’s affirmative actions, based on positive discrimination among communities. In this manner, the principle of equality translates a formal (majority) democracy into a substantive (constitutional) democracy. Yet, in pursuing these goals, that principle may also aliment tensions between the majority rule, the State’s sovereignty and the freedom for a minority to remain different. That is all the more appreciable where social contexts are characterized by strongly marked cleavages.

Democracy is governed by its most popularly understood principle, the majority rule, through which public authority affirms legislative acts avoiding both the balkanization of distinct communities and the feudalization of State’s sovereignty. However, when it is said that this sovereignty reflects the people’s will, the “people” are in reality expressed through the majority, which often tends to assimilate different identities and, consequently, not to provide for the real (substantive) equality of minorities. Therefore, while international organizations continue to insist on respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of existing States, and while echoes of the assimilationist approach remain, respect for minority rights is seen as one of the greatest challenges for contemporary democracies. In this sense, the principle of equality shall be
implemented in a way that accommodates the minorities’ claims and prohibiting unreasonable distinctions. And if this would be the case, the non-discrimination principle too has to change its character from being fundamentally connected to formal equality principle towards a non-discrimination that also reflects a substantive equality approach.

Besides, such an approach needs to be developed in the light of other two important issues: the individual human rights and the nature of minority requirements. On the one hand, the principle of equality implies the individual human rights, which must be recognised and guaranteed at any level of democratic participation and from any form of tyranny, including the forms of oppression that occur within a minority. On the other, the nature of sub-State community demands and the State’s responses vary considerably from region to region to such an extent that the same policy, which seems attractive in a geopolitical context, can systematically be seen as disadvantage or unreasonable in other parts of the world. The questions of minority rights in the Arab world are illustrative examples of that.

These questions have in fact triggered a large and still growing body of literature, inspiring comparative analyses of nationality laws, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples as well as studies of ideal policies governing diversities in the Arab world. Yet there is one pervasive limitation. Often this literature seems to be Occidentocentric or Arab-ethnocentric. So that, depending on the author’s perspective, some aspects of minority issues are exaggerated and some others are eluded or distorted. The volume Multiculturalism and Minority Rights in the Arab World, edited by Will Kymlicka and Eva Pföstl can be seen as one of the welcomed—exceptions.

Drawing on original and a well-established mix of both multidisciplinary approaches and authors’ different backgrounds, this volume tells a story that is much more complex than the stereotypical images of State-minority issues in the Arab world. The editors have in effect been able to combine historical and theoretical perspectives (Part 1) with a number of detailed case studies (Part 2) concerning the Western Sahara dispute,1 the Amazigh Movement in Algeria,2 the treatment of migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates and neighbouring States,3 the condition of Arab people within Israel,4 the federalization of

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1 Jacob Mundy, Bringing the Tribe Back in? The Western Sahara Dispute, Ethno-history, and the Imagineering of Minority Conflicts in the Arab World, pp. 127–150.
3 Nicholas McGeehan, The Gulf’s Servant Class, pp. 174–188.