plot in real time. In her 1925 dissertation, Baker spoke of women workers who opposed protective legislation because they labored on “industrial frontiers” in trades dominated by men. She understood “protective laws were an asset to women workers in fields they dominated but were a liability in fields in which they were a minority” (141). By the 1960s, Baker takes stock of social and economic changes since World War II and concludes, “Protective labor legislation may play a smaller role in the future than the past [189].” Of course, she was right.

Fittingly, *A Class By Herself* offers a challenge more than an easy moral or tidy conclusion. Woloch opens with the big questions that run throughout her narrative: “Does classification by sex invariably stigmatize those so classified and increase disadvantage? Alternatively, does gender-neutral law run the risk of denying difference, increasing inequality, and requiring conformity to standards set by men” (3)? These questions emerge again and again, growing familiar over the rise and preservation of protective legislation, and then in the final and sudden end of protection, these same questions of difference, equality, and risk take on a slightly recalibrated urgency. By the time *Johnson Controls* establishes women’s right to choose whether they should labor in hazardous workplaces, equality is gained, but the threat to workers’ health remains. The contingency of the past becomes ours as we still struggle with safety regulation, minimum wage, parental leave, and equal pay. Having demonstrated the necessity for complexity, nuance, and humility when demanding legal and economic equality for women in the past, Woloch leaves her readers to figure out how to face these complex issues in the twenty-first century.

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It is a time-honored cliché to claim that a book defies overview, its elegance and erudition invalidating the very idea of a concise assessment. In most cases, such claims amount to little more than rhetorical flourishes. The present book is a rare exception, presenting the reviewer with the unenviable task of having to convey in a limited space the full scope of an argument that sweeps across two decades and four continents to marshal an enormous quantity of previously untapped archival material.
Today, the League of Nations is remembered for many things, and is forgotten for even more. Its drive to establish a system of multilateral institutions that would coordinate, if not eradicate, the great-power rivalry that had marked the Concert of Europe’s machinations during the long nineteenth century is regularly cited as a forerunner of the United Nations. Its support for “technical cooperation” with respect to everything from the struggle against malaria to the regulation of maritime traffic to the standardization of economic data is invoked as a progenitor of the countless networks and organizations that now link the globe. The efforts of jurists and diplomats affiliated with various League agencies to further disarmament initiatives and outlaw the aggressive use of force is sometimes presented as having inspired attempts to defuse the Cold War that set in shortly after the next “great war.” Above all, however, the League of Nations is remembered as a failure, a starry-eyed attempt to reduce the violence and unpredictability of international politics to the (nominal) order and consistency of international law. The League’s inability to contain nationalism; its toothlessness in the face of the Great Depression; and its ineffective responses to war and intervention in Spain, Abyssinia, Manchuria, and elsewhere, all, it is widely believed, contributed to the League’s de-legitimization and consequent dissolution. As the institutional embodiment of a “20 years’ crisis” in which one after another hope revealed itself to be delusional, the League spawned the very catastrophe it was meant to avert.

The Guardians has little patience for such narratives. Sidestepping traditional explanations of the League project, Susan Pedersen trains her lens on the mandates system, regarded by many lawyers and historians today as the most significant precursor to the United Nations’ trusteeship system and a host of broadly related modes of international territorial administration. Unlike the League’s minority protection regime, designed principally for Central and Eastern European states, the mandates system was intended for the extra-European world, a means of placing territories detached from the German and Ottoman Empires under a combination of foreign administration and international supervision. Pursuant to Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant, every such territory was to be governed by a mandatory power with a view to ensuring its “well-being” and “development” (these terms being in tension and also open to divergent interpretations) and in the name of a “sacred trust of civilization” (this expression being a continuation of the centuries-old tradition of the mission civilisatrice). The League itself was to exercise oversight powers, mainly, although not exclusively, through its Permanent Mandates Commission. This was a small agency staffed by a shrewd and well-connected group of former ministers, colonial governors, and similarly high-ranking officials, most of whom hailed from leading imperialist states.

Lawyers and historians have conventionally sought to distinguish the kind of internationalized administration that found expression in the mandates system from the direct colonial rule that had marked European expansion (and its
underlying capitalist logic) for centuries. There is certainly something to this effort. Some of the most enthusiastic advocates of mandates would not have cast their lot with the system had it not been for their desire to stave off direct annexation of German and Ottoman territories. As Pedersen herself notes, the fact that the system—and the League more generally—operated in “a swirl of publicity” (65), with intense lobbying and public scrutiny often accompanying key decisions, tended to discourage crude policies of territorial aggrandizement. Nevertheless, the line between formal and informal domination is always a highly fluid one, and the distinction between colonialism sensu stricto and the League’s regime of mandatory administration has typically been overdrawn and exaggerated. In most cases, it has rested upon a rather naive belief that multilateralism is preferable to unilateralism and that the compromises of international law are capable of mitigating the rigors of domestic law.

The central ambition of *The Guardians* is to provide a more sophisticated explanation of the mandates system than any such hard-and-fast distinction would permit, and Pedersen is astonishingly successful in this regard, demonstrating that those who designed, implemented, petitioned, and railed against the mandates system continually blurred the line between formal and informal control. As she notes, one consequence of this conceptual and ideological ambiguity was that it became exceptionally difficult to determine whether sovereignty could justifiably be said to vest in the people inhabiting the territory that was placed in the trust of the mandatory power. Although most authorities were of the view that each mandate constituted a contract between the League on the one hand and the mandatory power on the other (91), there was nothing approaching a consensus on the question of where sovereign authority was ultimately to be located. Did sovereignty lie in the people subject to mandatory rule, in the mandatory power itself, or perhaps in the League? If sovereignty vested in the people, was it merely “in abeyance” until such time as the mandatory relationship came to an end and the people in question reconstituted itself as an independent sovereign state? Some may have sought to dismiss such questions as being purely of academic interest (e.g., 229); however, it is not hard to see that they lay at the heart of far-reaching debates concerning the limits of mandatory power and the rights of “native” peoples. Because whereas the mandates system was designed to internationalize the governance of formerly German and Ottoman territories, setting and ostensibly enforcing standards for foreign administration, it also facilitated the alienation of large tracts of land, furthered the practice of granting concessions to foreign companies, and reinforced a wide-ranging “open door” policy that invited economic exploitation by all and sundry. Indeterminacy with respect to the content and location of sovereignty thus proved to be a handmaiden of informal empire, all the more insidious for being less visible and less costly to maintain than formal empire. As Pedersen rightly observes, all of this was made possible by the
imprecision of the relevant legal instruments, first and foremost the League
Covenant and the individual mandate documents. Those who participated in
Geneva’s “force field” (5, 11, 94) may have been committed to a legalistic tex-
tualism (e.g., 64–65, 101–2); however, the texts themselves were shot through
with uncertainties that muddied the concept of sovereignty and muddled the
line between formal and informal tutelage.

Pedersen does not belabor the contemporary resonance of these and other
debates. Nor does she attempt to write a history of the present. At root, it is
for the reader to link the heavy-handed Belgian administration of Ruanda-
Urundi to the “tribal” divisions that would later prove to be so cataclysmic.
Similarly, it is up to the reader to trace the contemporary implications of
France’s brutal suppression of the Great Syrian Revolt or the various claims
to Palestine that were made by Arab and Jewish groups during the 1920s
and 1930s. Such circumspection makes the book not only more persuasive
but also more pressing.

Simply put, Susan Pedersen has produced an instant classic, a work of ex-
traordinary range that is without question the most insightful and carefully re-
searched study of the mandates system currently available. It will remain a
touchstone for all future discussion of this system, as well as of its complex
and variegated implications for subsequent exercises in nation- and state-
building. It should—and doubtless shall—be read (and reread) widely.

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