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# The Many Meanings of National Self-Determination

BRAD SIMPSON

In June 1919, as delegates from 25 countries gathered in Paris to finalize a settlement to World War I, a small group of Vietnamese activists delivered a petition to US Secretary of State Robert Lansing, hoping to enlist his support for their campaign against French rule in Indochina. The petition, signed by Nguyen Ai Quoc (later known to the world as Ho Chi Minh), declared that “the subject peoples” of the world were “waiting for the principle of national self-determination to pass from ideal to reality.” US President Woodrow Wilson had raised the hopes of Nguyen and other anticolonial activists with a series of widely disseminated speeches suggesting that the subject peoples of Europe had the right to self-determination.

Yet Wilson ignored the petition and hundreds like it during the spring and summer of 1919 from activists from around the world who hoped to use the postwar moment to lend legitimacy to their movements for independence from European colonial rule. Victorious European governments had no intention of relinquishing their nations’ imperial holdings, and US officials insisted that colonial areas were too backward to merit self-government, except perhaps after decades of tutelage.

US and European leaders embraced self-determination in the sense of popular self-government for European national groups, a conception used to justify the forcible relocation of millions in eastern and southern Europe after 1919 in the service of creating homogeneous nation-states. The colonial possessions of the German and Ottoman empires were transferred to the League of Nations mandate system and placed under international trusteeship,

ultimately deferring the colonial question until the end of an even more destructive and bloody conflict, World War II. Popular uprisings in China, Korea, India, Egypt, and elsewhere were suppressed with brutal force. Ho Chi Minh and others like him turned to Marxism-Leninism or other political ideologies as the failures of liberal nationalism proved too glaring to overcome.

The end of World War I was a signal moment in the history of anticolonialism, though neither the war nor Wilson’s rhetoric were proximate causes of the trend. Anticolonial movements predated the war and long outlasted it. Anticolonial activists’ appropriation of the discourse of self-determination to describe their aims, however, gave the concept far greater visibility and legitimacy than ever before. In the war’s aftermath—and in the century since—self-determination became one of the most important and contested ideas in international politics, serving as shorthand for a wide range of claims to sovereignty and human rights.

## HARD QUESTIONS

The dramatic expansion of self-determination claims and movements during the immediate postwar period raised numerous difficult questions: What was a “people” or a “nation”? Did anyone have a “right” to self-determination, and if so, was this right confined to the political sphere or did it have economic or cultural dimensions? Did it include the right to secede from established states? Was self-determination an act (such as a plebiscite) or an ongoing process (such as the holding of elections)? Did it apply merely to European colonies or extend to peoples and nations in other parts of the world? The strange career of self-determination in the century since

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World War I began has provided few easy answers to these questions.

Historians have traced the origins of ideas about self-determination to the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the American Declaration of Independence in the late eighteenth century, and to nineteenth-century German philosophy and late-nineteenth-century Marxism. Early twentieth-century radicals and nationalists were among the first to frame self-determination in collective terms as the right to form independent nation-states, which Vladimir Lenin called a stage in the historical development of capitalism.

Wilson and his peers viewed self-determination in liberal terms, as a political act that would create independent nation-states for people with “well-defined national aspirations.” He did not believe it to be a right, or think that the principle should apply to colonial peoples outside of Europe, at least not for the immediate future. Many anticolonial activists, however, couched their demands for self-determination in the context of a broader critique of capitalism and imperialism, and the economic exploitation they entailed. Wilson’s vision also posed a challenge for anticolonial leaders who sought to build transnational solidarity and framed their claims, as some Muslim activists did, in religious rather than ethnic or nationalist terms.

The rejection by US and European leaders of more expansive self-determination claims hardly settled the matter. During the interwar period, a wide range of groups and movements continued to frame their aspirations and demands in these terms. Self-determination lacked legal standing in international law and remained ill-defined, and was thus open to appropriation and redefinition to suit diverse needs. Anticolonial activists in League of Nations mandate territories, Pan-African and Pan-Asian thinkers, African-American Communists in the southern United States, and even National Socialists demanding *selbstbestimmung* for German-speaking peoples in central Europe kept the idea alive, even as some of them revealed the more ominous ends for which it could be used.

## CLASHING VISIONS

The outbreak of war in Europe and Asia in the late 1930s and the seeming collapse of European

empires once again galvanized anticolonial activists around the world to demand self-rule. In order to articulate a set of Allied war aims that would rally British and American citizens, and perhaps defang these anticolonial demands, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt in August 1941 jointly proclaimed the Atlantic Charter. The charter pledged that the Allies would “respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live” and “see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.”

Anticolonial activists seized on the charter’s promises of self-rule to justify their independence struggles. As a wartime slogan, support for self-determination proved to hold widespread popular appeal. The African National Congress in 1943 concluded that the Charter reaffirmed the principle of self-determination, and applied both to colonies and to peoples subjected to minority rule. Two years later, as he declared Vietnam’s

independence, Ho Chi Minh declared, “We are convinced that the Allied nations, which at Tehran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse

to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam.” Winston Churchill, among others, vehemently denied that the Charter said anything of the sort.

After 1941, the United States sought to embrace self-determination as a basic principle of global order, while simultaneously narrowing its scope and meaning. In doing so, US officials, scholars, and others advanced a limited vision of self-determination as popular self-rule. Like most colonial powers, Britain for its part insisted that rights inhered in individuals and not in collectively identified peoples. According to this argument, self-determination was a principle, not a right; and this principle imposed no legal obligation on states.

Both powers, therefore, worked to delete references to self-determination from the United Nations Charter, before bowing under strong pressure from Latin American and non-Western states. Anticolonial movements, many postcolonial states, and their socialist allies offered a more radical vision of self-determination, encompassing economic as well as political sovereignty, champi-

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*Economic self-determination claims were central to many post-1945 debates about sovereignty.*

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oning national liberation as a means to achieve it, and predicated on the full and rapid decolonization of European empires.

The Soviet Union's embrace of these more radical visions, dating back to Lenin, made self-determination a Cold War issue. US officials cited their deeply held belief that self-determination and communism were incompatible to justify countless American interventions in the decolonizing and developing world, from Iran to Guatemala to Vietnam. For example, Lyndon Johnson praised the 1965 invasion of the Dominican Republic as a "good example of what the United States wishes to see in other parts of the world: namely, that people have the right to self-determination, to freely elect their leaders and to choose the type of government they desire." A few years later, dissidents living behind the Iron Curtain would begin invoking self-determination to frame their own demands for an end to Communist rule in Eastern Europe.

## THE FIRST RIGHT?

Recognizing that the idea of self-determination would be appropriated by the great powers to serve their own interests, many anticolonial and nationalist leaders became convinced that they must enshrine the principle

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as a right and as customary international law. After failing to secure inclusion of self-determination in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, newly independent states began working through the UN Human Rights Commission and the Decolonization Committee to institutionalize its legal status as "the first right" from which all other human rights derived. These efforts ran in tandem with the widening process of decolonization and the central role that discourses of national liberation and self-determination played in justifying that process.

In 1960, African and Asian states secured passage of the landmark Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, which established self-determination as "the legal foundation for the establishment of the sovereign state from the colonial territory." When the UN General Assembly adopted the twin human right covenants in 1966 (one on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and the other on Civil and Political Rights), each began by stating: "All peoples have the right of self-

determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development."

The adoption of the covenants was the result, not the cause, of the extraordinarily rapid collapse of European empires, the emergence of new states, and the transformation of the UN that a larger membership made possible. As decolonization accelerated, however, so too did debates concerning the nature and limits of self-determination. Many viewed the idea with ambivalence, fearing that expansive claims by anticolonial movements could lead to secessionist movements, superpower conflict, and an unraveling of the international order.

At the founding conference of the Organization of African Unity in 1963, for example, leaders heatedly debated whether the Pan-African ideals of unity, anticolonialism, and self-determination required the maintenance of colonial borders or their dissolution in favor of a Pan-African federation or some other formation. Commitment to the territorial integrity of established states was a cornerstone of postwar international relations and one of the few causes uniting the Western democracies with the Communist bloc, and the former imperial powers with their former colonies.

Social scientists (like Harvard's Rupert Emerson) and diplomats alike worried that acknowledgment of a broad right to self-determination might open a Pandora's box of secession and state fragmentation, especially in the postcolonial world. This concern with secession revealed sharp differences between post-World War I and post-World War II conceptions of self-determination. US and European leaders after 1919 generally viewed national or ethnic communities, rather than states, as the repository of rights when it came to self-determination claims. The leaders of many newly independent countries after 1945, ruling over multiethnic communities bound together by anticolonial nationalism, understood self-determination as a right conferred on states and viewed ethnonationalism as a threat, or even a neocolonial plot to break up large, multiethnic countries such as the Congo or Nigeria.

UN member states almost uniformly condemned secessionist movements, especially in

Africa, and supported or turned a blind eye to the often bloody efforts of the Congo, Nigeria, and other states to suppress them. UN Secretary General U Thant stated that the “United Nations’ attitude is unequivocal . . . the UN has never accepted and does not accept and I believe it will not ever accept the principle of secession of part of its member states.” US officials generally agreed, though they occasionally backed separatist movements in postcolonial states when doing so suited broader Cold War agendas.

The 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a blizzard of initiatives at the United Nations and in regional forums invoking the right to self-determination and further solidifying its *de facto* legal status. Yet despite growing international acceptance of such a right for the world’s non-self-governing peoples, Western governments and early human rights organizations such as the International League for the Rights of Man held vastly different views than the decolonizing world on its scope and limits.

National liberation movements in southern Africa, the Middle East, and Asia asserted their right to use any means at their disposal—including armed force—to realize the right to self-determination. The United States, European colonial powers, and states such as Israel facing armed opposition movements rejected such claims. The United States and Britain, for example, both withdrew from the Decolonization Committee in 1971 after it passed a series of resolutions endorsing the right to armed struggle and even seeming to justify terrorism in pursuit of self-determination.

## ECONOMIC SOVEREIGNTY

By the mid-1970s, the era of formal European colonialism was drawing to a close. Between 1974 and 1976, Cape Verde, Comoros, São Tomé and Príncipe, Mozambique, Angola, Samoa, the Seychelles, Suriname, Papua New Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau joined the UN. They were the last group of independent states to appear until the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The achievement of political self-determination by the vast majority of the world’s formerly colonized peoples marked a turning point in the history of human rights. However, the end of the colonial era did not result in a falling-off of self-determination claims. A wide range of groups continued to make such claims on behalf of an

ever more expansive vision of sovereignty and rights.

The growing North/South divide over the scope and meaning of this vision most fully revealed itself in efforts by postcolonial and Latin American states to assert a right to economic self-determination. Leaders in many of these states had long recognized that political independence was a hollow prize so long as their economies remained dependent on their former colonial masters or dominated by foreign firms. The Atlantic Charter’s calls for postwar economic cooperation and equal access to raw materials for all nations, moreover, were hardly consistent with calls for economic sovereignty. Unsurprisingly, then, many postcolonial leaders insisted that political decolonization and independence must be buttressed by sovereignty over resources, investment decisions, and macroeconomic policy in order to be meaningful.

Yet US officials during this period, like Woodrow Wilson before them, did not seem to have even contemplated the prospect that demands for economic self-determination would begin emanating from the decolonizing world and Latin America. They had expressed far more concern regarding the dismantling of colonial trading blocs and other barriers to the establishment of an integrated world economy. Economic self-determination

From the archives  
of *Current History*...

“The creation of a league of free nations is the creation of an authority that may legitimately call upon existing empires to give an account of their stewardship. It comes to that. For an unchecked fragmentary control it substitutes a general authority. This league must necessarily alter the whole problem, therefore, of the tutelage of the politically immature nations, the control of the tropics, and the distribution of staple products in the world. It will knock away every excuse which can be made for dominion over ‘subject peoples.’”

H.G. Wells

“The Death Knell of Empire”

August 1918

HISTORY IN THE MAKING  
**100**  
years  
1914 - 2014

claims, however, proved not marginal but central to many post-1945 debates about the scope and nature of sovereignty.

Western diplomats, businessmen, and international legal scholars were quick to see the economic implications of acknowledging a right to self-determination. French officials, one US diplomat wrote in 1950, “are very much worried about the inclusion of any kind of article on self-determination [in the proposed UN human rights covenants], no matter how carefully drafted the language might be.” He added, “They fear that this will lead to economic self-determination of peoples and not be limited to political self-determination alone.”

They were right to worry. In 1952, Chile proposed amending the draft human rights covenants to state that the “right of people to self-determination included the economic right to control all of their natural resources and not to be deprived of their use . . . by any outside power.” The Chilean proposal set off a fierce decade-long debate over some of the most basic questions in international law concerning the prerogatives of foreign investors, the rights and duties of states, and the very meaning of sovereignty. These were especially pertinent questions for the decolonizing world.

US and other Western officials, business leaders, and social scientists viewed assertions of a right to economic self-determination, resource sovereignty, or nationalization as threats to the framework of foreign trade and investment underpinning the world economy. They argued that there was no such thing as economic self-determination, and that acknowledging such a right would lead to expropriation and capital flight from so-called developing countries, imperiling their futures.

These debates culminated in a landmark 1962 UN resolution endorsing permanent sovereignty over natural resources, firmly linking decolonization and self-determination to the notion of economic sovereignty. In the years that followed, developing countries launched bold challenges to the position of Western capital, nationalizing or expropriating natural resources from scores of Western firms. Postcolonial African leaders such as Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, who in 1960 admonished fellow anticolonialists to “seek ye

first the political kingdom,” by the end of the decade were nodding their heads in agreement with Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere, who insisted that “if we are to remain free, if we are to enjoy the benefits of Africa’s enormous wealth, we must unite to plan the exploitation of our human and material resources in the interest of all of our people.”

In March 1974, the United Nations held a special session on economic issues. In his speech at the meeting, Algerian leader Houari Boumediene highlighted the differences between Wilsonian self-determination and the far more capacious vision of the Third World. Western nations, he charged, had “accepted the principle of self-determination only after having grasped the reins of the world economy,” ensuring that formal independence would be meaningless. It was here that the Group of 77, led by Iran, issued a declaration of principles for the establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) that would accelerate the development of poor countries and close the widening gap between them and the industrialized world.

The solidarity of the postcolonial world was always fragile, masking deep economic and political differences that were revealed in the wake of the 1970s oil shocks. But the

grounding of calls for the NIEO in terms of human rights and self-determination shows just how far the decolonizing world and many of its supporters had moved from Woodrow Wilson’s vision.

## INDIGENOUS STRUGGLES

While American officials and others sought at the international level to contain self-determination claims and discourses within narrow bounds, they proved unable to do so. Just as significantly, they proved unable to prevent a wide range of groups and movements within the United States—including African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans—from deploying self-determination claims in ways that both connected with and transcended the transnational movements from which they often drew inspiration.

During the long black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s, many civil rights activists drew on the language of self-determination, human rights, and anticolonialism to define their movement and place it in a global context.

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*Anticolonial movements  
offered a more radical vision  
of self-determination.*

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Native American nations and organizations also embraced self-determination as a way of framing their collective struggles for political, economic, and cultural autonomy. They joined a global stream of indigenous sovereignty movements that, as the historian Daniel Cobb writes, “cannot be understood apart from the larger politics of modernization and decolonization or the turbulent contests over race, poverty, and war at home.”

The indigenous movements for self-determination grew out of but also transcended the Cold War and the era of decolonization. Indigenous activists were in many ways simply importing ideas that had long circulated abroad and refashioning them for use in the advanced industrial democracies. Their efforts demonstrate that the idea of self-determination, far from exhausting itself after European empires collapsed, had instead become a global vernacular for articulating sovereignty and rights claims.

## **WILSON’S GHOSTS**

A century after the start of the First World War, the concept of self-determination continues to fire the imaginations and aspirations of a wide array of movements and peoples.

In 2011, as President Barack Obama announced a gradual withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, he said, “In all that we do, we must remember that what sets America apart is not solely our power—it is the principles upon which our union was founded. . . . We stand not for empire, but for self-determination.” Thousands of miles away, citizens in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria were voicing their demands for an end to authoritarian rule in similar terms.

Like all American presidents since Wilson, Obama has identified support for self-determination as a cornerstone of US national identity. But like Wilson, he has also viewed self-determination as a source of potential peril, supporting it in principle but ever wary of expansive claims made on its behalf or excesses committed in its name.

For many, the unraveling of the Soviet Union after 1991 was a vindication of Wilson’s postwar vision. However, the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the spread of civil wars in Africa in the same decade prompted others to agree with the sociologist Amitai Etzioni’s criticism of self-determination as an “evil” and “destructive” idea that had “exhausted [its] legitimacy as a means to create more strongly democratic states.”

The past century is littered with examples of violence and bloodshed committed in the name of self-determination. One need look no further than the Middle East, where some of the borders of the post–World War I territorial settlements appear to be unraveling before our very eyes. The legacies of the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which promised a national homeland for European Jews while ignoring similar demands from the Arab inhabitants of mandate Palestine, still bedevil the international community. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne sacrificed the ambitions of Kurdish leaders, who were promised autonomy by the Allied powers only to see their hoped-for homeland divided among Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. Today, the political fragmentation of Iraq has produced a *de facto* independent Kurdistan, which is in turn threatened by civil war in Syria and the rise of the jihadist Islamic State movement.

Myriad claims and movements, however, produced a slowly expanding body of international legal principles that in the last few decades have enabled the peaceful adjudication of the vast majority of self-determination disputes, even if sometimes (as in South Sudan or Kosovo) only after the exhaustion of other means, including civil war. The September 2014 independence referendum in Scotland is arguably now the norm rather than the exception, though the Russian annexation of Crimea and demands for self-determination for Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine demonstrate how malleable and open to manipulation the idea remains.

Self-determination long ago entered the global vernacular as a way of understanding sovereignty and human rights. A child of *fin de siècle* Europe that was given a global platform during the Great War, it long ago escaped its bounds. The persistence of the idea in 2014 as a way of framing wildly divergent sovereignty and rights claims both shows how far we have come in the past century and attests to the limits of Woodrow Wilson’s worldview. Neither he nor his peers were willing to wrestle with the far more expansive visions of self-determination proposed by anti-colonial leaders, the implications of competing claims by various ethnonationalist and religious groups, or the contradictions between political sovereignty grounded in the nation-state and the countervailing demands of an increasingly integrated world economy. The ghosts of Wilson haunt us still. ■