

## Self-Determination

AMITAI ETZIONI

George Washington University, USA

Self-determination is the process by which a people who are governed by a foreign power gain self-government. Often the people first form a sense of community—a sense of a shared identity, destiny, and set of core values—and then seek to invest those in a state, forming a nation (defined as a community invested in a state). The term self-determination is also used to refer to the normative principle that is evoked to justify breaking away from the old regime to form a new one.

Self-determination was recognized as a principle of international law by Article 1 of the UN Charter, which calls for “friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples” (United Nations 1945). The 1966 UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights defines this principle as the right of peoples to “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (UN General Assembly 1966: 3). Self-determination was popularized by US President Woodrow Wilson in his wartime speeches, with six of his “Fourteen Points” being implicitly based on the concept (Pomerance 1976: 1–27; Raic 2002: 181). Prior to the formation of the United Nations, self-determination failed to gain recognition in international fora such as the League of Nations, as it threatened the interests of existing colonial powers (Kirgis 1994: 304–10).

Demands for national self-determination have served a large number of people in rising against colonial powers and in breaking up empires to form their own states and nations. The US and Latin American wars of independence against the European colonial powers provided important precedents of self-determination. Following the French Revolution and the rise of nationalism, minority demands for self-determination undermined the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman empires, which collapsed after World War I. As nationalism spread outside Europe, aspirations toward self-determination inspired the liberation movements that ended the British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and other empires in the mid-twentieth century, creating scores of new independent nations. The last major wave of self-determination occurred when the USSR fell apart. (One may add the disintegration of Yugoslavia.)

Given that, in each of these instances, native people (often of color) were able to wrest control of their lives from foreign powers that had occupied or controlled their lands and exploited them (though helping them develop economically and sometimes politically), self-determination has long been associated with democratization and hence considered a major liberating force and principle.

Since the end of the imperial period, and especially in the twenty-first century, the democratizing effects of self-determination—both when actually effected or merely fought for—have been far less clear. Amitai Etzioni suggested that, in the future, self-determination should be viewed as detrimental when it leads to less self-governance

*The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism*, First Edition.

Edited by John Stone, Rutledge M. Dennis, Polly S. Rizova, Anthony D. Smith, and Xiaoshuo Hou.

© 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2016 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

DOI: 10.1002/9781118663202.wberen631

(e.g., in the case of Slovakia and Crimea) and as beneficial when it leads to significantly higher levels of self-government (e.g., in the cases of East Timor, South Sudan, and the Kurds) (Etzioni 1992–3: 21–35).

Furthermore, in cases where regional minorities hold that a *democratic* central government is not responsive to their needs, as has been the case in Catalonia, Quebec, and Scotland, increasing regional autonomy or moving from a unitary state to a federal one may better achieve democratic self-government than secession (Etzioni 1992–3: 21–35). Such decentralization seems to have been carried out fairly successfully in Canada but much less so in Spain, while the effect of such changes in the United Kingdom is not yet clear.

Although self-determination is typically understood as an anti-imperial norm, it may also serve to justify territorial aggrandizement. Mark Bessinger (2014) argues that Russia in particular has over the past century used self-determination to “justify overriding sovereignty norms, challenging the territorial integrity of weaker states, and rationalizing an expansion of [its] power and influence—at times despite opposition by a majority of inhabitants of the affected areas [and] the conflicting self-determination claims of indigenous populations.” This approach characterized Russia’s 2008 Georgian war and 2014 annexation of Crimea, for example.

Self-determination in the past often involved armed uprising and confrontation. However, secession by referendum has also taken place, for instance in the former Czechoslovakia and Sudan. Bernard Yack (2014) points out that, even in nations in which changing the constitution or basic laws is very difficult, the right to secede may often be gained by a simple majority. And, unlike other constitutional revisions, secession seems extremely difficult to reverse. Hence such referenda are particularly fateful. Closely

related is the question of whether a referendum on secession should be taken merely by the region that seeks self-determination (such as Catalonia) or also by the whole country affected by the vote (such as Spain).

Wolfgang Danspeckgruber argues that the success of self-determination depends on technological and military factors that determine the relative viability of the new states, some rather small ones, in an age of globalization. Taking issue with the “current policy of the international community” in which rhetorical support for self-determination belies states’ preference for territorial integrity, he warns that “simply freezing the borders of all states is an unworkable solution” that has failed in the past (Danspeckgruber 2002: xi–xii).

SEE ALSO: Nation; Nationalism; Postcolonialism; Power; Psychology of Nationalism; Recognition; Sovereignty

## REFERENCES

- Bessinger, Mark. 2014. “Self-Determination as Pretext for Imperialism: The Russian Experience.” Lecture presented at The Perils and Promises of Self-Determination in the Twenty-First Century, Princeton, April 28. Quoted materials accessed October 31, 2014. [http://lisd.princeton.edu/sites/lisd/files/Program\\_Participants.pdf](http://lisd.princeton.edu/sites/lisd/files/Program_Participants.pdf).
- Danspeckgruber, Wolfgang F. 2002. *The Self-Determination of Peoples: Community, Nation, and State in an Interdependent World*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Etzioni, Amitai. 1992–3. “The Evils of Self-Determination.” *Foreign Policy* 89: 21–35.
- Kirgis, Frederic L., Jr. 1994. “The Degrees of Self-Determination in the United Nations Era.” *American Journal of International Law* 88(2): 304–10.
- Pomerance, Michla. 1976. “The United States and Self-Determination: Perspectives on the Wilsonian Conception.” *American Journal of International Law* 70(1): 1–27.

- Raič, David. 2002. *Statehood and the Law of Self-Determination*. The Hague: Kluwer Law International.
- UN General Assembly. 1966. "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights." Accessed September 5, 2014. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b36c0.html>.
- United Nations. 1945. "Charter of the United Nations." Accessed September 5, 2014. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3930.html>.
- Yack, Bernard. 2014. "The Dangers of Self-Determination." Lecture presented at The Perils and Promises of Self-Determination in the Twenty-First Century, Princeton, April 28.