

Charles Tilly

National Self-Determination as a Problem for All of Us

LET ME MAKE THE CASE FOR FLEEING from conventional discussions of nationalism to an analysis of national self-determination as a justification for political action. Every place we turn these days someone is discussing nationalism: its origins, its varieties, its intellectual history, its proper conceptualization. I have myself spilled many words on those topics. But surprisingly few of the discussions I have heard, read, or participated in have directly addressed the principle of national self-determination itself. By this I mean a principle operating in roughly these terms:

1. Each distinct, homogenous people has a right to political autonomy, even to a state of its own.
2. If such a people controls a state of its own, it has the collective right to exclude or subordinate members of other populations with respect to the territory and benefits under control of that state.
3. In that case, furthermore, even small or weak states have the right to formulate domestic and international policies without interference from other states.
4. If, however, such a people *lacks* a state, or at least substantial political autonomy, it has the right to struggle for independence or autonomy by extraordinary means.
5. Outside peoples and their states have the right and obligation to forward such struggles.

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6. If the representatives of such a people establish a state of their own or seize control of a state previously controlled by alien powers, outside peoples and their states have the right and obligation to recognize the new regime.

In its extreme (but not necessary) form, the principle of national self-determination assumes that the earth's entire population, or most of it, divides into a finite number of distinct, homogeneous peoples. It follows that the world's ideal condition consists of that finite number of nation-states.

Scholars can have a wonderful time puncturing each of the balloons in this bundle: demonstrating the composite character of almost all existing states; pointing out how few of the world's linguistic, religious, and cultural groups either possess their own states or are making claims for their own states; describing the selectivity with which Great Powers apply the principle in support of nationalist demands; underlining the contradiction between sovereignty and external intervention; analyzing the dependence of policy and welfare within small states on the actions of their powerful neighbors; noting how easily the principles become a virtual vindication of victimizing violence. I have often delighted in applying needles to these ideas.

Such exercises, however, miss a crucial point: for almost two centuries, this set of principles has had extraordinary force as a justification for political action by ostensible leaders of peoples who lack states, by rulers of states who speak in a nation's name, and by third parties—outside rulers, conspirators, international organizations, and many more—who intervene in the political struggles of particular states. Although it did not stop Austria, Prussia, and Russia from carving up Poland during the 1790s, the principle of national self-determination justified many French conquests during the period, and survived to become a major lever for prying apart the Ottoman Empire during the next century. However odd the principle's application sometimes seemed in culturally heterogeneous territories of Africa or Asia, the appeal of national self-determination informed and justified much of the massive decolonization that followed World War II.

When two or more competing versions of the principles come into play simultaneously (as they have acutely in disintegrating

Yugoslavia and may well soon in South Africa), they cause distress at home and abroad. When the population under the jurisdiction of a given state is strongly segmented, principles of democracy, human rights, and national self-determination commonly conflict, with partisans of each prepared to take drastic steps on behalf of their causes. In recent years, people have been slaughtering each other over the proper application of national self-determination in Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Azerbaijan, Vietnam, and many other parts of the world.

Confronted with heroism and murder in the name of national self-determination, scholars, journalists, and politicians whose attachments to all causes are quite contingent often ask why and how people form such strong commitments. That is an important inquiry, and should continue. But students of nationalism can perform a magnificent service by displacing some of their attention to the principles that advocates and combatants so frequently invoke—the principles of national self-determination. In the same sense that the principles of democracy, human rights, and just war deserve scrutiny for their own sake, so too do the principles of self-determination. The set of principles has a history, a philosophical structure, a relation to international law, a range of practical applications, and a characteristic packet of difficulties that will reward a collective investigation.

Let me mention some problems raised by principles of national self-determination that deserve critical discussion and empirical investigation.

Intellectual History. How, where, and why did ideas of national self-determination form, crystallize, change, and gain a following? How have they connected with ideas of sovereignty, national interest, freedom of the seas, war, and revolution? With what ideas have they competed most vigorously? What are the standard critiques and debates?

Normative Questions. What coherent case can one make for national self-determination as a right and obligation? What are the chief objections to that case? What further principles or conditions of fact does it entail? To what degree, and in what ways, does it conflict with principles of human rights, democracy, and sovereignty? How might one mitigate or eliminate such conflicts? How

does one go about implementing the principles of national self-determination, and what are the likely practical consequences of doing so?

International Law. What standing do principles of national self-determination have in international law? What mechanisms exist for their enforcement? What happens when they conflict with other principles and interests, such as collective security, environmental protection, human rights, or freedom of the seas?

Relation to Existing Political Processes and Conflicts. Where in today's world do claims in terms of national self-determination justify major political movements or motivate significant conflicts? Why and with what consequences? Sociologist Helen Fein has catalogued human rights violations, while political scientists Barbara Harff and Ted Gurr have inventoried what they call politicide, genocide, and ethnic mobilization; how often do their cases involve claims for national self-determination on one side or the other? Can we make any generalizations about the conditions under which such claims *a)* arise, *b)* have strong appeal, and *c)* succeed? Martin van Creveld argues that what he calls Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) has become the predominant form of warfare in the world while major powers have continued to prepare for wars in which massed armies, navies, and air forces zap each other with high technology; how often does LIC involve claims for national self-determination?

The Future of States, of National Self-Determination. If such changes as the breakup of the Soviet Union, the creation of the European Community, the globalization of capital, and the acceleration of international migration are altering the character of states and of international relations (as many of us have been arguing), the conditions for viable national self-determination must be shifting as well. What alternative futures are possible? Likely? What institutional changes do they imply? In a more utopian vein, by what means other than establishing one independent state per mobilized nation might we guarantee cultural variability, civic connectedness, protection of minorities, and other desiderata commonly portrayed as benefits of national self-determination?

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