

Two Rights Make A Wrong: “Self-Determination” Revisited

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A year ago, Western champions led by the United States declared Kosovo independence “*sui generis*,” a unique case of self-determination that sets no precedent. The case of Kosovo, however, is not (that) unique, and it did serve as a precedent. Russia was quick to counter with its own “*sui generis*” in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and another war ensued. The link between self-determination and mutual destruction loomed from the beginning. “Self-determination,” argued U.S. President Woodrow Wilson in 1918, “is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.” Nevertheless, Wilson’s own Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, countered that the “application of this principle is dangerous to peace and stability.” Both were right.

While self-determination is a noble ideal, perhaps the pinnacle of modern political ethics, it is also inherently perilous. In the best of worlds, self-determination should be dual and reciprocal. It is not merely about the right of the (collective) Self to decide what polity suits it best (an independent state, self-governance, etc.); it is also about the right of that Self to establish its own identity in the first place (religious, ethnic, civic, lingual, etc.). Collective identity and the collective polity are two sides of the same political-ethical coin. Furthermore, the right of self-determination is as much the Other’s as the Self’s. In real life the idea of self-determination has all too often lacked duality and reciprocity. Modern history abounds with attempts of outside parties to determine others’ self-identities or to exclusively appropriate the right to themselves while rejecting the Other’s. Both fallacies paved the way to the two recent secessions. Some argue that they are more representative of the determination by Others (be it Western or Russian) than of the main parties concerned.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia are typically understood as self-determination incarnate. The former disintegrated into 15 republics, the latter into seven countries and still counting. What could be more Wilsonian? And, considering the recurrent conversion of the cause of self-determination into a *casus belli*, what could be more Lansingian? A careful examination, however, shows self-determination, properly understood, as a lesser player in the state proliferation following the fall of the Berlin Wall 20 years ago. Germany’s unification and Czechoslovakia’s split following a velvet revolution are offshoots of real self-determination processes. The same can hardly be said of the former Soviet Union or Yugoslavia. There, the former despots, Stalin and Tito, had charted the inner borders of the two defunct mega-states rather than the will of the local peoples.

The crux of the matter is the mismatch of the nation-state duo. The widespread confusion of state self-defense with national self-determination is not new. Contrary to common assumptions, the international system was not created in 1648, at the Peace of Westphalia, but rather two centuries later, in the 1848 Spring of Nations. Whereas Westphalia marked the rise of states (and their right to self-defense), the European Revolutions of 1848 marked the emergence of ethnic nations

(and their right of self-determination). The amalgam of “nation-state” embodies a tension that too often translates into war. The two may correlate, but seldom correspond.

Reconciling self-determination with *uti possidetis*, in effect territorial integrity, is an ongoing preoccupation of modern diplomacy. It is hardly made easier if the description is ill-conceived, the prescription ill-advised, and the perceptions and aspirations hyped up and unrealistic. Kosovo, Kashmir, Kurdistan, Balochistan, Bangladesh, Georgia, Palestine, Tibet, Québec and Basque – all and many more are “sui generis.” We may continue to call on and kill in the name of self-determination while unwittingly treading in the footsteps of the Georgian, Joseph Stalin. We may however also choose to approach local, national, and regional politics even-handedly, to refine and redefine the ideal of that noble principle in ways that empower individuals and collectives alike with the liberty to determine their politics and the responsibility to allow others to follow suit.