

The Influence of Political Economy on the “Self-Determination of Peoples”

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Abstract

The right of peoples to "self-determination" is influenced by varying motives in different times and geographies in its implementation, and is rarely operated according to its foundational ethic and legal bases dating back to the Kantian concept of free will and the international laws codified after the World War II. Particularly, political economy has always played an important but usually covered role in the application of this principle to national or international disputes.

This paper aims to explain the dominance of political economy in international decision making processes about the people making a claim for their own state, and to highlight the changing nature of political economy supporting sometimes the sovereign states and sometimes the sub-state level ethnic groups. In this context, the theoretical development and the application of "self-determination" principle is assessed relatively by historical comparison method. Field research for the study comprises archival research of primary and secondary resources.

This paper concludes that the political economy has usually greater influence on the application of "self-determination" to the national and international disputes than its ethic and legal content, and that the paradoxical content of this principle contributes to the redistribution of lands usually in compliance with the interests of great powers.

1 Introduction

The right of peoples to self-determination as a contested third-generation human right has the etymological meaning of self-governance, or rule by the self of peoples, that has its roots in Kantian ethic approach to individuals. Kant argues that one ought to think free of the dictates of external authority and to act according to rational moral principles. The self-determined self is one that operates without constraint, and this principle is projected later in politics as a rule of independence of peoples from outside coercion. John Stuart Mill first proposed the link between culture and ethnicity on the one hand, and statehood on the other.

This principle highlights the importance of autonomy and the dangers of intervention for social integration, well-being, performance, healthy development, and creativity (*see* Deci and Ryan, 2000; Green, 2010). Aspirations of peoples must be respected and they may be governed only by their own consent.

Unfortunately, this concept is rarely operated according to its foundational ethic bases in the application in different times and geographies. Particularly, political economy has always played an important but usually covered role in the implementation of this principle in international law. Besides, politico-economic factors have also evident impacts on the independence claim of an ethnicity from an established state (*see* Lineira and Cetra, 2015; Boylan, 2015) as well as on the international decision-making processes. Yet, this study focuses on the latter.

This paper aims to explain the dominance of political economy in international decision making processes about self-determination issues, and to highlight the changing nature of political economy supporting sometimes the sovereign states and sometimes the sub-state level ethnic groups. In this context, this study begins by analyzing the paradox of self-determination at entity level, and the second section studies the historical development of self-determination before and after the World War II, and the influence of political economy on self-determination. The final section delineates the contribution of this vague conception to great powers' interests. Consequently, it concludes that the political economy has usually greater influence on the application of "self-determination" to national and international disputes than its ethic and legal content, and that the paradoxical content of this principle contributes to the redistribution of lands usually in compliance with the interests of great powers.

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2 The Paradox of Self-Determination

The primary paradox lies at its origin. Self-determination, which has been considered for the individual level at the outset, was projected later to group level in politics. But regarding individuals and groups as similar subjects is devoid of offering a smooth analogy. Groups are the result of mixed cultural, social, political and religious formations extending over long periods of time. There is no way of identifying the precise factors that will predominate in the formation of group allegiances.

The right of peoples to self-determination differs in this respect from an individual claim of liberty. Who can be acknowledged as “people” is not clear enough due to its involvement of complex issues of allegiance. Wilson’s Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, emphasized this dilemma stating (Hasani, 2002, p. 54):

“On the surface, it seemed reasonable: let people decide. In fact, it was ridiculous because people cannot decide until someone decides who the people are.”

Moreover, unlike an individual liberty claim, the right of peoples to self-determination potentially involves a territorial claim. A secessionist group necessarily asserts that it has international title to the territory concerned, a title that is superior to that of the existing state (Slattery, 1994, pp. 715-716). Briefly stated, this right gives uncertain groups the power to secede from the states they belong to.

Another paradox lies at the meaning of this notion. Does the right of peoples to self-determination in the UN Charter give the power to decide whether or not to secede from an existing state? The right of self-determination may potentially involve cultural autonomy, administrative autonomy, political autonomy, federal structure, independence (Wolff and Weller, 2005, p. 12; Macklem, 2006, p. 502) as well as expanded authority of local governance in *status quo*. This ambiguous nature of self-determination, to what extent peoples may have independence from the central authority causes manipulative interpretations.

The lack of clarity surrounding its nature, scope, and content has generated resistance from sovereign states, which tend to sustain their political unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity, because self-determination principle also legitimates their sovereignty. Sovereign authority is the formal phrase of this principle in international law. Sovereignty authorizes state action to protect the chosen arrangements from internal or external threat. In other words, self-determination can stand as a challenge to sovereign authority while legitimating it. This is another paradoxical feature of self-determination. It is a principle of moral legitimacy for sovereign states, while concurrently exerting secessionist pressure on them.

Together with these immanent paradoxes in self-determination, the method of application of this principle is controversial too. Can 51 per cent share of votes in a referendum be interpreted as an indicator of the will of the people? The right to self-determination potentially involves not only a claim of liberty against the existing state, but also a claim of authority with respect to the residents of the seceding territory, namely, the authority to decide their international status and ultimately to govern them to the exclusion of other states. This claim extends to all dissenting residents, and competes with the similar claim of authority advanced by the existing state.

Just as Quebec has the presumptive liberty to secede from Canada, so dissenting groups, such as Aboriginal peoples, are also equally at liberty to break away from a secessionist Quebec and attach themselves to Canada or else establish their own independent states. The Liberal Party of Quebec has also pushed for “distinct society” status for Quebec while campaigning against sovereignty referendums. The Navarrese People’s Union opposes Basque secessionism in Spain and integration into a wider Basque region, but instead it supports Navarre’s traditional status. The Frisian National Party defends Frisian language rights and control over local resources, but opposes any autonomy from the Dutch government that would include important regulatory and fiscal powers (Sorens, 2008, p. 327).

3 Political Economy of Self-Determination in Historical Course

The application of self-determination has also developed through contradictions just like the dilemmas in itself. Self-determination principle had sprouted in close relationship with the concept of sovereignty of peoples during French, American and Bolshevik revolutions. The notion has been one of the most prevalent principles shaping international structure since the middle of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Ironically, some of nationalist movements of that initial era were about the breakup of empires such as secessions of Greece and Serbia from the Ottoman Empire, while the others were about the unification of “nations” such as Germany and Italy. This inconsistency was generated by sacrificing of ethic bases of self-determination principle to the interests of European powers.

According to US President Woodrow Wilson (1927, p. 182), it is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril. After the World War I, he did want an arrangement on self-determination to be included in the League of Nations Covenant, but his so-called idealistic proposal was overruled on that issue by the European great powers, which had deep doubts about the term (Carley, 1996, p. 3). Wilson’s approach was linked to his political ambition to gain support for electoral purposes among Ukrainian, Polish, Armenian, Lithuanian, Albanian and Croatian diasporas that migrated to the USA with the outbreak of the World War I and became strongly preoccupied with the independence of their countries of origin.

Like in the nineteenth century, self-determination in 1919 had little to do with the demands of the peoples concerned, unless those demands were consistent with the geopolitical and strategic interests of the great powers. V. Epps points out the inconsistency of the use of the phrase “self-determination” during a time when victorious states such as England, France and Italy expected to, and certainly did, redistribute conquered lands after warfare

with no regard for the wishes of the residents (Molos, 2014, p. 87). Wilson's claim for self-determination was instrumentalized by the European powers to break up the defeated empires.

Plebiscites and the mandate system after Versailles Treaty were compensating devices for inadequacies and the imperfect application of the post-WWI self-determination. They were mostly directed against former German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman territories. In these cases, quite apparently, economic and strategic considerations prevailed over the nationality principle. In the plebiscite in Silesia, held in March 1921, majority voted for union with Germany. Since the area was mixed and there were allegations of fraud during the plebiscite, clashes between German and Polish peasants followed. In the end, the League gave Germany the bulk of Upper Silesia but most of the rich coalmines to Poland (Hasani, 2002, p. 82). Similar economic considerations also led the decision making processes in Saar territory, Danzig and Memel (Lithuania).

Aland Islands regarded as strategically essential to Finland were the subject of a confrontation between Sweden and Finland after the World War I. In this case, the islanders (almost entirely Swedish speaking) sought to become a part of Sweden following Finland's successful independence from Russia in 1917. If Finnish people was using this right, why could not the Alanders? But, this claim was denied by Finnish authorities and, as another aberration, the dispute had been concluded by the League of Nations against Alanders, because the secession claims was limited to those living under failed empires in war (Crawford, 2001, p. 13).

The commission of jurists appointed by the League in dealing with self-determination issues announced in 1920 that self-determination was not an absolute right but a right that is realized on a case by case basis and upon an agreement, which means that, apart from the will of the population, other factors such as economic, political and security should be taken into account (Hasani, 2002, p. 86).

This principle which was earlier based on ethical grounds was expected to solve the conflicts in national and international disputes when it became a rule in international law codified by the UN after the World War II. Self-determination was included in Articles 1 and 55 of the Charter of the United Nations as a principle and subsequently, in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as a human right in 1966. Unfortunately, neither before nor after evolving international law status, the right to self-determination did not mitigate the conflicts around the world, but triggered new disputes instead. Because, in addition to the abovementioned resolutions, which mobilize ethnic movements, the UN was also taking decisions strengthening sovereign states. For instance, the 1970-dated UN Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States mentions that the right to self-determination can never be interpreted as a right to undermine the integrity of a state with democratic governance.

The essence of self-determination after the WWII was equated with anti-colonialism. It became the basis for the demands of states against colonization of great powers and for the immunity of states' sovereignty from international interventions. During the Cold War, the case was again not that all peoples had the right of self-determination, but that all peoples under colonial rule, occupation and peoples exposed to systematic racism had the right to be independent (Aral, 2010, p. 28). These legal arrangements seem to be ethic-based in terms of democratic ideals at first sight, but regarding natural resources of colonized territories, decolonization *per se* is an economic instrument and has economic results for great powers. The desire of US to access to raw materials in third world and self-determination principle complimented each other in this era (Hoogvelt, 2001, p.33). Besides, political aim of the US was to undermine European power. An overall weaker Europe was less likely to start another world war (O'Grady, 2017, p. 6).

With the admission of ex-colonized states to the UN, the number of member countries (51 states in 1945) rose to 114, including 35 African, 15 Asian and 11 Middle Eastern countries. The borders of new states were consistent with the former colonial administrative borders which were set up in the Berlin Colonial Conference a century ago. This decision was also brought in harmony with great powers' interest to apply "trusteeship model" for territories under their and defeated states' mandate, which was also formulated to prevent Soviet territorial expansion after the WWII. In the beginning, the UN was considered as a tool of foreign policy by the Western states, but once the self-determination emerged as a threat to the interests of colonial powers, they lost their faith in the UN, and further creation of new states was not allowed during the Cold War period except for Bangladesh (East Pakistan). One of the important reasons underlying this unique resolution of the UN towards Bangladesh case was the ongoing economic exploitation of East Pakistan by the West.

Another incompatible example is the contested case of West Sahara, which was dominated by the Moroccan state after the Spanish withdrawal in 1975. However, upon the claims of independence of Polisario Front, the Saharai nationalist movement, the International Court of Justice denied the Moroccan interpretation based on pre-colonial borders and the United Nations recognized the Polisario Front as legitimate representative of Western Sahara. Nevertheless, it is a widely known reality that the conflicting interests of Western oil companies on the existing oil reserves in the region affected the international decision-making processes more than legal and ethical aspects of the right of self-determination (*see* Campos, 2008).

The detente in bipolar world system generated the struggles to build confidence and reduce tensions between parties. Both parties attended the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (later became OSCE), and agreed on the final Helsinki act, which meant a challenge for the Western states, but the recognition of post-war borders in East Europe for the Soviet Union. Unsurprisingly, the article saying that the state borders can be changed by peaceful means and by agreement in accordance with international law justified the Western vision about the region. The following breakdown of Warsaw Pact Organization and the subsequent dissolution of USSR and Yugoslavia led to the emergence of five new states in Yugoslavia and fifteen new states in Soviet territory as a consequence (Roberts, 2010; pp. 729-752).

Initially, the EU made public its guidelines on Recognition of New States in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union on December 16, 1991. Despite the European Union's limited efficacy on international relations, the adoption of the same principles by the UN in its related resolutions made EU's impact wider than expected covering the entire Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. In this document, respect for minority and human rights, democratic institutions and the rule of law were put forward as a precondition for statehood for first time since the development of the right to self-determination. Unfortunately, the claims of Kosovo's independence were not met with a positive return from the international community, although the application based upon referendum for an international recognition was handed over by the government in exile to the European Peace Conference on Yugoslavia (December 1991), where former administrative borders of Yugoslavia were taken as a reference point for statehood except for autonomous Kosovo region. The conflicting interests of France and Germany and Austro-German pressure in the EU were argued to determine the final decision of the EU commission on Kosovo. Though the claim of independence of Kosovo people was met by the UN in 2008, the inconsistencies in the application has kept existing hitherto.

4 Contribution of Ambiguous Nature of Self-Determination to Great Powers' Interests

Self-determination in current world politics is still a very vague notion. It is interpreted by the established states as the sovereign equality of states and the right to be free from foreign interference, but by the intra-state entities as their right to independence from the states they belong to. Along with all paradoxes given in the first chapter, the discrepancies in the application of this right by international structure have also added to the present complexity. Relevantly, it is true that this confusion encourages a world-wide confrontational environment; however, it is also true that it has given flexibility to the policies of the great powers.

They have the freedom to make different decisions in line with their interests even in similar situations. For instance, South Sudan's claim to attain its independence from Sudan was supported and enabled by the West, but similar Western support was not sufficient for the independence of Tibet in China. Conversely, secessionist Beloch people representing a distinct group in Iran and Pakistan was not backed by the West. Catalan, Basque, Quebec, North Ireland, South Tyrol, Flanders etc. nationalisms were thereby never welcomed and Kashmir, Palestine and North Cyprus independence claims were systematically prevented by some Western great powers.

On the other hand, Russia's military intervention into and eventual annexation of Crimea has been justified with a referendum referring to the right to self-determination, which shifted the balance of power in Black Sea in favor of Russia. According to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Russia determined to leverage its pivotal role in the global oil and gas trade into a program of territorial expansion (Ozsu, 2015, p. 443). On the contrary, Russia has always opposed the independence of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Which of these cases can be seen as having ethic and legal ground do change up to the sides of interest groups. Since there is vague supranational law and nobody to enforce it, the cases provide flexibility for international actors and develop in line with conflicting politico-economic interests of great powers.

Nonetheless, protracted conflictual environment caused by unresolved self-determination demands are not also a disadvantage of great powers. Ongoing conflicts give great powers a chance to change the commercial *status quo* by deploying their armed forces in the relevant region, and to exploit natural sources of the host country through international companies, as is the case in Northern Iraq. Moreover, they may better control the economic course all over the world. O'Grady asserts that American presidents want the freedom that this uncertainty offers them. During the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, there was great uncertainty as to whether the US would oust Iraq or consent Iraqi occupation. Therefore, oil prices got quite volatile as the rest of the world awaited its decision. A less volatile but similar situation coincided with the annexation of Crimea by Russia (O'Grady, 2017, p. 7). It means the great powers are able to hold the control of global economy by crisis. Thus, it would not be a realistic approach to expect the great powers to develop a consistent policy with regard to the right of peoples to self-determination instead of having the flexibility for the interventions compatible with their interests in disguise of democratic ideals.

5 Conclusion

The paradoxes embedded in the concept of self-determination itself render the question of who has the natural right to govern the people even harder to reply. On the one hand, the established states tend to protect their territory,

institutions and interests, as well as global security concerns, on the other hand peoples ask for liberation from unjustified –according to themselves– authority and there is a risk of chaos due to probable states in an unmanageable number.

In the historical process accompanied by this dilemma, the practices of national and international structure did not also follow the ethical and legal traces of self-determination principle. Some of nationalist movements in the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century were about the breakup of empires such as secessions of Greece and Serbia from the Ottoman Empire, while the others were about the unification of “nations” such as Germany and Italy. Balance of power played a great role in that era. Like in the nineteenth century, self-determination in 1919 had little to do with the demands of the peoples concerned, unless those demands were consistent with the strategic interests of the great powers. In cases of Silesia, Saar territory, Danzig, Memel (Lithuania) and Aland Islands, quite apparently, economic and strategic considerations prevailed over the nationality principle. After self-determination principle has become a codified right in several international documents that gave peoples who were exposed to systematic racism and under colonial rule and occupation the right to be independent, the efficacy of political economy did not change even in that era. Because decolonization, which was implemented in harmony with great powers’ interests, per se was an economic instrument and had economic results for all sides.

As for today, there are many peoples claiming the right of self-determination, and violent conflicts over it in different geographies around the world. With one-sided interpretations of legal arrangements, great powers support some of nationalist movements while concurrently preventing the rest incompatible with their interests. They enjoy the political flexibility provided by vagueness of self-determination principle, and by the way, it is not a zero-sum game. If the conflicting interests cannot be bargained in an acceptable way, the continuation of the disputes still contributes to their interests. Thus, it would not be a realistic approach to expect the great powers to develop a consistent policy with regard to the right of peoples to self-determination.

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