
Report on the 2018 ASN (Association for the Study of Nationalities)

Convention at the Columbia University in New York

On 5 May 2018, the Association for the Study of Nationalities hosted a panel entitled “*World War I and the Invention of Self-Determination*” *Francine Friedman (Ball State University)* was chair of the panel.

David Kanin (Johns Hopkins University) described the “unity of democracy” that seemed to exist in 1917-1918, which would have been the vehicle for moving to a new world order that would reflect the mythology of the universal applicability of American values. This would have been a full-throated muscular expression of American values, leading to the imagined community of the future, which would also include Russia, because revolution against the previous autocratic Tsarist regime was now possible. Kanin sees a parallel sense of optimism now.

Following World War I, there was a sense of optimism - until the 1930s - which determined that democracy and self-determination were related to each other. Since the Fourteen Points were issued by President Woodrow Wilson, it seemed that democracy and self-determination went together. However, broadly, self-determination had more than a political dimension; it also contained economic, social, even spiritual elements.

After World War I, similar to contemporary times, there was a kind of spiritualism seen as an alternative to Fascism and Communism. This philosophical bent during the 1920s, however, was altered by Wilson’s stroke, by a new administration that did not follow the Wilsonian path, etc. Then, as now, it began to become more evident that democracy is inefficient and doesn’t do what it is supposed to do, particularly when it is under pressure. In fact, it becomes more materialistic, which belies its promise.

When democracy does not work well, it does not offer anything except the material—no spiritualism, no philosophical underpinning, etc. Thus, a search for meaning and a new operating system is not satisfied by democracy. Fascism and Communism were not democratic, but they provided an emotional connection for people, and they were performance-oriented, which

democracy was not. Today, populism also provides an emotional connection and is performance-oriented, which accounts for its popularity.

In geo-political terms, there has been no American hegemony except in 1919 and 1945, not even post-1989. After World War I, no one could be a real hegemon. Thus, actors like Ukraine became important then, becoming a field of operation (an objective) just like it is now.

In World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union bestrode the world, with Europe no longer great and powerful, but still wise. Europe thus believed that the new great powers (and others) should listen to its wisdom, especially with regard to self-determination. But in the inter-war period, the United States was, by comparison, more exotic than Europe and had enormous power and wealth. The United States, thus, gave people a model—something to yearn for—as it also did after World War II.

However, American exoticism has dissipated in the interim. Ukraine became the theater that helped Russia to reorient itself, even while the United States was losing itself. Democracy can no longer provide the model for self-determination. Now the West faces an economic challenge from China, which is a serious economic competitor unlike the former Soviet Union and has the advantage of the sort of exotic attraction to many foreigners that the United States had in 1919. Democracy is not producing, and the United States is weakening. There seems to be consensus that there is a possible non-democratic future, but the United States does not know how to deal with its structural decline. If the United States is to preserve its position, it must find a connection between democracy and the new reality of today.

Stefano Bianchini (University of Bologna) applied the liquidity notion propounded by Zygmunt Bauman to self-determination, which contributed to liquefying social links. Self-determination can apply to many different things, such as the nation, the working class, etc. However, self-determination has only recently become of academic interest after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as opposed to the study of nationalism. Self-determination is liquid because of its different meanings in different contexts. This is not necessarily about manipulation, but its implementation is mainly connected to power politics or to people's own ideology about the establishment of a new world; in this way, we could refer to both Woodrow Wilson's and Vladimir Lenin's differing views of self-determination.

Imperial Germany also supported self-determination during WW1, although its view did not lead to independence (for example, Poland's annexation to German in 1916 was about

reproducing its former existence as a kingdom incorporated within the Habsburg Empire). Of course, this was more about German expansionism, not about the rights of people's self-determination. By contrast, Finland became independent in 1917, encouraged by Lenin who identified self-determination with secession, but, in this case, the applied self-determination was followed by a civil war. This event was interpreted by Lenin as a confirmation of his theory that social revolution would become a priority of the working class as soon as the national question would be satisfied and then excluded from the agendas priorities of a society.

In 1917, meanwhile, Wilson sought a reason to enter World War I; the February Russian Revolution made Russia democratic, at least temporarily, because it rid itself of autocracy. But paradoxically, the House inquiry that Wilson established in order to have a post-war peace program suggested that borders would follow language, not a civic model.

Furthermore, the Fourteen Points did not use the word self-determination, because it went against the power politics of the European states, even though Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia both were able to unify during this period.

Through these examples, we can see that "liquidity" can apply to self-determination, because self-determination is not well-defined, as it can be used in different contexts. Today, Scotland and Ireland are discussing the term with regard to the United Kingdom and Brexit. Thus, the concept of liquidity helps us to understand how to manage politically with a theoretically fluid notion that concepts can change regarding politics and ideology.

Craig Nation (Dickinson College) reminded the audience that self-determination has no legal definition. It was practiced in the 1700s, although the term used was the "sovereign rights of nations." In the 1860s, the "right of peoples" was used with regard to Poland. In the late nineteenth century, the term self-determination was used regarding such diverse situations as European nationalism, labor movements, democratic aspirations of people to a political identity with independence (as opposed to multi-national empires). The term self-determination was used by Otto Bauer and Karl Renner with regard to cultural autonomy, as well as by Lenin and Wilson, but there was a difference in application. Bauer and Renner meant it to indicate cultural national autonomy, respect for people's identity. However, Lenin meant the term to stand for freedom of secession from Tsarism, linking national separatism and independence. It was a right, not an obligation, to be applied case-by-case, because the Bolsheviks were internationalists.

So, what has happened to this concept?

Its nineteenth century idealistic, democratic aspirations became perverted by twentieth century political dynamics. The Wilsonian principle was used to dismantle the Central Powers, especially Austria-Hungary and Germany, to some extent. Mandates, or selective application of the principle based on power politics, were applied. In Russia, the civil war was fought in peripheral, non-Russian areas for territorial control, in Ukraine, for example, and not for self-determination. Thus, Bolshevik idealism was perverted during the civil war; the Bolsheviks had to concoct a national policy, but they chose territorialization of national identity.

In the twentieth century, self-determination does not appear in the League of Nations Charter, although it can be found in the United Nations Charter and other international documents referring to both customary and international law. However, the problem is still the same with regard to the status of self-determination: what constitutes a people? Self-determination is more a premise than a principle in practice. This means that, yet today, power decides who gets to enjoy self-determination.

Julie Mostov (New York University) discussed the “gendered borders of self-determination.” She mentioned that the concept of self-determination is ambiguous with regard to gender. Who is the subject? In democracy, it is the individual, who can vote, etc. But is the subject as a people; is it ethno-national?

The gendered view of this question is, if the subject is ethno-national, the principle of self-determination becomes dangerous, because it is not democratic. Ethno-nationally, people are defined demographically, which focuses on majority vs. minority. Thus, in order to either dominate, or at least hold one’s own position, there must be an emphasis on reproduction of the nation to keep its majority or for a minority to attain majority status. The nation is an organic unit that must continue; therefore, women must be protected against invaders of our space and other aliens. This means that the nation must control the reproduction of its women. This further leads to the need to demonize the masculine other or feminize the other men by showing that they cannot protect their own; the result is the rape of the “other’s” women. We start to see this rape as national politics during World War I, but also after World War II.

We see self-determination of people, workers, etc. But this seems to some to be anemic, because there is a question of who belongs to a nation—and there is no element of choice here. We are traitors to the nation if we don’t honor our gender role. There is a connection here with

populism in which others are telling you what to do: we will restore the proper gendered roles and will protect against the contamination of our space.

The gender lens helps us to see what the role of the racial/ethno-national other is. America has had naturism before, but, until now, we did not see the outright expression of group rights in our conservative politics. Now, we are witnessing the rejection of the rights of other groups that we claim for ourselves.

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