

PUBLIC SEMINAR

THE NATIONAL EUROPE CENTRE AT THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY IS PLEASED TO INVITE YOU TO:

Self-determination: a right in search of a subject, from Lenin to the Australian Aboriginals

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Thursday 21 April, 12.30 - 1.30pm

at the National Europe Centre

The Australian National University, 1 Liversidge Street,

(Parking available in Balmain Lane, opposite University House)

'Self-determination' has been one of the most successful political catchwords of the 20th century. According to both International Covenants on Human Rights of 1966, the right of all peoples to self-determination is the first and foremost human right. But what is a people and thus the subject of the right? This has never been defined, nor will it ever be, because the power of definition in this case would mean the power to (re)draw the boundary lines all over the world.

Self-determination as a concept of individual freedom makes sense. As a collective right it makes no sense because the number of possible collectives that might claim it can never be determined. The right promises more than it can possibly keep. Its history is marked by attempts to domesticate and limit it. As a rule it is used to weaken one's enemies, but in the end it regularly turns against the powerful and works in favour of the weak. It is domesticated by being made a purely formal principle. But its farther-reaching, albeit illusory promises can never be completely eliminated.

The modern use of the concept was initiated by Lenin, who used it in 1917 as a weapon of despair to blow up Russia's enemies even though it might fragment Russia as well. Wilson and his allies used it from a position of power to weaken their enemies, but not where it might have led to the consolidation of Germany. Hitler logically claimed self-determination for those populations which had been prevented from joining Germany. In view of these experiences, after the Second World War the victors rejected the concept and preferred moving around populations. But then, self-determination reappeared as the principle guiding decolonization, normally without an attempt at determining the wishes of the population. After that, it turned up as a method to dissolve federal states. Where will it appear next? Are the so-called indigenous peoples (preferably called 'populations' by the existing national states so as to avoid the association with self-determination and thus with independent statehood) serious candidates? They claim the concept for themselves, at the same time emphasizing that they do not want to found sovereign states. Whatever the result, self-determination will remain a bone of contention because its subject will remain undefined.

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