



Colonial Genealogies of National Self-Determination

ABSTRACT: *Self-determination is a central concept for political philosophers. For example, many have appealed to this concept to defend a right of states to restrict immigration. Because it is deeply embedded in our political structures, the principle possesses a kind of default authority and does not usually call for an elaborate defense. In this paper, I will argue that genealogical studies by Adom Getachew, Radhika Mongia, Nandita Sharma, and others help to challenge this default authority. Their counter-histories show that the principle was used to justify, strengthen, and adapt imperial rule in the twentieth century. In particular, the idea that controlling a population's composition through regulating immigration is an essential aspect of self-determination emerged as a response to White anxieties about the migration of negatively racialized groups. Genealogies have not been adequately appreciated as a critical tool within the mainstream of political philosophy. I show that these genealogies have a critical role to play because they unsettle our uncritical attachment to the structures of the nation-state system and raise serious questions about the meaning and emancipatory force of the principle of self-determination.*

KEYWORDS: immigration, nation-state, self-determination, race, colonialism, genealogy, counter-history

Introduction

Self-determination is a central organizing principle of the nation-state system and is codified in international law. It is also a central concept for political philosophers. For example, many philosophers have appealed to this concept to defend a right of states to restrict immigration (see Fine [2013] for a helpful survey of these positions). These theorists disagree about the precise scope of this right and offer different arguments for it, but they share commitments to the value of collective self-determination and to the idea that having control over the membership of a political community is fundamental to self-determination. Differential treatment based on nationality would seem to violate requirements of moral equality. But the appeal to self-determination promises a distinctly liberal justification for a right to exclude because it appears to be an expression of the foundational liberal

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idea that legitimate political authority derives from the people. Even liberal defenders of open borders or more open borders usually concede that collective self-determination is an important political interest albeit one that can be outweighed by the interests of migrants (see, for example, Carens 2018: 3).

To support claims about the value and importance of self-determination, many authors appeal to struggles against colonialism. For example, Andrew Altman and Christopher Wellman suggest that decolonization ‘was principally about the collective right of self-determination’ (2009: 12). Such judgments about what motivated anticolonial resistance are used to support a general principle of self-determination that is then used to justify the sovereign rights of states in the current state-system or at least a reformed version of it. For example, Altman and Wellman appeal to an aspect of self-determination to defend the right of the state ‘to exclude all foreigners from its political community’ (2009: 164). But whereas anticolonial movements appealed to self-determination to fight colonial domination, exploitation, and expropriation, many discussions within the philosophy of immigration contribute to public debates within Western liberal democracies where, David Miller suggests, ‘citizens often feel that they are no longer in control of the movement of people across their borders’ (2016: 2). This contrast is significant because many Western nation-states emerged from former settler colonies or metropolises of imperial states, while many of those seeking entry come from formerly colonized communities. This broad use of the principle of self-determination across very different political contexts raises serious questions about the principle’s meaning and authority.

In this paper, I will argue that a careful consideration of the principle’s messy history challenges its authority as a basic principle of political morality. A common historical narrative suggests that the principle has its origin in Enlightenment ideas of popular sovereignty and was globally diffused and gradually realized in the twentieth century, particularly in the course of decolonization (Getachew 2019: 16; see also Weitz 2015). This development is often seen as a confirmation of the value and importance of self-determination. But two insights from several recent historical studies undermine this narrative. First, Adom Getachew (2019) and others have pointed out that the principle of self-determination was used in the twentieth century to justify and strengthen imperial control (see also Eslava and Pahuja 2020; Massad 2018; Mitchell 2011; and Tully 2008). Liberal internationalists such as US president Woodrow Wilson and the South African leader Jan Smuts ‘remade self-determination as a racially differentiated principle, which was fully compatible with imperial rule’ (Getachew 2019: 10). The attempts of anticolonial nationalists to build a world order based on an anti-imperial understanding of self-determination largely failed. Second, Radhika Mongia (2018), Nandita Sharma (2020), and others have shown that the claim that controlling a population’s composition through regulating immigration is essential to self-determination emerged first in a colonial context as a response to anxieties about the mobility of Asian migrants within the settler colonies of the British Empire. Before the twentieth century, imperial states rarely restricted entry into their territories. It was in response to the mobility of negatively racialized groups, arguably with the goal of maintaining the global racial order established

by colonialism and protecting its spoils, that emerging nation-states claimed the authority to regulate migration and portrayed this as an essential feature of state sovereignty.

These studies support James Tully's (2008) claim that vocabularies and practices of self-determination are deeply entangled with past and contemporary forms of imperialism. Moreover, they amplify Sarah Fine's (2016) worry that arguments that appeal to self-determination to justify a right to exclude cannot properly address the racist legacy of immigration controls. In particular, the studies show that many national political communities that claim a right to self-determination emerged only in a colonial context. Discourses of self-determination as well as the political reality that these discourses have helped create were shaped by indirect colonial rule, colonial migration regimes, appeals to 'racial purity', and attempts to protect the material advantages of White settler populations. Consequently, we need to ask whether the concept has the normative authority needed to serve as the basis for critical reflection within political philosophy.

This paper will focus on self-determination claims made by Western nation-states. Genealogies are told to concrete audiences with the aim of distancing them from the world they inhabit. The studies discussed here have a particular import for those of us who, as citizens of Western nation-states, can more or less comfortably navigate a world made up of nation-states. I will not discuss the studies' implications for anticolonial and Indigenous understandings of self-determination although such implications are certainly important and are also addressed by the studies' authors. For example, Getachew reconstructs how anticolonial nationalists imagined and attempted to implement an anti-imperial and internationalist conception of self-determination. Sharma argues that anticolonial and Indigenous appeals to national self-determination cannot escape the imperial legacy of this discourse and do not serve 'a decolonization worthy of its name' (2020: 34). But discussing these issues would go beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, my aim here is to contribute to an ongoing disciplinary self-reflection within Western political philosophy about the legacies of colonialism.

Several authors have recently addressed the implications of colonial legacies for debates about immigration in political philosophy. For example, Sara Amighetti and Alasia Nuti (2016) have argued that migrants from former colonies belong to the political communities of their former colonizers in virtue of their shared colonial history and therefore cannot be legitimately denied entry from former metropolises. Similarly, E. Tendayi Achiume (2019) has argued that migrants from the Third World are already, in virtue of the colonial history of the communities to which they seek entry, political insiders. As such, she suggests, individual migrants can be seen as making personal claims to decolonization. These arguments implicitly appeal to a principle of collective self-determination while challenging political boundaries that are usually taken for granted. In this paper, I pursue a different strategy although I believe that it has similar implications. My aim is to explore how colonial genealogies of self-determination undermine the default authority of this concept, an authority that it has in virtue of structuring the nation-state system and the political subject positions possible within in.

1. The Uncanny Effect of Telling Genealogies

While genealogical methods have recently received more attention in political philosophy, the import of telling genealogies for normative reflection is still underappreciated (see Prinz and Raekstad [2020]; Jaggar [2020]; Finlayson [2020]; Erlenbusch-Anderson [2018] and Koopman [2019] are two examples of productive uses of genealogies in political philosophy). Before considering genealogies of self-determination, I will briefly explain what I take this import to be (see Menge 2017 for a more in-depth discussion). Genealogies as ‘histories of the present’ (Foucault 1977: 31) aim to show how our present practices and the concepts, norms, and forms of reasoning that structure them have come to be authoritative for us. In other words, beyond chronicling the emergence of normative concerns, genealogies aim to help us understand the grip that these concerns continue to have on us. By focusing on forgotten struggles and conflicts that have led to the emergence of our current practices, institutions, and discourses (Medina 2011), genealogies ‘mess up tidy categories and definitions’ (McWhorter 2009: 296). Making our concepts and practices appear strange, they aim to loosen their normative grip on us.

By looking at the history of our practices, histories of the present draw our attention to normative concerns that we continue to pursue and act on unwittingly. In particular, they usually involve a historicized form of conceptual analysis. An articulation of the inferential structure of our practices can allow readers to recognize to what they may be implicitly committed as they participate in material practices. Making commitments explicit makes them available for critical reflection and transformation. The concepts that genealogists are interested in often have special significance for our self-conceptions, that is, for who we think we are and can be. Historicized conceptual analyses, together with accounts of the material practices in which the concepts are used, contribute to what Foucault has called a ‘historical ontology of ourselves’ (1997: 315). By detailing how discursively articulated practices have shaped how we can act and who we can be, genealogies help us understand why we treat certain concerns and projects as authoritative.

But the point of telling genealogies is not simply to provide a better understanding of who or what we are. It also aims to transform how we relate to our practices and, consequently, to who we are and can be. This transformative effect comes from making explicit norms that structure our world. In effect, genealogies call on their audience to take responsibility for those norms. The world we inhabit is always normatively contoured, but when we are absorbed in our activities, this may not be transparent to us. For example, all of us navigate gendered norms and expectations that govern our bodies, appearances, activities, interactions with others, and so on. Insofar as these norms are embodied in the world and in our bodily comportments toward it, they have a default authority. That is, for the most part, we unreflectively go along with what the world demands of us, tacitly treating these embodied demands as reasons for acting. We come to experience them *as demands* only when we fail to navigate the world smoothly. Once that happens, our relationship to our world changes. Norms do not compel us as a

matter of blind impulse; they bind us only if we recognize their authority. As we experience their normative force, we are called upon to consider whether demands make a legitimate claim on us (see Kukla 2002). As a result, our immediate involvement in the projects in which we have been engaged is suspended. We cannot continue to go along unreflectively but must take responsibility for the norms we are following. In other words, telling genealogies can have an uncanny effect: It disrupts our immediate involvement in the world and the projects we are pursuing in it by revealing to us the embodied norms that structure this world (see Menge 2017; Karademir 2013; Kukla 2002).

Telling genealogies achieves this uncanny effect by making norms that are embodied in institutions and material arrangements salient and explicating the inferential structure of concepts that structure them. For example, in my everyday dealings with the world, I may treat sexuality as a fixed fact about myself and others. But genealogies of sexuality make explicit the demands that we navigate as we understand ourselves and others as having a sexuality (see, for example, Foucault 1978; Davidson 2004). As a result, we cannot continue to follow these demands unreflectively. We are called upon to determine how to go on without appealing to the default authority of norms that are embodied in our material practices. Of course, it is difficult to suspend our attachment to norms that are central to who we are. The result is a kind of paralysis, an experience of not knowing how we ought to go on (Foucault 1991: 41). But this paralysis can open up a space for imagining ourselves and our relationships with the world and with others differently. Opening a space for transformation is a normative effect because it results from changing how we ought to relate to projects in which we find ourselves engaged.

The normative effect of telling genealogies is distinct from that of an explicit evaluation of practices. It does not require a judgment, let alone an argument, that a practice is morally bad or impermissible although genealogies need not necessarily avoid such judgments. Negative evaluations do not generally have an uncanny effect because they are usually based on familiar norms embodied in our ways of life (see Blattner 2015: 126). For example, when marriage as a legal institution was opened to same-sex couples, this was done by appealing to familiar norms, such as the value of committed romantic relationships. The evaluation of our previous marriage practices appealed to familiar norms that structure our world rather than making those norms the object of reflection. In contrast, genealogies can create uncanny experiences in which we do not take such norms as given. As a result, we are called upon to transform our practices more actively and fundamentally. The normative force of this call for transformation aims not at the content of specific norms but at our relationship to them. This also means that a genealogy does not provide any guidance for *how* to change practices. Telling a genealogy nonetheless has a distinct normative effect: It changes how we ought to relate to our practices.

Based on the previous reflections, at least two benefits of genealogical approaches for political philosophy become apparent. First, telling genealogies can make practices and institutions that are central to who we are—and thus often serve as the starting point for normative inquiries—the object of explicit normative

reflection. The genealogies I will discuss in the following sections, for example, challenge the default authority of territorially and demographically bounded communities as the taken-for-granted site of democratic politics. Second, genealogies can do this while recognizing the complex moral character of practices and institutions. Because the normative effect of telling genealogies does not depend on negative evaluations, we can recognize that our practices may well constitute something of value (for example, ways for individuals to be, to relate to one another, to have individual and collective capacities) while also making possible forms of social control, oppression, and domination. One important goal of telling genealogies is to loosen our attachment to practices that are central to who we are, making room for an active transformation for how we live. The remainder of this paper will illustrate these benefits by looking at how genealogies of modern immigration control practices and the principle of self-determination challenge the default authority of this principle.

2. Historicized Conceptual Analysis: Imperial Conceptions of Self-Determination

Respect for the ‘self-determination of peoples’ (Charter of the United Nations, Article 1) is a central organizing principle of the nation-state system, embedded in its institutions and codified in international law. Because it is deeply embedded in our basic political structures and shapes our subject positions (for example, as citizens of nation-states), it possesses a considerable default authority. In other words, as we act and interact as citizens of nation-states, we usually treat this principle as authoritative. When philosophers appeal to this principle, for example, in debates about immigration, they consequently do not need to offer a thorough defense of it. In a world of nation-states, self-determination serves as a starting point for normative reflection. Telling genealogies of this concept and the practices that it structures, I will argue, can challenge this default authority.

Genealogies transform how we ought to relate to our practices by engaging in a historicized form of conceptual analysis. For example, Adom Getachew’s *Worldmaking after Empire* (2019) looks at appeals to self-determination in the context of decolonization. Getachew reconstructs the political thought of Black Atlantic thinkers and statesmen such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Eric Williams, who, she argues, ‘reinvented’ the concept of self-determination based on a distinctive critique of empire (2019: 2). They believed that abolishing empire required not just the end of foreign rule but a new world order that would undo the hierarchies that facilitated domination and exploitation. This anti-imperial conception of self-determination did not emerge from the liberal tradition, as is often assumed. Getachew shows that liberal internationalists such as Woodrow Wilson and Jan Smuts cast self-determination as a ‘racially differentiated principle’ and used it to strengthen and reshape imperial rule (2019: 10). Clearly distinguishing these conceptions of self-determination has a defamiliarizing effect: If Getachew’s historical account is right, it turns out that we may not understand our own appeals to self-determination as well as we thought. We might have considered them to have an anti-imperial character, but the fact that the current

world order and official discourses of self-determination have been shaped significantly by Wilson's and Smuts's tradition should give us pause.

Getachew shows in detail how the League of Nations, led by Wilson and Smuts, institutionalized imperial rule under the banner of self-determination. The international order created by the league was based on the 'unequal integration' of the formerly colonized into a hierarchical international society (2019: 37–70). Wilson and Smuts acknowledged a 'latent capacity' of non-Western peoples for self-government but argued that the full realization of this capacity had to be deferred or denied because of their supposed backwardness. Smuts claimed that colonial subjects would never be able to realize 'democratic self-government in the European sense' and could only govern themselves in separate institutions organized by racial hierarchy (2019: 46). Wilson had a more developmental account, according to which self-government required the right state of development (which only those with 'Anglo-Saxon inheritance' had achieved), but it had the same practical implications. The league's mandate system implemented this racially differentiated conception. It formally recognized 'a right of the indigenous populations to dispose of themselves' and thus required the consent of colonized populations (quoted in Mitchell 2011: 73). But in practice, this minimal requirement was satisfied through treaties with local rulers, whose weak positions allowed for the indirect control by imperial powers (see Mitchell 2011: 99).

Getachew argues that this racially differentiated conception of self-determination also allowed for the unequal integration of formally independent states such as Ethiopia and Liberia. Their admission into the league, often seen as the first postcolonial expansion of international society, created the conditions for continued imperial domination. Their 'burdened and racialized membership', Getachew shows, came with requirements of international oversight and administrative reorganization that were officially aimed at disciplining and 'civilizing' these countries so that they could raise themselves 'to the ranks of other members states' (2019: 54, 58). In Liberia, for example, allegations of persisting practices of slavery led an international commission to recommend a thorough reorganization of the country's internal administration, including the replacement of native district commissioners with American or European ones. The commission also required an economic open-door policy to overcome the country's 'impeded development' (2019: 60). Wilson's developmental account of self-determination made it possible to claim that opening the country to American trade, investment, and oversight was necessary for it to develop its capacity for self-government fully. Effectively, the account justified continued economic dependency and exploitation, characteristic of what James Tully (2008) has called 'free trade imperialism'. This conceptual separation of internal self-rule from the unequal integration into the international economic order continued in the institutions of the United Nations, where more radical demands for economic self-determination were for the most part set aside (Getachew 2019: 78f.).

At the same time, settler colonies like the newly founded Union of South Africa or the Dominion of Canada also demanded more self-government, but in ways that only empowered White settlers and further disempowered negatively racialized groups (see also Mitchell 2011: 70–72). Indeed, the appeal to self-determination

provided a rationalization for overseas settlement and control by White settler populations (see also Massad 2018). According to this rationale, the European presence in colonized territories made self-rule possible and allowed for the ‘development’ of non-Europeans for a future role in their own government. Almost all nation-states that emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of them settler colonies, appealed to self-determination as they constituted themselves as racialized political communities (see Sharma 2020: 62–89). In addition to genocide, violent ‘population transfers’, and social exclusion, immigration and citizenship policies that excluded ‘undesirable’, negatively racialized groups helped to shape these communities, a point to which I will return in the next section.

Getachew insists that the league’s racially differentiated understanding of self-determination and the practices it informed were not simply a failure to realize the ideal of self-determination. Principles, she argues, do not have ‘stable unequivocal meanings that need only be applied and realized in practice’ (2019: 39f.). It is ‘practice itself that imbues principles like self-determination with their content and meaning’ (2019, 40). By exploring how the principle was used, in what inferences, by whom, for what purposes, in what social and institutional contexts, and with what implications and effects, Getachew engages in a historicized form of conceptual analysis that treats concepts as ‘words in their sites’ (to use Ian Hacking’s phrase, 2004: 68–72). The critical upshot of this analysis is the uncanny suspicion that contemporary liberal conceptions of self-determination, which focus on the absence of foreign rule, may be compatible with informal imperial domination and international racial hierarchy. We may reject Wilson’s and Smuts’s racist accounts, but we act within institutions that were initially set up to further goals that they pursued. The point here is not simply that claims to a right to self-determination were often used strategically by political actors (see Bob 2019), but that the projects that Wilson and Smuts pursued shaped the very meaning of the concept of self-determination. Getachew’s historical conceptual analysis reveals that we may be acting on commitments that we are surprised to have.

Concepts and institutions can change, of course, so we should not simply assume a continuity between past and present. It may seem unfair to impugn contemporary liberal appeals to self-determination by associating them with Wilson’s and Smut’s racist theories. The contemporary political philosophers mentioned earlier all explicitly reject such theories. They appeal only to the normative core of the principle of self-determination, that each political community or people has a right to govern itself independently, without outside interference or foreign rule (see, for example, Stilz 2016: 98). This core requires specification; for example, it needs to be spelled out which groups count as a people and what forms legitimate self-government can take. But by itself, this core principle does not imply any specific claims about who is or is not capable of self-government and therefore does not commit us to the racially differentiated accounts of Wilson and Smuts. Their views can be rejected without impugning the notion of self-determination itself. Moreover, theorists such as Anna Stilz have argued that the value of self-determination can be grounded independently in people’s general interest to

see themselves as the authors of their political institutions and that the failure to respect this interest was a central motivation for the resistance to colonialism (2019: 93f., 101–104; see also Song 2019; Altman and Wellman 2009).

But while it is true that the principle's normative core does not imply Wilson's and Smuts's racist views, Getachew's genealogy suggests that a thin understanding of self-determination focusing on the absence of foreign rule fails to get at what was and is at stake in struggles for decolonization. In other words, this understanding is compatible with continued imperial rule even if it does not imply it. Ethiopia and Liberia were self-governing states, and yet the mere absence of foreign rule did not guarantee the absence of domination and exploitation. More generally, all 'postcolonial' nation-states had to perform within an international economic system in which they had been positioned as producers of primary commodities, were dependent on the industrial production of former metropolises, and were highly indebted to the global financial system (Eslava and Pahuja 2020: 121). Political independence did not change most of the social relations that made the exploitation and expropriation practiced under colonialism possible. It did not, in other words, sufficiently protect the ability of people in formerly colonized countries to shape the conditions in which they live. A thin conception of self-determination thus cannot adequately distinguish imperial from anti-imperial appeals to self-determination. That is why, Getachew argues, anticolonial nationalists had to reinvent the idea of self-determination as they fought for decolonization.

The practice of international democracy promotion, based on a supposed right to democracy, is another example for how a seemingly non-imperial understanding of self-determination can contribute to informal forms of imperialism (see Tully 2008: 153ff; Scott 2012). Democracy promotion is often justified by arguing that there is an internal connection between self-determination and democracy (Franck 1992). According to this argument, promoting democracy from the outside can help to create the necessary conditions for self-determination. In practice, democracy promotion programs have focused primarily on electoral processes and neglected the global and domestic distributions of power and wealth that significantly affect the extent to which the citizens of a country can shape the conditions of their own lives. In other words, these programs usually aim at establishing 'low-intensity democracy', which merely rationalizes the social and economic status quo (Tully 2008: 156–58).

Consider the case of Haiti, where in 1994 democratically elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was reinstated with US military assistance after his violent removal in 1991. US support was conditioned on Haiti's commitment to reduce government spending, privatize public services, and remove import tariffs (Marks 2011: 519–22). Rather than strengthening Haiti's ability to resist external control, 'democracy promotion' weakened the ability of Haitians to shape the conditions of their lives. This case shows several continuities with a Wilsonian conception of self-determination: First, the focus on elections signals an understanding of self-government that centers on procedures of consent. Second, the exclusion of considerations of economic domination from the idea of self-determination, together with an open door requirement, sets the stage for promoting continued

economic dependence. Third, there is an underlying assumption that a country like Haiti may not be ready for self-government and thus requires foreign assistance and economic reforms. As Peter Hallward has put it with respect to Haiti, talk of democracy promotion has repeated ‘perhaps the most consistent theme of Western commentary on the island: that poor black people remain incapable of governing themselves’ (quoted in Marks 2011: 522).

While many liberal political philosophers deny that self-determination requires democracy (see, for example, Stilz 2019: 128; Miller 2016: 60), we can see similar continuities in philosophical discussions of self-determination. The most important one is a narrow focus on domestic political institutions, which disregards the global political and economic structures that enable exploitation and domination even in the absence of foreign rule. This narrow focus is often evident in how authors invoke decolonization as they motivate their appeal to self-determination. Altman and Wellman, for example, argue that ‘the decolonization movement . . . was principally an effort to ensure that the right of a group to determine *its own political affairs* was properly respected’ (2009: 12, my emphasis). The exclusive attention to domestic politics neglects the possibility that global inequalities of power and wealth undermine the ability of formerly colonized populations to determine their own affairs. Altman and Wellman acknowledge that colonial powers may have unjustly exploited a country’s economic resources and effectively undermined its self-governing ability in the past and thus may have a duty to pay reparations. But they do not consider the need for a radical transformation of the global economic and political order. Indeed, they diagnose a potential conflict between global egalitarianism and political self-determination; addressing unequal life prospects based on one’s birthplace, they suggest, could put ‘tight constraints on the exercise of self-determination’ (2009: 123). This analytical separation of domestic self-government from the global distribution of power and wealth ignores the possibility of informal imperialism, where it is precisely the lack of an egalitarian international order that undermines genuine self-determination. Getachew’s genealogy helps us see that this separation is more reminiscent of Wilson’s understanding than that of anticolonial nationalists.

In her recent defense of the sovereign territorial state, Anna Stilz (2019) also construes self-determination primarily in terms of domestic self-rule. She argues that ‘by guaranteeing self-determination, the territorial states system can protect people against alien domination, safeguarding their claim to live according to their own beliefs’ (2019: 11). In contrast to Altman and Wellman, Stilz acknowledges that gross global inequalities can undermine domestic self-determination, and she claims that a ‘duty to ensure fair terms of economic cooperation’ is compatible with her defense of sovereign territorial states (2019: 16). Stilz grounds self-determination in people’s interest to see themselves as the authors of the institutions that shape their lives. As the example of ‘democracy promotion’ in Haiti shows, unequal integration into an unfair global economic system can make it impossible for people to be genuine authors of their institutions despite domestic self-government. But as Paulina Ochoa Espejo (2021) has pointed out, the interest to which Stilz appeals seems to be compatible with many forms of

political organization, and Stilz does not show why sovereign territorial states are better at achieving this interest than those other forms. This question becomes particularly pressing in light of Getachew's genealogy, which suggests that the territorial state system, together with its ideal of self-determination, was created not to protect *everyone's* interest to 'live according to their own beliefs,' but primarily to maintain indirect imperial rule and international racial hierarchy. Because Stilz defends the territorial state primarily in terms of domestic self-rule, it is not clear whether and how continuing forms of imperialism and neo-imperialism could be avoided within the territorial state system even if it were extensively reformed. Getachew's genealogy calls on us to address this challenge by suspending our attachment to an ideal of self-determination that is tied to the territorial state system.

While this short discussion cannot do justice to the full depth of the arguments advanced by Altman and Wellman and by Stilz, it illustrates how genealogies can shift the debate. These authors invoke anticolonial resistance to support a principle of self-determination that is then used to justify the sovereign rights of territorial states. Getachew's genealogy suggests that such arguments may be based on a serious equivocation that overlooks what is at stake in anticolonial appeals to self-determination and does not pay sufficient attention to the imperial uses of the concept. This historicized conceptual analysis not only challenges a progressive historiography of self-determination (see Cueni and Queloz, [forthcoming](#)), but it also undermines the principle's default authority by making explicit the normative projects in which it was and continues to be involved. Of course, authors may stipulate their own understandings of self-determination. But the Wilsonian conception significantly shaped the political reality we inhabit and who we are and can be within that reality. Conceptual stipulations that ignore this background are unlikely to help us critically reflect on the legitimacy of the normative projects implicit in our existing political institutions. Moreover, the imperial projects advanced by Wilson, Smuts, and others not only shaped our understanding of self-determination but also shaped who we are in the sense that they helped to create our political communities. In the following section, I will further elaborate the implications of such a 'historical ontology of ourselves' for philosophical debates about immigration.

3. Historical Ontology: Nationality and Immigration

Immigration control practices and citizenship policies are central to nation-state sovereignty and have been closely linked to the idea of national self-determination. In his influential contribution, Michael Walzer has argued that the ability of a political community to determine its membership is crucial for self-determination (1983: 61f.). Many others have agreed with him and argued on this basis that states have a right to exclude would-be immigrants (see Fine 2013 for an overview). This is not merely a theoretical issue; in public debates about migration in Western countries, it is usually taken for granted that the right to exclude is a central part of legitimate state sovereignty. But Radhika Mongia, Nandita Sharma, and others have shown in their historical studies of state immigration

controls and citizenship policies that the idea of national self-determination, as well as the political communities that it claims to protect, were shaped by colonial and racist projects. As such, the idea may not provide an authoritative ground to defend current immigration practices.

Until the nineteenth century, most states did not generally regulate entry into their territories. Imperial states, in particular, cared about facilitating mobility to increase their access to labor power (see Mongia 2018: 2). Nation-states that emerged from European empires started to impose immigration restrictions only in response to racial anxieties of White settler populations about the mobility of negatively racialized populations. From their inception, these states used restrictive immigration and citizenship practices to define and shape racialized political communities. By the beginning of the twentieth century, immigration controls had come to be portrayed as an essential aspect of national self-determination. An important aspect of this history, Mongia points out, is that the new category of ‘nationality’ came to stand in for more direct appeals to ‘race’ (2018: 126–39). For example, the Imperial War Conference, which assembled the governments of the British Empire’s various self-governing entities, declared in 1918: ‘It is an inherent function of the Governments of the several communities of the British Commonwealth, including India, that each should enjoy complete control of the composition of its own population by means of restriction on immigration from any of the other communities’ (quoted in Atkinson 2016: 165). This race-neutral formulation bears a striking similarity to Walzer’s framing of a right of states to exclude non-members. But this new policy, advanced by the settler colonies of the British Empire, was based on considerations grounded in racial ideology. Jan Smuts reminded his colleagues about the stakes of this policy: ‘We are a white minority on a black continent and the settlers in South Africa have for many years been actuated by the fear that to open the door too widely to another nonwhite race would make the position of the few whites in South Africa very dangerous indeed’ (quoted in Atkinson 2016: 164).

Such frank admissions were rare, however. Instead, states framed the need for exclusion in terms of the protection of territorially defined ‘nationalities’. In her study *Indian Migration and Empire*, Mongia reconstructs how the newly founded South African state rearticulated the racist anxieties of White settlers in terms of religion, gender, and nationality (2018: 85–111). In 1911, South Africa—defining itself as a White Christian nation—started to deny the legal recognition of polygamous Hindu and Muslim marriages. The fact that this restriction was applied to individual marriages that were not in fact polygamous suggests that the underlying intent was to restrict the movement of middle-class Indian families to South Africa. Using its authority to govern kinship relations, the state defined a new, racialized national identity without explicitly referring to race. Mongia discusses a similar development in Canada, where a new passport requirement was introduced in 1917 to restrict the migration of Indian, nonindentured migrants (2018: 112–40). While the demands for these restrictions were part of a strategy to protect a ‘White Canada’, they were advanced through seemingly race-neutral arguments and policies. Canada’s Prime Minister Sir Robert Laird Borden defended the ‘ideal and the aspiration of the self-governing Dominions

with regard to their present social order and the type of civilization which they are desirous of building up' (quoted in Atkinson 2016: 164). This idea of a distinct, territorial nationality, characterized by a certain 'type of civilization', allowed Canada to 'effect racial exclusion without naming race' (Mongia 2018: 133). In both cases, South Africa and Canada, new nationalities did not emerge from historically grown affective or cultural bonds—as liberal nationalists such as David Miller (2016) might argue—but as state-imposed categories used to create racialized political communities.

This strategy became central to the self-understanding and functioning of all modern nation-states, as Sharma meticulously documents in her book *Home Rule* (2020). Virtually all nation-states that emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used racialized discourses of natural belonging that privileged those who were portrayed as 'people of the place' while excluding those seen as 'people out of place' (2020: 4). For example, White settlers in the United States and Canada inverted the imperialist category of the 'Indigenous-Native' (2020: 35–53) and reimagined themselves as 'natives' who had to protect their territorial political community from racialized others. Similar discourses globally informed immigration restrictions as well as social exclusions, violent 'population transfers', and genocides. In the second part of the twentieth century, former imperial metropolises, such as France and the United Kingdom, passed immigration restrictions that were primarily targeted at former colonial subjects, producing new 'native' identities that were implicitly racialized as White (Sharma 2020: 185–98; see also El-Enany 2020). The evidence that Sharma assembles suggests that modern nations did not emerge through the organic development of shared traditions, values, and ways of life, but were created through a massive and violent 'reordering of people's relation to place, to states, and to one another' (2020: 114). This reordering used the racial ideologies that had served colonialism although this was partly concealed by an appeal to territorially demarcated nationalities. By analyzing the actual role that the concept of nationality played in the creation of nation-states—again, a historicized conceptual analysis—Mongia and Sharma highlight a close conceptual connection between 'race' and 'nationality'. Moreover, they show how many of the national political communities that now appeal to the principle of self-determination were initially created as racialized communities. As a result, who we are collectively, as national political communities, is deeply entangled with the history of colonialism.

The idea that people belong to a particular place, while others who may live in the same place or want to live there are 'out of place', continues to be central to the self-understanding and functioning of nation-states. States regulate who can enter their territories and who can become part of their political communities. Controversies over who properly belongs to a place, often based on essentialized notions of nation or race, can be found in all modern nation-states (including postcolonial states, as Sharma points out). In this paper, I focus on Western nation-states, whose immigration controls and citizenship restrictions historically served as an instrument for creating and maintaining racialized political communities. In the present, these states seem to maintain a 'hard-on-the-outside, soft-on-the-inside' understanding of citizenship (Bosniak 2006) although who

counts as a political outsider is often contested and often includes persons who are territorially present. As Nadine El-Enany (2020) argues in the case of the United Kingdom, the exclusion of presumed outsiders helps the metropolises of former imperial states and their White populations to protect the wealth gained through colonialism. It also enables new forms of exploitation by creating legally subordinate and thus easily exploitable groups of migrant workers (see Sharma 2020: 16). Given these continuities, can immigration and citizenship restrictions be successfully defended as legitimate exercises of self-determination while breaking with the racist and colonial legacy of such restrictions?

Sarah Fine (2016) has explored this question and raised serious doubts. Can proponents of self-determination arguments for a right to exclude explain, say, why it is permissible to make admission decisions based on skills but not on the basis of race or ethnicity? David Miller, for example, argues that rejecting applicants on the basis of race would be insulting to them, 'given that these features do not connect to anything of real significance to the society they want to join' (quoted in Fine 2016: 144). Christopher Wellman argues that the use of racial or ethnic criteria in immigration practices is impermissible because they express disrespect for *existing* citizens who belong to the same categories (quoted in Fine 2016: 145). But as Fine shows, these ad hoc justifications are unsatisfactory. For example, why would 'unskilled workers' not be similarly insulted by a state's decision to block their entry on the grounds that they lack desirable skills? Moreover, if the problem of racial discrimination in admissions lies in the expressive harm to current minority citizens (as Wellman suggests), this rationale would not apply to ethnically or racially homogeneous states. Unwittingly, such an argument would give weight to historical projects to create racialized political communities. In addition to Fine's criticisms, it is worth noting that Miller's and Wellman's argumentative strategies focus on the expressive harms of racial discrimination but ignore the role that racial ideology has played in rationalizing and perpetuating global practices of domination and exploitation. As a result, they miss how racialized understandings of self-determination have shaped the international order that we inhabit today.

Fine's discussion leaves us with the uneasy impression that arguments based on self-determination cannot be convincingly squared with a commitment against racial discrimination. The genealogies sketched earlier pinpoint the source of our unease by showing us how the concept of national self-determination got a grip on us. Most Western nation-states emerged from imperial states as racialized communities and appealed to self-determination to rationalize exclusion. Their efforts to determine the 'character' of their own communities and to exclude 'undesirable' populations were based on White supremacist ideology. Recognizing this history renders our own attachment to the idea of national self-determination *uncanny*, and it distances us from an idea that structures our political lives and shapes our political subjectivities. Telling genealogies shifts the normative terrain of the debate: Rather than continuing to rely on the concept's default authority, we must determine whether and how it could have legitimate authority. This cannot be done without grappling with the imperial and racist legacies of our immigration control and citizenship practices.

Whether a genuine break with this history is possible within our current political structures, or at least within a revised version thereof, is not simply a theoretical question but a practical one. A retreat, by theoretical stipulation, to a conception of self-determination that avoids essentialist claims about the nature of our political communities is not sufficient. The real issue is whether the existing nation-state system we inhabit, organized by the principle of national self-determination, can leave behind the history of imperialism and racialization from which it emerged. In the context of debates about immigration, this question is urgent for cultural nationalists, who ground the right of self-determination in the value of preserving national cultures (for example, Miller 2016). If national identities were created or at least shaped to rationalize racial exclusion and segregation, and if contemporary patterns of exclusion resemble those of the past, we have reason to doubt that a continued appeal to them has genuinely broken with those legacies.

Civic nationalists, who reject cultural criteria for membership in a political community and instead require only a commitment to shared political institutions, must confront this question as well. Because civic nationalists hold that political communities emerge from within existing political institutions, they cannot ignore the actual history of nation-states. Even if a nation-state does not currently appeal to race, ethnicity, or national origin as a criterion in its admissions decisions, its political community may have been shaped by these criteria in the past. In that case, present race-neutral restrictions may well continue to reproduce the state's exclusionary character. The United States, for example, which has a history of explicitly White supremacist immigration and citizenship policies, abolished admissions restrictions based on national origins in 1965. But in practice, nationality continues to be a barrier to equal opportunity and free movement within the current immigration system (see Munshi 2016: 281–86). Arguably, these restrictions put the wealth gained through past domination and exploitation out of reach for the vast majority of those whose lives have been shaped by these processes (see El-Enany 2020: 10). It is not clear why much weight should be accorded to the self-determined decisions of political communities that were created and maintained in this way.

This challenge to self-determination's default authority has implications even for some accounts that limit appeals to self-determination when it comes to immigration. For example, Stilz has argued that self-determination does not generally give states good moral grounds to exclude migrants because migrants do not usually threaten the political autonomy of the state's citizens and often have weighty interest of their own to enter and even settle (2019: 187–215). Nonetheless, she holds that citizens have legitimate authority to decide their own migration policy, which outsiders are obliged to respect, even if the decision is wrong from a moral point of view (2019: 188; see also Jurkevics 2021). Stilz grounds this authority, which involves a limited right to do wrong, in political communities' strong interest in their self-determination. But again, in light of the genealogies discussed above, we cannot take for granted that political communities that were defined and created through imperial projects should have such authority.

The preceding discussion does not aim to settle the discussion about the value of self-determination, in particular insofar as it is taken to imply a right to exclude outsiders. There may, on reflection, be good reasons to affirm this value, at least for some states or political communities. But the discussion suggests that we cannot determine this without a historically informed analysis. Again, the above genealogies shift the terrain of the debate: We cannot continue to take for granted that it is a legitimate exercise of self-determination for Western countries to shape their own 'self' through immigration controls, nor can we assume that the concept of self-determination that is embodied in the nation-state system has legitimate authority.

4. Counter-History: Making Self-Determination Uncanny

Genealogies of our present practices make salient the normative structure of the world in which we act, thereby distancing us from norms that we usually follow unreflectively. Together, the historical accounts put forward by Getachew, Mongia, Sharma, and others make salient the understanding of national self-determination that has shaped the political structures and subjectivities we inhabit. They provide a historicized conceptual analysis of this idea and, at that same time, investigate how it has shaped our institutional and social reality. By acting in this world, we often unreflectively treat the understanding of self-determination embodied in it as authoritative. But by showing how this understanding came to have default authority for us, these genealogies create an uncanny experience that distances us from this world. As a result, we are forced to take responsibility for the legitimacy of its normative demands. This means, I have argued, that we should not treat appeals to self-determination as an authoritative starting point in political philosophy.

By way of conclusion, it will be useful consider again to whom genealogical projects like the ones discussed above are addressed. Telling genealogies involves a call to take responsibility for the legitimacy of found norms that structure the world we live in. A call is a second-personal speech act, that is, it aims for a particular uptake from a particular audience (see Lance and Kukla 2013). Whether telling a genealogy will create an uncanny experience for a reader depends on how they are socially and materially positioned. For example, if I already experience gender as demanding, say, because it is particularly difficult for me to conform to dominant gender norms, a genealogy of gender and sexuality may not have an uncanny effect on me because I am already not comfortably at home in a gendered world. But if I can smoothly navigate a gendered world, then the genealogy can have its uncanny effect. In the same way, genealogies of self-determination will have this effect for those of us who are at home in a nation-state world. For example, citizens of Western nation-states whose passports allow them, for the most part, to easily navigate borders, may not usually experience the structures of the territorial state system as demanding—or at least not in the same way as 'migrants' from formerly colonized countries or stateless people do. In this paper, I have therefore focused on the implications that genealogies of self-determination have for the normative reflections of citizens of Western nation-states.

To make us less at home in our world, genealogies challenge official histories. José Medina (2011) has pointed out that critical genealogies provide ‘counter-histories’, which focus on experiences and memories that have been excluded from official ones. They allow us (or some of us) to learn about social struggles and conflicts that were involved in the creation of institutions and discourses but have been forgotten or were actively concealed. Discussions of collective self-determination within political philosophy often draw on a historical narrative that connects Wilson’s 1918 appeal to self-determination with the decolonization movements of the twentieth century and emphasizes the continuous (if not always linear) diffusion of liberal Western values. Together, the studies by Getachew, Mongia, Sharma, and others provide an alternative to this narrative. National borders and immigration controls, they show, became a global phenomenon because they preserved the racialized asymmetries of imperialism even as formal empires started to dissolve. This counter-history reminds us that sovereign control over the composition of a country’s population was deeply bound up with imperial projects of dividing opportunities along lines drawn by racial ideology. It also reminds us that the meaning of the concept of self-determination was contested. For example, Getachew excavates the attempts of anticolonial nationalists to resist a conception of self-determination that is compatible with imperial rule and to ‘reinvent’ and implement a more capacious, anti-imperial conception. While these attempts ultimately failed, remembering them helps, in Ladelle McWhorter’s words, to ‘mess up tidy categories and definitions’ (2009: 296) and forces us to reevaluate what is at issue in our own appeals to self-determination.

It is not incidental that Western political philosophy has largely ignored these aspects of the nation-state system and the history of self-determination. As Charles Mills (2007) has argued, it is a core element of the global system of White supremacy we inhabit that those who have been most privileged by it have, by and large, become unable to understand the world they have created and continue to recreate. Official histories help sustain this motivated form of ignorance. A progressive liberal history of national self-determination can conceal new forms of imperialism and the role that nation-states have played in maintaining the social relations that enable global exploitation and domination. The uncanny effect of critical genealogies thus makes them an indispensable tool for political philosophy in the Western world, a discipline that has yet to grapple fully with the legacy of colonialism.

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