

From Principle to Right: Self-determination in the Age of Decolonization

From early historians and theorists of decolonization such as Rupert Emerson and John Plamenatz to more recent writings by Hedley Bull, Erez Manela and others, the anticolonial mobilization of self-determination is largely understood as an extension and universalization of an existing principle largely identified with the Wilsonian moment. However, this idea that anti-colonial nationalists merely globalized the principle of self-determination to apply to the non-Western world misses a crucial innovation: Between the 1940s and 1960s, self-determination was no longer a principle but became a right. Far from a straightforward development, it was a contingent and contested reinvention of self-determination. This talk traces the emergence of a right to self-determination and its political and theoretical implications in the age of decolonization.