

Freedom and the Right of Self-Determination

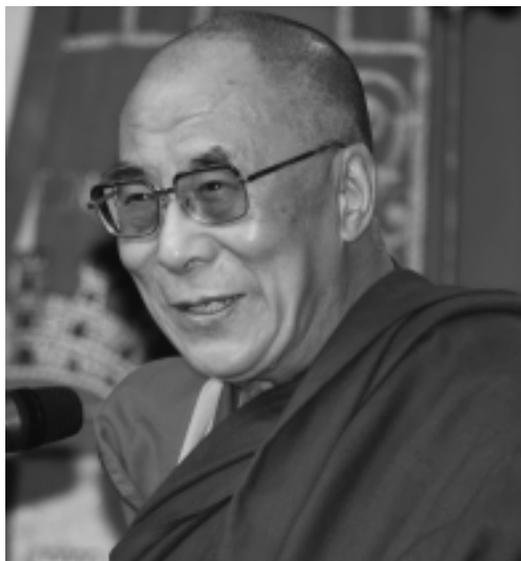
BY RICHARD M. EBELING



The most guarded prerogative of every government is its legitimized monopoly over the use of force within its territorial jurisdiction. The second most important prerogative is its exclusive control over all its territory. By implication, governments therefore claim an exclusive right over the political, economic, and cultural destinies of the people under their control. If people may not voluntarily and peacefully separate from the state in which they live, then it is tacitly claiming ownership over them.

Of course, the most fundamental right of self-determination is the individual's right to live his life as he chooses, as long as he does not violate any other person's right to life, liberty, and honestly acquired property. In other words, the core principle underlying any free society is the right of self-ownership. The individual is not the property of the state, any collective group, or any other individual. Without this principle, freedom is unsustainable in the long run.

The recent events in Tibet should remind us once again that there is no liberty without the right of self-determination. In 1950, shortly after Mao Zedong's communist armies drove Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government off the Chinese mainland to Taiwan, they invaded Tibet and imposed communist rule there as well. For the next nine years Mao's government suppressed religious freedom, persecuted and brutalized Buddhist monks, forced Buddhist nuns into marriages with Chinese soldiers, and imposed economic collectivization on a pastoral and peaceful people.



Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama
commons.wikimedia.org

In 1959 a revolt broke out against Chinese rule. The Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, was forced to flee and take refuge in India, and tens of thousands of Tibetans were killed during the Chinese repression of the rebellion. In the years since then, communist control has maintained a stranglehold on Tibetan society. In addition, the Beijing government has heavily subsidized the settlement of thousands of ethnic Chinese, which the Tibetans view as potential cultural and ethnic genocide, considering that the entire Tibetan population within the borders of Tibet comes to less than three million. In the neighboring provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan, many among the large Tibetan minorities have only been taught Chinese in the compulsory government schools and have often lost all working knowledge of the Tibetan language and its various dialects.

While the Dalai Lama and his government in exile have publicly embraced the more conciliatory objective of greater autonomy within China, a vast number of Tibetans want the right to determine whether they will once again be an independent country, which Tibet virtually was from 1913 to 1950.

The Chinese government insists that Tibet has been, is, and will permanently remain an integral part of the People's Republic of China, regardless of the wishes of the Tibetans. The Chinese government bases its claim on the principle that if any piece of land was ever part of China, it should remain as such or be reunited with

Richard Ebeling (rebeling@fee.org) is the president of FEE.

China even if it is currently under the jurisdiction of a neighboring state. This was the justification for reclaiming political control over Hong Kong and Macao, and for China's insistence that Taiwan must submit to Beijing's authority. It is also the basis for China's occasional claim to large stretches of Russian territory bordering on China in Siberia.

The classical liberals of the nineteenth century believed that individuals should be free to determine their own lives. It is why they advocated private property, voluntary exchange, and constitutionally limited government. They also believed that people should be free to reside in any country they wish. In general, therefore, they advocated freedom of movement. Governments should not compel people to stay within their political boundaries, nor should any government prohibit them from entering its territory for peaceful purposes.

An extension of this principle was that individuals should be free to determine through plebiscite what state they would belong to. This is distinctly different from the collectivists' notion of "national self-determination," the alleged necessity for all members of an ethnic, racial, linguistic, or cultural group to be incorporated within a single political entity, regardless of their wishes. Thus, for instance, the Nazis demanded that all members of the "Aryan race" be forcefully united within a Greater Germany under National Socialist leadership.

Classical liberalism is closer to "individual self-determination." Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises argued in *Liberalism* (1927) that the liberal ideal allows individuals within towns, districts, and regions to vote on which state they would belong to; they could remain part of the existing state, join another state, or form a new one.

Mises stated that in principle this choice should be left to each individual, not majorities, since a minority (including a minority of one) might find itself within the jurisdiction of a government not of its own choosing. But because it was difficult to imagine how com-

peting police and judicial systems could function on the same street corner, Mises viewed the majoritarian solution to be a workable second best.

Minimal Intrusion

What would at least assure the minimal political intrusion into the individual's affairs, even if he found himself under a government not of his own choosing, was the reduction of state power to protection of life, liberty, and property in a social order of voluntary association and free-market exchange. In such a world the use of political power to benefit some at the coerced expense of others would be eliminated or at least reduced to the smallest amount humanly possible. Government, then, would be only a "night watchman"

responsible for guarding each individual from force and fraud under the equal protection of law within its monopoly jurisdiction.

Many, if not most, of the ethnic, linguistic, racial, and cultural conflicts that we see would be ended or significantly diminished if this right of individual self-determination were practiced by nation-states. The problem of Tibet would soon be a footnote in history if only the government of China would let Tibetans

vote on whether their villages remain part of China or become part of an independent Tibet. Areas of Tibet in which a Chinese majority voted to remain a part of China would have to be allowed to. The slate of past injustices might have to be cleaned and set aside, with the outcomes of the plebiscites the bases of a new beginning. Bygones, no matter how hurtful, might have to be bygones.

Needless to say, the same principle of self-determination should be applied to the people of Xinjiang province, Inner Mongolia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

Alas, neither the government of China nor other governments seem ready or willing to respect the sovereignty of their citizens, which individual freedom and self-determination require. We continue to live in a time when governments presume to claim ownership over all they administer, including the people. 

The liberal ideal allows individuals within towns, districts, and regions to vote on which state they would belong to.
