



Evolution of human rights

The Helsinki Declaration of human rights

Stuart Mitchell:

Well we can see that Mark Mazower, whether we agree with him or not, at least highlights the shifting nature around human rights and recognises that's interesting and valid if we want to look at the history of ideas. Was it important beyond the history of ideas in the postwar world though?

Chris Williams:

Yes, I think there is one definite impact. In 1975 when all the states in Europe, East and West, signed the Helsinki declaration of human rights which is a restatement of the UN declaration of human rights and all the states, NATO, non-aligned, Warsaw pact, all signed up to these. Now the USSR signed up in 1948 and 1975 both times thinking it was a dead-letter and the satellite states of Eastern Europe also signed in 1975 on the assumption it wasn't going to change very much. What surprises Eastern European regimes in the period after 1975 is that groups of citizens come together, they call themselves Helsinki committees and they start saying to the ruling communist parties in these countries 'you've signed on the dotted line saying we've got rights, now you must deliver' This is a weapon used by these peoples against their rulers and one of the things that feeds into 1989.

Stuart Mitchell:

Okay but if I could just put a very small fly in the ointment here, you're quite right that these ideas are extremely important but they aren't really enough. They do need a kind of transmission mechanism to get those ideas to the citizens of the communist bloc and that bloc becomes more porous in the 1970s, in terms of the leaking of print material and increasingly of broadcast material behind the Iron Curtain. So you get Radio Free Europe and the like and they are the vehicles that carry those ideas across the Iron Curtain. So in a sense there's a model of Western civic institution which is monitoring government adherence to a yardstick, in this case the Helsinki accords that the Helsinki committees are aping, they are copying the West in respect so you need that transmission mechanism otherwise the ideas themselves won't have much of an effect.

Chris Williams:

Yes, fair point. The idea of human rights is necessary but it's not sufficient. Treaties are important they're one thing but other facts on the ground are important as well. I think we

have to consider the whole picture. But I think it's important to end on thinking about how there is a new ideal of Human Rights, what we've been talking about today is that there are different kinds of peace, different kinds of peace settlements and different ideas about what peace might involve and minority rights are a clear example of the ways in which interwar Europe was structured differently with different expectations and different laws from postwar Europe.

In the interwar period, a set of ideals and also of laws underpinning collective rights. In the post-war period another different set of ideals and laws about individual rights. So hopefully a conversation that started with a random encounter in a second-hand bookshop has given us some insight into the ways we can think about long-term change in Europe and how that's affected national institutions.