



Evolution of human rights

The problem with Individual rights

Chris Williams:

This is one of the themes Mark Mazower takes up in *Dark Continent* now although most people like to see history as the story of progress and the UN is keen to say individual rights are better than collective rights, Mazower doesn't necessarily agree, this is what he had to say about collective rights in the context of the Balkan wars of the 1990s:

Mark Mazower:

Well one of the things that struck me as I was writing this book, I remember it very vividly – the onset of the war in Bosnia in the Spring of 1992, Amnesty International published a report of human rights violations in the Madrina Valley. From one point of view that was a great thing to do - there were a lot of them. But from the other point of view, I remember thinking this is kind of an odd way of talking about this because it's not as though you can get at this phenomenon by understanding why Mrs Blogs was beaten on the head and Mr Blogs was forced out of his shops and so on for another 10,000 cases, you're dealing with collective action against a minority. Why have we substituted for an older language of minority rights, this new language of individual human rights? Which is in fact obscuring what's going on in Bosnia and so I started to look into this and I realised that the same reason that it impelled the great powers really connive in what you might call ethnic cleansing after the war and the expulsion of ethnic Germans would be part of this, had also led them to just give up on this whole idea of minority rights altogether because they'd given up on minorities.

They'd come to the view that minorities, the Germans in particular had started the second world war, if they hadn't been a minority Hitler never would have gone in claiming to save the ethnic Germans and so they quite self-consciously dismantle the whole international legal regime and there's an interesting history about that, I written about it and other people have written about that and in their place they create around the UN this very grandiloquent, but at that stage largely verbal and rhetorical regime of individual human rights and, of course, the argument at that time is that if you have robust individual rights you don't need to worry about minority rights. Except it wasn't really true, because minority rights had got at a sociological reality – the reality of communities that might want to preserve languages and traditions, that might need protection internationally, that individual human rights did not necessarily get at. And for a long time we just forgot about all of that because the Cold War imposed a kind of stabilisation on Europe and then suddenly in the early 1990s in Yugoslavia it fell apart and

now I think we can see that that regime of international human rights that we've grown up with, that's an artefact of the Second World War, was a political artefact - which is not to discredit it or to say it's got no value, no meaning and that it's not virtuous, but it's also to say, let's look at its limitations, let's look and see what purposes it serves, what situations it speaks to and what situations it's silent about and what I think was important too, that the war replaced a certain regime of international law with another regime of international law and both of them had strengths and weaknesses – it wasn't simply a story of progression from darkness to light.